

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL
SCIENCES

LOS ANGELES AS AN ARRIVAL CITY? MEXICAN-
AMERICAN SPACES IN CONTEMPORARY
LITERATURE

CARLA SELENE GIERICH

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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The thesis explores whether Los Angeles could be regarded as an Arrival City for the Mexican-American protagonists in *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (John Rechy, 2006 [1991]), *Their Dogs Came with Them* (Helena María Viramontes, 2007), and *The Barbarian Nurseries* (Héctor Tobar, 2012).

The study focuses especially on the depiction of city space within these contemporary LA novels and examines to which extent the protagonists are able to navigate and appropriate these spaces. Arrival is understood here not as a fixed, static goal, but an ongoing process of entries and openings that the protagonists can use to insert themselves into city space. Arrival means a creative usage of city space through the creation of third spaces, borderlands, transculturality, and liminality. Successful arrival processes do not only require these fluid and mobile liminal spaces, but also a sense of emplacement to allow for the chance of participation in actively shape city space.

A close reading of the novels suggests that it remains difficult for the protagonists to create a sense of arrival. In *The Miraculous Day*, city space remains inaccessible behind a maze of stereotypes that hinder an appropriation of space. In *Their Dogs*, city space itself remains so hostile due to quarantine roadblocks and freeway construction that deconstructions of colonial binaries are only possible on a metatextual level through myth, metaphor, and story. In *Nurseries*, city space is depicted as a fiction that hinders the protagonists' arrival at the American Dream, although in the end, there is the possibility of accessing the metaphysical aspect of the Dream, not through city space appropriation, but through the belief in the equality of opportunities.

Keywords: Los Angeles, Mexican-American Literature, Arrival, Liminality, Hybridity, Third Space

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A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read 'Corle G. M.' followed by a stylized flourish.

Dated: 14th March 2019

1 Introduction

Mexican Americans¹ in Los Angeles always have had to negotiate different spatial identities (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 11).² On the one hand, they are perceived as non-locals by dominant, White society, leading to othering and spatial segregation (Villa, 2000, p. 3).³ This othering concerns native Mexican-American Angelenos as well as recent immigrants from south of the border and hence creates a homogeneous other whose internal differences are rendered invisible. On the other hand, as they are city dwellers like everybody else, they are locals with unique and different experiences of and relations to city space and especially specific areas of it. This means that Mexican Americans have to negotiate between their own perception of being locals while at the same time having to react to the results of othering, such as spatial segregation, limited access to certain city spaces, and disadvantages in social and economic development (Villa, 2000, p. 5). There is thus not only a physical back and forth across the Mexican-US border, but also a mental oscillation between the local and non-local, an ‘urban transfrontera’ (Priewe, 2007, p. 44) that creates specific cultural practices to deal with this in-between state.

This back and forth has been a major focus in Mexican-American literature in Los Angeles, which has been able to create stories that allow for a more nuanced and manifold view of Mexican Americans in LA which counteract the above mentioned othering narratives. Mexican-American literature resists the binary of self and other and instead promotes a region of encounter in between cultures (Hepworth, 1999, pp. 164–165, see also West-Durán, 2004a, p. 23). These regions of encounter become especially visible in contemporary Los

¹In this thesis, the term is hyphenated only when used as an adjective preceding a noun. This is in line with common grammatical usage where a compound adjective is usually hyphenated before a noun (Kellerman and O’Conner, 2012, n.p.), while avoiding the usage of the hyphenated noun, which can be conceived as derogatory: ‘Their use in racial and ethnic identifiers can connote an otherness, a sense that people of color are somehow not full citizens or fully American: part American, sure, but also something not American.’ (Fuhrmann, 2018, n.p.).

²In this thesis, I use Mexican American instead of ‘Chicano/a’ because in common perception, Chicano/a refers mostly to second and third generation Mexican Americans, sometimes also including a political notion. This notion would hence exclude broader notions of Mexican-Americanness which is why I prefer the more inclusive Mexican American (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 238).

³Trump’s intention to build a wall between Mexico and the US may serve as an example of how the self/other binary created by the image of the wall also concerns Latinos/as within the US although the wall is not directly directed against them (Varela, 2018, n.p.). The Wall ‘squanders resources to satisfy irrational fears, xenophobia and racism of his [Trump’s] political base’ (Kilani, 2019, n.p.).

Angeles literature, as the city itself is a ‘world city’ (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 6), characterized by visible and invisible borders which lead to an increasing fragmentation and segregation of city space (Gámez, 2002, p. 98).

Mexican Americans counter this segregation and fragmentation by creating in-between spaces, a borderland (Anzaldúa, 2012 [1987], p. 25) or contact zone (Pratt, 1992, p. 4) where the meeting of different identities creates a hybrid (García Canclini, 2005, xxv) or third space (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211) which challenges dominant discourse (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114).

In my dissertation, I will analyse whether and how these third spaces are produced in literature by Mexican-American protagonists choosing the concept of arrival as a lens through which to examine these spaces. Arrival here is not limited to the first reaching a new place. The experience of arrival is hence not only meant to include recent migration, but entails a broader concept, as the mechanisms of othering and exclusion also concern long-time Mexican-American Angelenos, confronting them with the necessity to constantly reclaim and re-negotiate city space. Arrival thus means the ability to insert oneself into this city space, not only on a material level, but also on a symbolic one (Kunow, 2008, p. 162), the ‘conceived space of the imagination’ (Soja, 2000, p. 11).

This study focuses on the following questions:

- 1) How is Los Angeles city space depicted within the novels and how do the protagonists navigate this space? Are they able to influence, form, and appropriate it or does city space dictate limited forms of spatial usage?
- 2) Are the protagonists able to arrive in Los Angeles by creating possibilities to insert themselves into city space and create entries and openings out of which to establish a space of their own?
- 3) Can Los Angeles be an Arrival City for its Mexican-American inhabitants within contemporary LA novels?

To answer these questions, my dissertation undertakes a qualitative literary analysis of three contemporary Los Angeles novels with Mexican-American protagonists, namely *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (2006 [1991]) by John Rechy, *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007) by Helena María Viramontes, and *The Barbarian Nurseries* (2012) by Héctor Tobar. These novels have been chosen because they feature a broad range of Mexican-American protagonists: native Angelenos who expertly manoeuvre their barrio in *Their Dogs*, a woman moving to LA in search of the father of her children in *The Miraculous Day*, or a

recent immigrant from Mexico D.F. in search of work in *Nurseries*. Additionally, the novels offer an especially rich depiction of Los Angeles city space which in this regard almost turns into an additional protagonist, lending themselves particularly well for an analysis of this space. The novels' publication dates range from 1991 to 2012, allowing for a time frame that on the one hand makes the novels comparable due to their contemporaneity, and on the other hand suggests the possibility of a development in their depictions of city space.⁴

My work will expand the scholarly interrogation of city space within the novels. Especially in *The Miraculous Day* and *Their Dogs*, scholars have focused on how the protagonists create spaces and tactics of resistance against dominant city space (Aldama, 2005, p. 52; Giles, 2000, p. 124; Kevane, 2008, p. 36; Wald, 2013, p. 87). This focus on resistance 'fosters an understanding of cultural interactions based on a binary opposition between dominant and subordinate that is always contextualized by conflict, contestation, and distance' (Hamilton, 2011, p. 3). It hence re-creates the binaries it attempts to criticize. By focusing not on resistance, but on arrival processes, this study attempts to eschew this re-creation of binaries and hopes to highlight the fluidity and open-endedness of dwelling in the liminal spaces of Mexican-American Los Angeles.

To this end, the study in chapter 2 first expands on the definition of arrival. Part 2.1 is used to expand on the concepts my definition of arrival is based upon, namely hybridity (García Canclini, 2005, xxv), liminality (Aguirre, Quance and Sutton, 2000, p. 6), transculturality (Welsch, 1999, p. 198), and third space (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211). In chapter 2.2, I then offer a working definition of arrival. Arrival will be understood as entries and openings (Kunow, 2008, p. 159) within dominant space that enable a sense and place of stability, a dwelling within the borderlands that is more than a mere living on the margins. It thus enables the creation of third spaces of hybridity that are not based on constant in-between movements, but demand a sense of emplacement.

Part 2.2 focuses on theories of space and place to enable a discussion of these concepts within the novels. Useful concepts will be Lefebvre's (2008, p. 52) notions of abstract, social, and differential space as well as de Certeau's (1988, p. 117) spatial practices and heterotopia concept. I will elaborate on how space and place are tied to operations of power and how

⁴In her publication on racial passing, Nera (2014, p. 5) draws the line for her analysis in 1990 as the early 1990s mark a watershed with a number of significant national and international events, such as the fall of the wall, the freeing of Nelson Mandela, or the Rodney King riots. This caesura certainly also holds true for the analysis of Mexican-American literature.

alternative spatial concepts challenge these dominant spaces. These concepts are then transferred to the specificities of city space, which per se is a space of encounters with the other and thus highly involved in power negotiations between self and other.

Chapter 3 applies these spatial theories to Mexican-American space usage within Los Angeles. It starts by giving an overview over the history of Mexican Americans within Los Angeles, focusing especially on the periods in which the novels are set. It thus mentions the Chicano Movement of the 1960s as well as barrio destruction through freeway construction. A further focus is on the tense atmosphere of late 1980s Los Angeles, shortly before the Rodney King Uprisings and a major earthquake, when LA police waged a war on drugs and heavily policed Latino/a inhabitants. Another period of special interest is the first decade of the new millennium, as 2008 was the start of the latest financial and economic crisis that is the trigger for the incidences in *Nurseries*.

Chapter 3.2 discusses how these negotiations play out for Mexican Americans within the specific place of Los Angeles. It will show how Los Angeles attempts to manage difference by spatial segregation, leading to suburbanisation and urban sprawl. The chapter also explores how Latinos/as have invented barriological counter-practices to these barriozing forces (Villa, 2000, p. 8) which will emerge again later in the novels. Chapter 3.3 discusses how these spatial negotiations are based on the construction of race and class difference, colonial continuities and how they shape Mexican Americans' access to the American Dream. The chapter concludes by examining what an Arrival City could look like within this contested LA city space and attempts to provide a working definition of the term Arrival City.

Chapter 4 provides the literary theoretical framework necessary to contextualize the novels. The first subchapter serves to locate the three authors and their novels within literary discourses of their time. It highlights that the writers stand for different currents and periods within Mexican-American LA literature which is why they were chosen for analysis. *The Miraculous Day* is considered to be Rechy's first genuinely Chicano/a novel as he was first perceived as a queer writer (Priewe, 2007, p. 131). Viramontes belongs to the first generation of feminist Chicana writers of the 1980s, challenging early mainstream Chicano literature similarly to Rechy (Jacobs, 2006, p. 110). Tobar as a Guatemalan-American represents the widening of the field of Mexican-American literature in the last decade (Aldama, 2013, p. 135).

The second subchapter provides an overview of literary criticism of the three novels to allow for a comparative overview.

Especially in *The Miraculous Day* and *Their Dogs*, scholars have focused on how the protagonists create spaces and tactics of resistance against dominant city space (Aldama, 2005, p. 52; Giles, 2000, p. 124; Kevane, 2008, p. 36; Wald, 2013, p. 87). My thesis will expand continue this spatial focus, but will move away from the resistance paradigm, as it ‘fosters an understanding of cultural interactions based on a binary opposition between dominant and subordinate that is always contextualized by conflict, contestation, and distance’ (Hamilton, 2011, p. 3), hence re-creating the binaries it attempts to criticize. By focusing not on resistance, but on arrival processes, this study attempts to eschew this re-creation of binaries and hopes to highlight the fluidity and open-endedness of dwelling in the liminal spaces of Mexican-American Los Angeles.

Chapter 5 finally delves into the literary analysis of *The Miraculous Day*. The chapter follows the space Amalia visits on her journey through LA, examining first whether her home can be a place of security against violent city space or whether it entails its own problems due to patriarchal structures within her Mexican-American family. The next subchapters focus on several LA locations, starting with her garden as a transitory space, then moving to barrio space and Hollywood. Another focus will be on her walking through these spaces, she has been interpreted as a ‘subaltern flâneuse’ (Priewe, 2007, p. 142) by critics, a claim that in my opinion should be contested. The ending of the chapter focuses on Amalia’s apparition in the shopping mall, and how this ending determines her ability to open up creative gaps in dominant space through a magic realist incidence in a temple of consumerism.

Their Dogs Came with Them uses myth, metaphor, and memory to deal with dominant spatial practices. Chapter 6 thus first elaborates on how the novel uses the metaphor of dogs to trace colonial continuities from the Spanish conquest to the 1960s freeway construction (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella, 2007a, p. 135). It then focuses on how the dog metaphor is also used to deal with the other symbol of oppression in the novel, the roadblocks and helicopter shootings of the Quarantine Authority. The next subchapter examines how these colonial continuities influence the movements of the protagonists, enforced by deficient public transportation and cars that represent masculine dominance. This dominance also extends to the female body, the city being equalled to a (female) mangled body of amputated limbs and stumped dead ends. The chapter examines whether the protagonists are able to create

alternative homes at home and in public barrio space and counter the erasure of social ties and memory. Next, the chapter will analyze whether the cemeteries Turtle spends a night at can open up in-between spaces not only between the living and the dead but also between dominant and dominated space. The last subchapter focuses on the supernatural ending and Tranquilina's levitation, which has been discussed as a syncretistic act of empowerment (Kevane, 2008, p. 36). The study will analyse whether this empowerment and cultural hybrid of a third space can also be found with regard to space or whether the novel just delegates this task to the imagination of the reader.

The analysis of *Nurseries* in chapter 7 starts with focusing on the negotiations of race and class within the novel which still determine the protagonists' ability to navigate space, especially within Orange County suburbia. The chapter will elaborate on how the novel also criticizes processes of racial erasure (Kinnally, 2016, p. 85) that make spatial appropriation of space even more difficult than overt racial narratives. Next, the chapter focuses on suburbia as the location of the American Dream which nonetheless can also turn into a nightmare due to tight spatial control, restrictive gender roles, and class differences. Maureen's and Scott's garden will be analysed as an extension of this suburban dream turned nightmare. The next subchapter accompanies Araceli on her way to central LA, analysing how the novel depicts LA space in general and South Central in particular as fantasy novel settings and how this shapes the protagonists' approach to this space. Subsequently, the chapter deals with the various Latino/a barrios Araceli encounters on her way and how the novel negotiates different versions, stages, and levels of achievement of the American Dream with them. The last subchapter focuses on the novel's twofold ending, Maureen's and Scott's moving to an all-American craftsman home and Araceli driving into the sunset after she has escaped the legal system. Overall, the analysis will focus on whether these different city space are depicted as being able to provide entries and openings that enable places of arrival or whether the colonial binaries of dominant and dominated space will still be kept alive.

2 Arrival – Liminal Spheres of Entries and Openings

The present study poses the question whether Los Angeles can be an Arrival City for the protagonists of the selected Mexican-American novels. To answer this question, some theoretical background and clarification of concepts is needed. This chapter will trace the meanings of arrival and how it is connected to notions of liminality (Aguirre, Quance and Sutton, 2000, p. 6), hybridity (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114), and transculturality (Welsch, 1999, p. 198) which are key concepts in the analysis of Mexican-American literature.

The idea to introduce the concept of arrival when interrogating the relationship between Mexican-American Angelenos and city space was inspired by Doug Saunders' study *Arrival City* (2010). In this book he examines the factors that make a city⁵ a place where migrants from the countryside can experience a successful arrival: social integration, economic success, education for their children, and money transferral to their home communities. I want to transfer these predominantly sociological views on arrival to the area of literary studies, bringing cultural and material dimensions of arrival together to allow for a deeper understanding of the 'simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of experience and agency' (Soja, 2000, p. 11) that Mexican Americans encounter in Los Angeles.

According to Saunders, especially rural migrants see the city as a place of advancement that offers a network of human relationships that helps to settle in the new environment. The slums, *favelas* and *barrios* of the large metropolises for him are not terminal stations of urban decay, but transitional urban spaces that can offer social ascent and progress if the structural institutions of the cities and states do not deny the recent arrivals the chance to development. In the latter case, the danger of trapping the poor in social exclusion is imminent (Saunders, 2010, pp. 2–3). A successful arrival city needs to provide tools of social mobility to its newcomers: home ownership, education, security, business creation and connection to the wider economy and not 'non-solutions such as social workers, public-housing blocks and urban-planned redevelopment' (Saunders, 2010, p. 83).⁶ In short, a functioning arrival city

⁵Saunders does not refer specifically to Los Angeles when coining the term arrival city, but sees it as a general concept. Los Angeles is one of the case studies to illuminate his concept though.

⁶In my understanding, with this Saunders does not want to rebuke the work of social workers or public housing as a whole, but rather sees them as a treatment of the symptoms, rather than addressing the roots of the problems a failed arrival policy can cause.

provides networks, entry mechanisms, a social mobility path and is an urban establishment platform (Saunders, 2010, p. 20).

Los Angeles has been described as a ‘gateway’ or ‘broadly successful arrival city’ (Saunders, 2010, p. 82) because migrants (for example Central Americans in South Central LA) send regular payments back to their rural villages of origin and do not live in poor barrios, but move through them towards more promising neighbourhoods which leads to a cycle of arrival and upward mobility (Saunders, 2010, p. 82). Still, Saunders accuses the US government of deterring arrival: the lack of legalization of immigrants hinders them from investing into their community, letting them get stuck somewhere between economic success and legal neglect and turning opportunities into dangers (Saunders, 2010, p. 85). Transportation problems that cut off the migrants from spaces of work and education can also be a hindrance (p. 318). The functioning arrival city in contrast is a hybrid place of transformation that becomes and ‘colonizes the established city (just as the failed arrival city is likely [...] to invade it violently)’ (Saunders, 2010, p. 322).

2.1 Hybridity, Transculturality, and Third Spaces

Although these concrete, social arrival factors can be found in Mexican-American literature (economic success, illegality, mobility etc.)⁷, they have to be complemented by an additional theoretical framework to allow for a deeper literary analysis. Arrival is based upon and expands concepts such as transculturality, hybridity, and liminality which I will elaborate upon in the following.

The term ‘hybridity’ derives from the natural sciences and describes the (sometimes wanted, sometimes unwanted) cross-breeding of specimen varieties. In colonial times, the biological concept was transferred to cultures, mixture being seen as defying the natural order of things, namely the superiority of the colonizer (Hà, 2005, pp. 18–26). This ordering impetus constructs the colonized as an other and produces dominant and marginal positions within society. This order can never be complete, though:

From this contradictory functioning of racism derives that neither colonial-racist exclusion nor the controlling power can ever be total. This also means that marginalized subjects do have the action of power and have the possibility to break dominant narratives. In this way, within the powerful

⁷A classical example would be *Pocho* (1970) by Antonio José Villareal

dynamics of the colonial modernity a process starts that comes into apparition as a hybrid practice of overstepping the boundaries. (Hà, 2005, pp. 114–115)⁸

Hà (2005) coincides here with Spivak (1995, pp. 27–28) who claims that the marginalized colonial subject cannot speak for itself, but can only be heard through the gaps within the dominant discourse.

Cultures are thus not enclosed entities, but are constantly in a process of hybridity (Bhabha, 1990, p. 209). This process creates a ‘third space which enables other positions to emerge’ (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211). There, the own culture can be questioned, negotiated and extended. Bhabha stresses that cultural difference is necessary to guarantee the independence of the other culture and prevent assimilation through a dominant culture (Castro Varela and Dhawan, 2005, p. 94). As a consequence, hybridity for Bhabha (1994) has a subversive element: ‘it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal’ (p. 112) because ‘...other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition’ (p. 114). The migration of post-colonial subjects from the peripheries to the metropolis hence challenges the dominant majority. Through their mere presence, they replace some of the metropolitan narratives of progress and question the authority of those narratives (Bhabha, 1990, p. 218).⁹

García Canclini’s (2005, xxvii) concept of hybridization is similar. He regards it as a central element in Latin American modernity (Kuortti and Nyman, 2007, p. 10). Hybridization means the ‘*socio-cultural processes in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices*’ (García Canclini, 2005, xxv, emphasis orig.). Those discrete structures are results of prior hybridizations, there are no ‘pure points of origin’ (García Canclini, 2005, xxv). He emphasizes that borders (between countries and large cities) are places that condition the properties of hybridization. For him, these borders have become porous and enable the surge of hybrid cultures (García Canclini, 2005, xxxiv). He sees these cultural mixes as creative, productive and innovative (p. xxvii). For him, hybridization is no permanent, stable

⁸My own translation, orig.: ‘Aus dieser widersprüchlichen Funktionsweise des Rassismus ergibt sich, dass die kolonialrassistische Ausgrenzung wie die damit einhergehende Kontrollmacht niemals total sein können. Das bedeutet auch, dass marginalisierte Subjekte handlungsmächtig sind und die Möglichkeit haben, dominante Narrationen diskursiv zu unterbrechen. Dadurch ist in der gewaltvollen Dynamik der kolonialen Moderne ein Prozess in Gang gekommen, der als hybride Praxis der Grenzüberschreitung in Erscheinung tritt.’

⁹This can also be seen in the chosen novels, where Mexican Americans challenge developers’ plans by simply living in a barrio that is in the way of the planned freeways (*Their Dogs*), or where the mere presence of the Mexican maid reminds Mexican-American family father Scott that his living in a White upper class suburb is not to be taken for granted (*Nurseries*).

condition, but a process one can enter and exit at any time, which makes visible ‘the various subject positions implicated in cross-cultural relations’ (García Canclini, 2005, xxx). One can hence oscillate between identities of origin and destination without mixing them (p. xxx).

A focus on contact and cultural oscillation has hence outlived the old monocultural understanding of a ‘separatist understanding of culture’ (Welsch, 1995, p. 42) which has to be seen as fiction. For Welsch (1995, p. 39), modern societies are highly differentiated within themselves so that cultures are not homogeneous, but are characterized by hybridization (Welsch, 1999, p. 198). Several scholars argue that this notion of a pool of global cultures from which everybody can draw is an overly optimistic point of view. This concept has been criticized as overly optimistic: García Canclini (2005, xli) claims that globalization does not only blur boundaries between cultures (1995), due to the force of capitalism it also has homogenizing effects. For Huggan (2006, pp. 58–59), the rich are still privileged despite the common ‘culture pool’ and the prefix ‘trans’ conjures a too optimistic world view driven by culture, forgetting material aspects. However, transculturality manages to eschew the pitfall of hybridity, namely that

it always reiterates and reinforces the dynamics of the same conflictual economy whose tensions and divisions it re-enacts in its own antithetical structure. [...] It shows that we are still locked into parts of the ideological network of a culture that we think and presume that we have surpassed. (Young, 1995, p. 27)

Transculturality focuses more on interconnectedness and exchange: ‘it concentrates on questions of agency and remains process-oriented vis-à-vis a more results-oriented notion of hybridity’ (Rings, 2016, p. 11). This process-orientation finds its spatial expression in the concept of liminality:

A *limen* is a threshold between two spaces. If a border is viewed as the line, imaginary or real, which separates these two spaces, then the threshold is the opening which permits passage from one space to the other. [...] Another way of putting this is to say that a *limen* constitutes a passageway across a border and that ‘liminality’ designates the condition ascribed to those things or persons who occupy or find themselves in the vicinity of the threshold, either on a permanent basis or as a temporary phenomenon. (Aguirre, Quance and Sutton, 2000, pp. 6–7)

This threshold is not a line, but expands until it becomes the other territory it presents the opening to (Aguirre, Quance and Sutton, 2000, p. 9). Liminal space hence challenges the existing order, it frays its edges and lets disorder, the other, enter into the self through ‘*lunatic fringes*’ (Waldenfels, 2006, p. 19). It lets thus enter the formerly denied parts of the self,

challenging its self-perception. For the receiving party, this process can hence be a challenge. Pratt (1992) calls these liminal zones of mixture ‘contact zones’,

social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today (p. 4)

This process of determination between periphery and centre is not unidirectional as the periphery also has an impact on the centre, even if that impact might be the result of unconscious and involuntary processes (Pratt, 1992, p. 6).

This idea is also widespread in Chicano/a studies, where Gloria Anzaldúa laid the basis with her idea of the borderlands. To her, the US-Mexican border ‘*es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds’ (Anzaldúa, 2012 [1987], p. 25, emphasis orig.). Out of this ‘wound’, a third country or border culture emerges which transgresses the thin borderline and dwells in a borderland, ‘a vague and undetermined place’ in a ‘constant state of transition’ (Anzaldúa, 2012 [1987], p. 25). *The Miraculous Day, Dogs, and Nurseries* deal exactly with these open wounds that the ambivalent attitude of LA towards its Chicano/a inhabitants has left. As the metaphor of the bleeding wound implies, this liminal borderland is no smooth space of cultural mixture, but a place for ‘*atravesados*’ (Anzaldúa, 2012 [1987], p. 25), a place of outcasts or the other.

2.2 Arrival – Processes of Emplacement

The above mentioned concepts of hybridity, third space, transculturality, liminality, and borderlands share that as process-oriented terms, they do not offer a ‘logical closure’ (García Canclini, 2005, xxxii) or stable order. Arrival focuses precisely on this process-oriented quality and connects it with a spatial relation:

[a]rrival is [...] broadly understood as the coming into presence of that which has its origin elsewhere, that has not been ‘there’ before, whose presence can therefore not be taken for granted but must in a very direct sense be ‘made’. Arrival is that which follows movement, passage, also that which precedes staying, habitation. There is thus a link, even a historical correlation between arrival and those multiple displacements and growing diasporic communities that have over the last decades become more frequent and more intense in the context of capital induced globalization. (Kunow, 2003, p. 181)

Arrival is the construction of something new, an event and performance, related to space, especially to the city as the ‘location of social and cultural differences and displacements’

(Lenz, 2003, pp. 26–27). Culture develops specific spaces for these moments, ‘heterotopic locations for disembarcation’ (Kunow, 2008, p. 158). These ‘truly promiscuous space[s]’ (Kunow, 2008, p. 159) arrest the flow of movement and examine the instant after dislocation and before relocation or sessility (Kunow, 2008, p. 159). Arrival can hence be seen as an entry and an opening at the same time. The entry focuses on the performative aspects of arrival while opening refers to processes of entry from the receiving end (Kunow, 2008, pp. 159–162).

Arrival hence means the ‘ways in which people can or cannot insert themselves into somebody else’s material and symbolic spaces’ (Kunow, 2008, p. 165). If the host society denies this insertion, this can lead to a ‘congealed movement’ (Holert and Terkessidis, 2006, p. 247) where the migrant is at the same time present and absent, physically there while their ‘real life’ or relevant mental parts of it take place somewhere else. The state of exception turns into a normality which renders the migrants invisible so that they run the danger to disappear in the landscape (Holert and Terkessidis, 2006, p. 248). ‘Many migrants, it seems, are caught within a nebulous and paradoxical spaciousness where arrival is indefinitely postponed, and where one seems already ‘there’ without ever leaving home’ (Concannon, Lomelí and Priewe, 2009, p. 2). This model of being physically at a place but feeling as if one is to leave again soon is usually connotated negatively. Barboza argues that this transitory arrival could also be perceived in a positive manner (Barboza, 2016, p. 125): the transitory person serves as a foreigner that breaks up the existing society, opening up creative spaces within it. Arrival has an interactive quality that describes a process between the new arrivals and the place at which they arrive (Pries, 2016, p. 132).

Mexican Americans in Los Angeles are of course not all ‘migrants’ or new arrivals. I refer to these migration theories here because they nonetheless express an experience common to Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and in the US in general: they themselves may not be migrants, but common perception constructs them as belonging to this category, leading to an othering that re-creates the spatial dislocation experienced by migrants (Hise, 2004, p. 556).

Consequently, Martinez (Martinez, 2002, p. 54) criticizes overly optimistic notions of liminality, borderlands, and fluidity which claim that in-betweenness opens up creative spaces. He rather sees them as a hindrance to taking roots that forces the border dwellers to keep moving, similar to the congealed movement of Holert (2006, p. 247). To him, the focus on movement only reproduces the American mythos of mobility and reaffirms ideologies of

neo-individualism (Martinez, 2002, p. 54). He claims that migrants seek to arrive at an ‘imagined space where the migrant can live freely while establishing not only a *sense* of stability, but an actual *place* of stability’ (Martinez, 2002, p. 54). They intend to claim a stable communal space from which to practice full participation (Martinez, 2002, p. 62). To arrive, people need to experience the ‘friction of places and processes of human emplacement’ (Moslund, 2011, p. 40). This understanding coincides with Pries’ perception of arrival as a process of being accepted, respected and receiving a chance of participation (Pries, 2016, p. 134). Whereas I agree with Martinez’ criticism of in-betweenness in a sense of being always on the move, I do not think that dwelling in the borderlands and arrival do have to exclude each other. Arrival as a process is able to create entries and openings, creative gaps that challenge precisely the dominant neo-liberal narrative Martinez criticizes.¹⁰ In this sense, a dwelling and rooting in the borderlands is possible if all concerned parties accept to overcome these binaries and creatively engage in constructing new places of stability that need to be readjusted in a constantly changing world.

2.3 A Right to a Place? City Spaces, Movement, and Power

As mentioned above, arrival depends on the ability to insert oneself into material and symbolic spaces (Kunow, 2008, p. 165). This access to space is often determined by one’s social and racial status. Spatial processes thus produce a certain culture through social practice (Möllers, 1999, p. 49). To examine this access to space further, working definitions of space and place are needed.

Space is a social space in which the individual moves, such as a city, shaped through the society it lives in (Gámez, 2002, p. 114; Wehrheim, 2009, p. 19). Place would then be a special part of this space which the individual or society in general has a more specific bond to (Möllers, 1999, p. 43). A place is a space that evokes strong feelings or has been given stronger meanings.¹¹ Locations can have a ‘sense of place’, an identity and character. People perceive their space as place-based (Castells and Susser, 2002, p. 354).

¹⁰One might argue that the ‘Cariboo Café’ (1995 [1985]) in Viramontes’ short story of the same name represents one such place where the washerwoman is able to develop an agency, even if the story has a tragic ending

¹¹An example would be Ray’s Friendly Shop in *Their Dogs* which evokes childhood memories in Turtle (Viramontes, 2007, p. 18).

These places cannot exist within themselves but are the result of cultural constructions (Baumgärtner, Klumbies and Sick, 2009, p. 14, Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, p. 17). Spaces that do not evoke a sense of place can be placeless or inauthentic. They lack localization and could be anywhere (e.g. motels, shopping malls etc.). As these places often are connected to mobility, they are places that are not entirely there, they are in-between places or heterotopias, 'other' places as defined by Foucault (1986, p. 24). Places are hence processual, relationally ordered systems. They are 'always open and indefinite with respect to future formations' (Löw, 2006, p. 120).

Place is then a concrete, nameable location (but not one having to be immediately experienced) that is placed within space by objects or persons. It does not disappear with the persons but can be occupied differently throughout time.¹² Immigrants for example use remembered places or memory of place 'to construct imaginatively their new lived world' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, p. 11). Place is embedded in a space of actions and accumulates meaning.¹³ Place is 'politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, a local and multiple construction. [...] Places have multiple meanings that are constructed spatially' (Rodman, 2003, p. 205).

These definitions of space and place are by no means final, but the distinction of space as an environment to move in and place as a location with meaning can serve as a guideline. City dwellers in Los Angeles for example have to find themselves a place and fill it with meaning to make a connection to it and not linger in the heterotopias of not-getting-anywhere. Or, as Leclerc & Dear (1999) put it, '*place makes a difference*', but difference also '*makes place*, in the sense that diverse people create recognizably different spaces for themselves' (p.2, emphasis original). Place-making is thus an important aspect of arrival as it includes the ability to create a sense of emplacement (Moslund, 2011, p. 30).

Wehrheim (2009, p. 19) distinguishes between the social production and social construction of space. Space is a product of society which develops its societal character only through the practice of the people who live within it. Real space and the perception of space can be very different: while a shopping mall for one person is a place to relax and be a good consumer, for another person this purposefully pleasant environment can turn into a threat and site of

¹²Klein (2008, p. 114) for example describes how Los Angeles' fame shifts within a few years from a safe and hospitable city to that of America's most dangerous city in the early 1990s. The place is the same, but its mental occupation has shifted completely.

¹³Some scholars claim that these places become spaces through this localization, but to limit confusion I will still refer to them as places (see e.g. Baumgärtner, Klumbies and Sick (2009, p. 14)).

exclusion, as will be seen later in *The Miraculous Day*. De Certeau (1988, p. 107) also sees 'spatial practices' as influencing space, which for him is a dominated and ordered realm. This realm can be changed by these spatial practices: 'Things *extra* and *other* [...] insert themselves into the accepted framework, the imposed order' (Certeau, 1988, p. 107, emphasis orig.).¹⁴ This process is mirrored within the arrival process which implies the ability to insert oneself into somebody else's material and symbolic spaces (Kunow, 2008, p. 162).

This challenging of the imposed order can also be found in Lefebvre's theories about space (Lefebvre, 2008, p. 52). Lefebvre distinguishes three dimensions of space: 'abstract space' is a space of control and profit, dominated by the forces of urbanism (economisation, functionalization and planification of the city is for Lefebvre something unfeasible) (Lewitzky, 2005, pp. 54–57).¹⁵ One extreme example of this controlled space could be what Davis (2006, p. 221) calls 'Fortress America' and sees it realized in LA, a city of video cameras, police helicopter surveillance and hostile yet award-winning architecture. In contrast, 'social space' is public space which has a practical value for society and is always threatened by abstract space and the powers of urbanism. So called slums – unplanned housing and small-scale economic areas built by and for migrants – provide affordable accommodation and social networks, but are also under constant threat of being demolished by 'official' city planning. Saunders' Arrival Cities work under this premise (Saunders, 2010, pp. 2–3). According to Villa (2000, p. 6), the barrio is such a social space as it reveals 'multiple possibilities for re-creating and re-imagining dominant urban *space* as community-enabling *place*'.

'Differential space' is a third space which stands in opposition to abstract space. This space has to be appropriated in a non-dominant form because it is uncontrollable (Lewitzky, 2005,

¹⁴The success of this insertion into the imposed order is dependent on power constellations. According to Foucault (1987, p. 245), power relations within a society are related to the individual's position within this society. A subject can be turned into a passive object by separating it from others (Foucault, 1987, p. 243). Foucault (1987, p. 254) stresses that power is no abstract force, but a consequence of actions, something that one has to execute over the other. Hence the other is not at the mercy of power, but has a field of reactions, answers and effects to rely to; it still remains a subject. This becomes visible in *Their Dogs* where the Chicano/a barrio is vivisected by bulldozers, but the inhabitants still show different ways of engaging and coping with this situation, they remain agents. On the other hand, this implies that execution of power is only possible on free subjects because power changes the actions of others. 'Free' means to have a freedom of possibilities of reaction, while still being interwoven into a network of other subjects and responsibilities (Foucault, 1987, p. 255). Following this argument there is no society without power relations (p. 257). These automatically imply resistance because power is only executed over free subjects that can choose to act and resist (p. 259). Developing this thought further, the exclusion of the other can never be complete.

¹⁵De Certeau's (1988, p. 107) ordered space is similar to Lefebvres abstract space.

pp. 58–60).¹⁶ This differential space is utopian, it emerges out of the crisis of the homogeneous abstract space (Schmid, 2010, p. 271). Whilst abstract space aims at homogeneity and negates difference, differential space bases itself on difference. It is able to connect separated elements and moments of social practice (Schmid, 2010, p. 271). For Lefebvre, difference is not only a concept, but a practice; he defines difference as that which is excluded: the peripheries. Difference means then to admit the other, to live differently and put the peripheries in the centre (Schmid, 2010, p. 276). Due to these movements between periphery and centre, contradictions arise; contradictions between domination and appropriation of space, between homogeneity and the scattered character of abstract space (Schmid, 2010, p. 275).¹⁷ Differential space is a utopia, or perhaps more fittingly, a heterotopia, a place of the other, at the same time excluded and – through this exclusion – included.¹⁸ It thus bears resemblance to the hybrid third spaces (1990, p. 211) which are needed to open up the liminal in-between spheres of arrival.

The concept becomes blurry though when describing the implementation of this differential space; like Bhabha's concept, it remains an optimist theoretical idea. Furthermore, Murphet (2001, p. 24) warns that the differences or contradictions that differential space creates are restless and dictate a shift in the pattern of capitalist urban life: a homogenized multitude of fragments is unsustainable without constant political pressure on social space. This creates a space of upsurge and struggle that is contradictory to the creative differential space (2001, pp. 141–142). As we will see later, this becomes evident in *The Miraculous Day* where Amalia as a Chicana feels excluded from public space. Nonetheless, the ruptures and frictions of differential space can also open up liminal places (see also Aguirre, Quance and Sutton, 2000, p. 9) where dwelling on the margin becomes possible, something Amalia constantly attempts but does not succeed in due to her biographical obstacles.

¹⁶For Lefebvre, 'appropriation' is an oppositional practice and not, as one might think, an expression of power and dominance (Wehrheim, 2009, p. 27).

¹⁷Chambers (1999, p. 536) claims that the dichotomy centre/periphery is outdated and that colonialism is replaced by capitalism and its 'informational axis of world economy' so that the world consists of 'direct connections' (which again allude to transient third spaces) rather than differential spaces. However, capitalism is but a continuation of colonial practices, centre and periphery have not been abolished, but only diverted.

¹⁸Lefebvre's concept of heterotopia (see Schmid (2010, p. 278)) is very similar to Foucault's (1986, p. 24) description of the term. It will be dealt with more in depth in the analysis of *The Miraculous Day*.

2.4 Space and the City

Big cities are realms where these frictions and ruptures of spatial appropriation become visible. Cities are places of the other where the heterogeneity and anonymity of the people is one of their distinctive features (Wehrheim, 2009, p. 11). This overarching experience of otherness does not make the inhabitants equal, though. Questions of othering and who is subject to othering are still present. In this regard, 'the ability to consume and control space is tied to operations of power' (Gámez, 2002, p. 114). Who has and who has not free access to space determines the view on the city. While freeways mean freedom of movement for some inhabitants, for others they mean the dissection of their barrio and their construction sites become breeding grounds for gangs as in *Their Dogs*.

Similar to the other, the big city is disturbing ('de-calming'), its complexity and diversity cannot be registered within the constraints of an ordering city map (Chambers, 1999, p. 515). The city as a public space is foreign. This renders it attractive and unsettling at the same time. Bauman (1995) defines strangeness as the 'gap between what one needs to know in order to navigate and what one knows or thinks one knows about actual and possible moves of the others' (p. 126). Hence life in the city is carried on by strangers among strangers.

This insecurity is a basic element of cities. Trying to eliminate it creates security but also boredom that will erupt as destruction in other places (Wehrheim, 2009, p. 58).¹⁹ The fact that the structure of cities is not static, but fluid and process-based, similar to a changing mosaic, enhances the feeling of strangeness. It is in these zones of transition that a feeling of urbanity arises and which enable process-based arrival to take place. Urbanity includes changing uses of city zones and restructurings (Wehrheim, 2009, p. 222). These heterogeneous, differently attractive spaces are only divided by blurry, contested borderlines that are in a process of constant realignment (Bauman, 1995, p. 130). These borders become

a broad terrain characterized by social divides. Interestingly, this cultural condition, which is marked by fragmentation, has often come to represent the contemporary city; fragmentation has become a key descriptor for postmodern cities like Los Angeles... (Gámez, 2002, p. 98)

The city is hence a place of hybridity and liminality. The borders that become a broad terrain or are a conceptualization of the 'normal' locale enable a dwelling on the threshold, 'a transgression or an entry into the Other' (Aguirre, Quance and Sutton, 2000, p. 9). They are

¹⁹Especially shopping malls struggle with this ambivalence, an issue that will be treated later in the discussion of *The Miraculous Day*.

hence places where the entry and opening (Kunow, 2008, p. 159) necessary for the process of arrival can be enabled and lived. This liminality as expressed in the city's borders and its fragmentation can be seen as a 'mirror image of the mental constitution of its inhabitants, often reflecting feelings of confusion and bottomlessness' (Brandt, 2009, p. 553). Viramontes' novel *Their Dogs* is a good example where the dissected barrio finds its echo in the fragmented way of storytelling as well in the disrupted biographies and trajectories of the barrio dwellers.

Within these contested areas, struggle for power over the new sites is inevitable. This struggle is also fought between the extremes of individuation (to be able to move between the mosaic public spaces and to play different place-related roles) and consideration for other individuals. A forced encounter with otherness in the city can mean an inhibition of individual freedom. If one cannot choose whether to encounter otherness or not, problems arise. The mosaic structure of the city can at the one hand help to avoid these encounters, but on the other hand, the changing nature of it leads inevitably experiences of difference within the city (Wehrheim, 2009, pp. 222–225).

Within the changing structures of the city, identity is not rooted in fixed places of inherited property. It is as changeable as the city and needs to be constructed. This leads to a city of strangers without natural beneath, without inherited belongings. Bauman (1995, p. 136) calls these strangers 'surfaces' who stay superficial to each other. This helps controlling contact with the other strangers (Bauman, 1995, p. 135). But this surface-like life is non-sequential and the self cannot be constituted out of surfaces: the city bears a danger of feeling lost (Bauman, 1995, p. 136). Where every step appears to be risky, the need for a risk-free defensible space emerges, the idealized conception of a secure home (Bauman, 1995, p. 136). Conflict arises as the home itself cannot fulfil this need. The city runs the risk of being segregated into gated communities where the stranger is constantly ante portas, an imminent threat. The adventurous city stroller turns into a 'homesick wanderer' (Bauman, 1995, p. 136) who is overwhelmed by different sensations. This condition bears resemblance to the neither-nor state of 'congealed movement' (Holert and Terkessidis, 2006, p. 247) that occurs when people are hindered to arrive. This spatial segregation does not enable to creatively dwell in a liminal sphere, but leads to a sense of being at the same time locked in and locked out.

Wehrheim (2009, pp. 44–53) and Bauman (1995, pp. 128–129) see two ways of coping with this ambivalence of city life: either exclude or ignore the stranger and render it invisible by segregation; or reduce complexity by routinizing the contact, confine the stranger to certain

roles it has to fulfil. This treatment of the stranger is problematic and leads to ‘urban-planning utopias’ or even to a ‘war declared on strangers’ (Bauman, 1995, p. 128). Again, this creates boredom and monotony, expressed by the city grid, the ‘fullest and most fitting expression of the dream of the city as uniform, impersonal, cool’ (Bauman, 1995, p. 129). Los Angeles as *the* emblematic horizontal grid city expresses this ambivalence and struggle between freedom, threat, security and boredom, a paradigm for the postmodern city. Segregation threatens to limit the freedom of movement for the segregated strangers. As freedom of movement is a ‘principal stratifying factor in the city’ (Bauman, 1995, p. 130), the strategy of segregation fails: instead of reducing complexity, it creates it by intensifying mosaic structures. Raising inequality means raising threat. The segregated so-called ‘no-go areas’ are in reality ‘no going out areas’ (p.131). This confinement of movement becomes especially problematic when regarding de Certeau’s *flâneur*, the pedestrian who can perceive, appropriate and finally change the topographic system through walking (Certeau, 1988, p. 97). Segregation of public space is hence a hindrance to place-making, a triumph of abstract space.²⁰ A successful arrival within the city needs a transition from this abstract space to a place that through appropriation has been filled with meaning. Where this transition does not occur, the city may be seen as an immense social experience in which people frequently lack a sense of place or belonging (Brandel *et al.*, 2011, p. 258). Without it, the city remains ungraspable and illegible; the limen remains an edge rather than opening up the opportunities of the third space necessary for arrival.

²⁰I will delve deeper into the implications and theories of flânerie in my analysis of *The Miraculous Day*, as critics have claimed Amalia to be a ‘subaltern flâneuse’ (Priewe, 2007, p. 142).

3 Mexican Americans and LA City Space

The following chapter will lay out how these hybrid arrival processes and spatial power negotiations play out within Los Angeles for its Mexican-American inhabitants to better understand the dynamics that shape city space within the novels. For this, the chapter will first trace Mexican-American settlement in Los Angeles and will then delve deeper into how this history has shaped how Mexican Americans deal with LA city space. As will be laid out in the following, these dealings are shaped by questions of race and class and traces of a colonial past and how these questions determine the access to the American Dream for Mexican Americans which is one crucial aspect for the ability to arrive at American LA space.

3.1 Mexican Americans in Los Angeles

In the following, I intend to trace the settlement of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, laying the focus on events and epochs connected to the three novels: *Dogs* was written in the new millennium but takes place in the 1960s, an era of deep changes in US-American society and LA city space which affect the protagonists: Ermila and her friends are part of the school walk outs and their whole barrio is reshaped by freeway construction. *The Miraculous Day* was written and takes place in the early 1990s, thus sensing the tension in the city that will break out in the Rodney King riots in 1992. The social decline of the Torres-Thompson family in *Nurseries* mirrors the financial crisis of 2008. Thus the novels are all connected to historic events whose relevance and connection to each other shall be laid out here.

The relationship between Los Angeles and its Mexican American inhabitants is founded upon a long, intertwined and often unhappy history of conquest, displacement, deportations and misunderstandings, due to which it remains challenging to find the right terminology to discuss inhabitants of the US with Mexican roots. ‘Latino/a’ or ‘Hispanic’ also refers to immigrants from other Spanish speaking countries of Latin America, Hispanic becoming slowly outdated because of omitting the Indian and Mestizo backgrounds of most Latin Americans (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 182).²¹ ‘Chicano/a’ is a common denomination, but refers either to second generation Mexican Americans, people

²¹For a more detailed history of the controversy about these terms, see also Davis (2000, pp. 12–13).

born in the US but of Mexican descent (Soja, 2000, p. 286), or to 'politically active Mexican Americans' during the 1960s and 70s (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 238), in any case excluding recently migrated Mexican Americans. Castillo (2005) in contrast argues that the historical, cultural, and demographic basis of the composite term 'Mexicana/Chicana' (she focuses on female history in her publication) derives from a community's common prehispanic and colonial origins and a contiguous international border which facilitates the revitalization of common cultural roots, hence stressing the transnational dimension of the term (p. vi). Hepworth (1999, p. 169) also stresses that Chicanos/as resist the binary of self and other, the border permeates their conception of self. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the term Mexican American, although it is also a questionable construct because Mexican nationals are also Americans which renders the term US-centric. Still, as the term is commonly used and also includes first generation immigrants to the US, it will be used here to describe the population of Los Angeles with roots in or coming from Mexico. This is necessary because the protagonists of the three novels to be examined have very different connections to Mexico: Amalia was born in the US of Mexican parents; Araceli is a *chilanga* directly from Mexico, D.F. whereas *Their Dogs*' protagonists all have deep connections to their home barrio of East LA.

The protagonists hence mirror the broad range of Mexican-Americanness in Los Angeles. The city was originally founded as a Spanish mission in 1777 (Möllers, 1999, p. 64). In 1847, the US occupied California and implemented a Protestant work ethic to form nature according to their imagination of a garden Eden (Möllers, 1999, p. 73), and the Gold Rush created a building boom that has not stopped until today. The new mid-western American settlers were 'intent on building not a centralized city but a far-flung network of middle-sized towns', a new kind of urbanism, 'perhaps the first purely American cityspace' (Soja, 2000, p. 123). This reshaping of the spatial and social structure of California marginalized Californio ranch owners and indigenous population alike. Their way of life depicted as lazy and backward and hence in need of improval.²² To justify the annexation of California, the US needed to re-establish the old binaries between Western civilization and Southern wilderness, colonizers and colonized (Möllers, 1999, p. 74). Two tactics of coping with the

²²The pre-Anglo way of life has survived as a romanticized longing for a peaceful rural past in mission style architecture and Hollywood movies. One example would be *The Legend of Zorro* (2005), where Zorro (played by the Spaniard Antonio Banderas) helps 'freeing' the Californians from the evil Mexicans (who collaborate with even more evil Europeans) and facilitates a free election that ends with the US being chosen to govern California. Of course, this glorious past and lost garden Eden never existed in the first place, famines and exploitation were the reality for a (indigenous) majority of the Californian inhabitants (Möllers, 1999, p. 78).

other emerged: assimilation/Americanization, which meant suppressing everything Mexican (e.g. food, language, and patterns of family care) and adjusting to the presumably better 'Protestant capitalist work ethic' (Villa, 2000, p. 52); or deportation, expulsion, and hindering the other to enter the country.

The myth of the Californian paradise, together with a need for cheap work force in the US, attracted many immigrants hoping for a better life, while the old prejudice of the lazy, backward Mexican facilitated the expulsion from Paradise, in particular in times of economic crises. Until around 1880, Los Angeles was a multi-ethnic metropolis, when a wave of European immigrants gained a majority in the population of the city. The *barrioization*²³ of the Mexican population was in full course (Villa, 2000, p. 4). Due to segregation, discrimination and economic problems, Mexican Americans were continually marginalized.²⁴

It is no surprise that gangs or *clicas* started their appearance in this time as a 'manifestation of local, defensive urban territoriality' (Villa, 2000, p. 63). In 1943, the pressure erupted into the so-called Zoot Suit Riots, where Marine soldiers hunted down Mexican Americans wearing fashionable but somewhat extraordinary 'Zoot Suits' (Villa, R., 1999, p. 11). The media apportioned blame to the Mexican Americans, though, which caused major riots in the whole Los Angeles area.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the role of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles continued to be ambivalent. On the one hand, due to work force shortage caused by World War II, immigrants from Mexico were encouraged to work in California, especially in the labour-intensive agricultural sector (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 135).²⁵ Although this rural working class had little in common with the emerging Mexican-American middle class of the cities, both groups suffered from growing social inequality between Mexican Americans and the rest of the population (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 135). As illegal immigration increased, the public opinion in the South West suffered a nativist backlash which led to 'Operation Wetback', a deportation programme by the

²³ A term Villa uses to describe socially deforming spatial practices as opposed to culturally affirming *barriological* practices (2000, p. 8).

²⁴ Villa (1999, p. 10) states that '...the very use of public space by Mexicans became a constituent category of their alleged social and criminal maladjustment. [...] loitering [was] the principal reason for police citation of Mexican juveniles'.

²⁵ The so-called 'Bracero programme' only allowed temporary importation of Mexican workers though, and thus involuntarily produced a growing number of illegal Mexicans in California, in part due to the fact that getting a job was far easier than getting a work permit (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 136).

Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The INS illegally entered homes and detained US citizens without reason as it based their selection more on appearance than on paper-proofed nationality (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 137).²⁶ This race-based discrimination can be seen as an expression of the colonial continuities which determine Mexican-American access to city space and which will be dealt with in more detail later in the chapter.

During the 1960s, Los Angeles County's Mexican-American population increased by 113 percent (to 1,300,000 inhabitants) (Acuña, 2004, p. 300). It lived mainly in East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights, which experienced the forces of urban growth and a developer-led city planning: in the 1960s, bulldozers vivisected the barrio to build freeways that still would not be able to cope with the hordes of commuters invading Los Angeles every work day from their suburbias, causing a spectacular 'spatial violation' (Villa, R., 1999, p. 12) of the barrio. As Villa (2000, pp. 10–11) states, urban redevelopment projects usually do not benefit the poor and subaltern, in this case the Mexican Americans, but follow mostly the interests of real estate holders (Soja, 2000, p. 134). This not only meant spatial movement confinements and car noise, but also the loss a geographical identity and social network that the barrio could offer (Villa, 2000, p. 5)²⁷. According to Acuña (2004, p. 309), this social network and stronger family ties even prevented Mexican Americans from taking part in the violent outbreak that shook Black areas in 1965 although they faced similar economic and social conditions. Viramontes' entire novel *Their Dogs* is written on the premises of this dramatic experience, the outer chaotic and fragmentary structure of the novel mirroring the barrio's disruption and inner confusion of the protagonists.

This spatial suppression was only a symptom of general oppression of the large Mexican-American minority. The discontent about chronic inequalities, poverty and high rates of educational failure again lead to an outbreak of demonstrations, riots and violence in East Los Angeles, framed by a general protest wave by Blacks and other suppressed minorities in the entire US (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 159), the Watts riots in

²⁶This arbitrary rule of the administrative machinery renders the relationship of Mexican Americans to paper work very ambivalent: in Viramontes' novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996), the mother safely guards the family's proof of US nationality under the feet of a Jesus statue, whereas in *Their Dogs*, in the Eastside, 'your word was your word' Viramontes (2007, p. 63) and no one believes in paper.

²⁷Villa (2000, p. 5) also reminds also of the less positive consequences of *barrioization* though, such as gang violence, poverty and despair.

1965 which left 35 people dead and involved an occupation of the area by the National Guard (Acuña, 2004, p. 308).

In 1968, 10,000 students in East Los Angeles went on strike and participated in the so called 'Blowouts' to demonstrate for more participation and the ending of discrimination. In 1970, the peaceful protest turned into violence when a mostly peaceful mass demonstration against the Vietnam war (in which a disproportionately high number of killed soldiers were of Mexican-American descent) was beaten up by the police and ended with three dead persons, among them critical journalist Ruben Salazar (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, pp. 165–166). This incident started a spiral of fiercer demonstrations and even more brutal police force that can be traced far into recent history and is described in length in Mike Davis' book *City of Quartz* (2006, p. 274) and that Araceli falls victim to in *Nurseries. Their Dogs* plays between 1960-1970 and breathes the troubled air of the late 1960s with the police chasing dogs with helicopters (showing the disproportionate measures) and people filing before quarantine blocks.²⁸

Still, during the 1970s and 1980s, more Latinos/as (still mostly Mexicans, but also increasingly Central Americans) than ever before entered the US: the Hispanic population in Los Angeles grew by 62 per cent over the 1980s (Murphet, 2001, p. 123). The Latino/a population spread from East Los Angeles into the Watts area, formerly a predominantly Black quarter. These fluctuating ethnic residential patterns changed the economy and politics of the city and might even be a precondition for the 1992 riots (Murphet, 2001, p. 123). In the late 1980s, the Los Angeles Police Department also raised the pressure by starting its 'Operation HAMMER', a heavy 'war on drugs' and against gangs which led to the arrest of 'more Black youth than at any time since the Watts Rebellion' (Davis, 2006, p. 268). *The Miraculous Day* refers to these random acts of police violence (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 114) to highlight the domination of city space by authorities. It was also mainly Black and Hispanic youth that were affected by massive curfews and even barricades or road blocks that the LAPD erected in late 1989 (Davis, 2006, p. 277).

The so-called 'Rodney King' or 'Justice' riots were but a violent manifestation of the growing social, economic and racial pressure that was caused by California's severest depression since the 1930s. Job offers decreased while the flow of immigrants did not cease

²⁸In *Their Dogs*, the road blocks are installed as a protection against a rabies outbreak among dogs. The rabies outbreak is fictional, the roadblocks are not, as these are based in the curfews after the Chicano Moratorium uprising (Rodríguez and Viramontes, 2013, pp. 257–258).

(Crawford, 1995, p. 6). Inequality, e.g. in education and household income, grew due to job shortage, concerning especially children and unskilled female workers (Acuña, 2004, p. 370). The spark which ignited this explosive ambience was the beating of Black motorist Rodney King which was filmed and broadcast over and over on TV. The riots did not start, nonetheless, until it became public that the involved police officers were not held responsible for their crimes, but acquitted in court (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 211). The protests culminated in arson, looting and shootings and were the bloodiest and most costly riots in US history (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 211). Although being stylized as a Black upraise by the media, 44% of the participants were Latinos/as (mostly recent arrivals) while most of the damaged shops and restaurants (almost no residential areas were affected) were located in South Central LA (a mostly Black area) and Korea Town (Crawford, 1995, p. 6). Although Rechy's *The Miraculous Day* was written before this incident, it yet captures the unquiet and conflict-poised feeling of Los Angeles in the late 1980s. Amalia perambulates through a scenery that depicts the calm before the storm. One could argue that Proposition 187 was a late consequence of the recession and the Rodney King riots. This Proposition, which wanted to prohibit access to education, health care and other public services to illegal immigrants, was a consequence of the growing anti-immigrant sentiment that should culminate in the post-9/11 security measures and state paranoia. Due to legal doubts, the Proposition was never put to practice, but again its media and mental echoes are still present in the public memory (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 213).

Since then, Los Angeles' history seems to have calmed down, although for this 'industrial capitalist cityspace' (Soja, 2000, p. 122), standstill seems unlikely. One could argue that on the one hand, there has been progress and a certain revival of public space in Los Angeles: since the late 1980s, the city has started constructing a public railway transportation system to relieve the clogged freeways and enable access to the whole city for people without a car. But as is mirrored even in the most recent novel, Héctor Tobar's *Nurseries*, public transportation still remains a strenuous adventure, working against the visibility of Latinos/as in the public perception (López-Calvo, 2011, pp. 12–13). Latinos/as outnumbered the Anglo population in Los Angeles County in 1998 (Davis, 2000, p. 2). In 2017, Los Angeles had almost 4 million inhabitants. 48,7% of these classified themselves as Latinos/as

(census.gov, 2018, n.p.).²⁹ Nonetheless, discrimination abounds. In 2006, anti-immigration forces tried to pass the federal Border Protection, Anti-terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 which would make ‘unlawful presence’ an ‘aggravated felony’. The collapse of the dot-com bubble in 2000 and the worldwide financial crisis in 2007 (followed by a lasting recession) did not help to raise acceptance for immigrants and Latinos/as in general, putting even more pressure on a yet tight labour market. This is notable here because in *Nurseries*, Araceli’s employer Scott Torres was hit hardly by these crises which indirectly lead to Araceli’s journey to Los Angeles. Although immigration rates from Mexico have dropped (Cave, 2013, p. 4), American politicians still play with the fear of illegal immigration, highlighting that xenophobia and othering can often not be rationally explained. The most prominent example certainly is Trump’s request to build a wall on the US-Mexican border, despite facts doubting its effectiveness (haaretz.com, 2019, n.p.).

3.2 Colonial Continuities and the American Dream

The above depicted history of colonialism, Anglo development, and racism deeply influences today’s structure of Los Angeles city space. As Martinez (2009, p. 753) states, the US racial system has been based on an exclusively White/Black concept of race, based on a Western, Protestant form of dualism. There is a fear of mixture, no room for a multi-faceted identity or hybridism. Latinos/as in the US combine three sets of roots – indigenous, European, and African – and hence represent the un-American concept of *mestizaje*³⁰ (Martinez, 2009, p. 757). Mexican Americans in the US also defy the dualistic mind in that part of them are a colonized people displaced from the ancestral homeland with roots in the present-day US that go back centuries. Those ancestors did not cross the border, the border crossed them. At the same time, many have come more recently as ‘immigrants’. This complexity of Raza baffles and frustrates most Anglos, making the construction of a clear distinction ever more necessary (Martinez, 2009, p. 758).

²⁹They hence constitute the largest population group in LA, Whites accounting for 28,4%, Black or African Americans for 8,9%, and Asian Americans for 11,7% (census.gov, 2018, n.p.).

³⁰*Mestizaje* in itself is a disputed concept, at least in its original sense as promoted e.g. by Vasconcelos. In contrast to hybridity, which is a concept that sees transcultural mixture as positive, *mestizaje* stresses the Spanish and creole factor in the mixture, attempting a *blanqueamiento* of the indigenous part. It is hence a term that stands in the tradition of the racist colonial discourse (Leinen, 2000, pp. 233–235).

Race is hence not biological or fixed by nature, but rather a construction based on social beliefs (Haney López, 2013, p. 483). Race is determined by actions that people do, it is a process that enables multiple, fluid ascriptions (Moya, Paula M. L. and Markus, 2010, p. 4). What makes it problematic is the fact that it is used as an instrument of social, geographic, and economic control that serves to justify and obscure the inequitable distribution of social and natural resources (Moya, Paula M. L., 2016, p. 34). This usage of race as an instrument of control also concerns Mexican Americans in the US, it is used to justify their inferiority in the social hierarchy. Race can be ‘used as a lens through which to view Latinos/as in order to focus our attention on the experiences of racial oppression’ (Haney López, 2013, p. 485).

Latinos/as in the Southwest have been treated differently based on race since at least its incorporation into US territory after the US-Mexico war of 1846-48. Anglos justified their superiority in the social hierarchy through notions of Mexican-American inferiority. This reasoning was not only used on the original Latino/a population, but expanded to all kinds of Latinos/as that arrived in California in the subsequent periods until now. Evidence of this underlying racism can be found in all of the three analysed novels. In *The Miraculous Day*, Amalia encounters open racist insults and has to take a physical assault in the form a chicken bone thrown after her. The protagonists of *Their Dogs* are treated like the title-giving animals precisely due to their ethnicity as they live in the Mexican-American barrio of East LA, and Araceli is turned into a token for immigration supporters and opponents alike only due to her being a Mexican immigrant.

This racial othering also concerns Mexican Americans’ access to the American arrival master narrative, namely that of the American Dream. The American Dream is a topic underlying all three examined novels. In *The Miraculous Day*, it is expressed through Amalia’s Hollywood dreams, the ultimate dream of ‘having made it’. *Their Dogs* makes clearly visible that Mexican Americans in East LA in the 1960s were excluded from this dream, and Nurseries questions whether in modern LA with its erasure of race the American Dream may be achieved for all citizens or whether it is still a chimera.

The American Dream includes different aspects. On the one hand, there is the material component where citizenship shades into ownership and which includes class mobility and economic opportunity. Its most obvious manifestation in city space would hence be the privately owned home as present especially in Los Angeles’ suburban architecture. On the other hand, there is a metaphysical component, a blend of optimism and happiness (Kimmage, 2011, p. 27). It is not only about freedom, but about equality of opportunity

(White and Hanson, 2011, p. 8). The Dream is hence based on the assumption that success comes to those who work hard and entails values such as discipline, determination, a fierce work ethic, and modesty (Rosenbaum, 2014, p. 131). The flip side of this assumption is that it places the responsibility for failure and success on the individual, erasing factors such as race or class differences which would question this assumption of equality. Following the Dream logic, those who do not achieve the Dream are incapable to achieve it not because of unequal conditions – this would question the Dream which is one of the fundamental uniting myths of the US as ‘it is a Dream dreamt by a nation of individuals’ (Kimmage, 2011, p. 33).

The Dream is hence a tool to construct the self, which again leads to questions and constructions of otherness, foreignness and binaries. As Rosenbaum (2014, p. 138) states, the global and the foreign remain indispensable to the construction of Americanness and the American Dream. Immigration narratives classically have relied on the American Dream as a motivation for immigration. As this immigrant narrative relies heavily on the American Dream, it entails the same problems, such as masking stories of structural racism, sexism, or classism (Mata, 2014, p. 5), contributing to maintaining the myth of a unified nation (Mata, 2014, p. 7). In recent Latino/a narratives, this myth-based reasoning has been replaced by a need for economic survival as a reason for moving to the US (Mata, 2014, p. 2), as can be seen in *Nurseries* as well. *Nurseries* highlights that mechanisms of erasure and denial foreclose the promised equality of opportunity for Mexican-Americans. The Dream is out of reach for Latinos/as whose ‘difference’ (of race, class, religion etc.) cannot be easily subsumed under the rhetoric of ‘Americanness’ (Mata, 2014, p. 2):

Coming from an ethnic group with a long experience of discrimination and deprivation, Mexican American writers have been disinclined to subscribe to a myth that regards success as lying within everyone’s reach and that deems those who fail to achieve it as themselves somehow culpable. (Paredes, 1981, p. 71)

Dreaming the Dream is ‘permitted, but actualization of the dream is denied’ (Márquez, 1983, p. 15). Amalia’s day dreams in *The Miraculous Day* reflect precisely this ambition and refusal, whereas *Their Dogs* aligns more with Mata in that the American Dream is seen as unattainable in the first place through the massive segregation and discrimination caused by freeway construction and city politics in the 1960s in LA.

In recent Mexican-American narratives, protagonists hence do not strive for the achievement of the American Dream, but for the creation of a space where they will finally feel at home, a space that exists outside the constructed boundaries of the nation (Mata, 2014, p. 2). The

American Dream is a master narrative that obfuscates structures of power that hinder Latinos/as' equal access to opportunity and privilege:

When we insert subjugated histories and contest the structure of the schema of this master narrative, the fissures in the conventional narrative widen into much larger ruptures that cannot be easily subsumed under the narrative's organizing logic. (Mata, 2014, p. 7)

In my analysis, I want to highlight precisely these fissures within the novels which can hence make arrival possible without succumbing to the Dream's assimilationist logic.

3.3 Mexican-American Space and Place Usage in Los Angeles

The following subchapter will elaborate upon how the history of disadvantaging and othering Mexican Americans has shaped their relation to LA city space. Los Angeles has managed to deal with these othering mechanisms through spatial strategies such as segregation. This spatial separation has been made possible by the city's willingness to spread and turn into a horizontal city (Möllers, 1999, p. 19). According to Möllers (1999, p. 94), this horizontality and fragmentation helped to contain the internal struggles for power that would have erupted much earlier in more densely populated cities.

Los Angeles is defined by 'borders', social and physical spatial divides that limit the people's access to the city as a whole. These borders create areas of marginalization, especially for minorities such as the Latino/a community (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 18). They do not separate two countries from each other, like the cousin to the south, but are a much more complex, interwoven and less visible multitude of borders, 'an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, p. 18). This 'blurred macrofrontier' (Leclerc and Dear, 1999, p. 5) or 'third border' (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 18) with its contradictions of 'simultaneous centrality and marginality' (Leclerc and Dear, 1999, p. 5) is the spatial equivalent to the more symbolic third space, liminality, and hybridity concepts laid out in the previous chapter. Here, the term is used in a more concrete, spatial manner, referring also to physical borders such as freeways or the wall of concrete slabs of the LA river that make East Los Angeles 'a zone of radical alterity' for most Angelenos (Crawford, 1999, p. 118).

This segregation of Los Angeles has various consequences, of which three are very significant in the examined novels and shall be examined here in more detail:

suburbanization, limit of movement due to restrictive means of transportation and Los Angeles as a war zone. As mentioned before, Los Angeles has always been a city without centre, consisting of a fragmented mosaic of small, only loosely interconnected communities. This spatial separation has been reinforced by racial segregation: property owners who fear devaluation of their property by a Latino/a and/or Black neighbourhood try to close their communities to this apparent threat to property (Davis, 2006, p. 169). The only affordable living space for new arrivals is thus the inner city, a place that is soon contested by investors, freeways and city planners:

Residential segregation created by prejudice and socioeconomic disparities is reinforced by planning practices and policing, implemented by zoning laws and regulations, and subsidized by businesses and banks. (Low, 2003, p. 390)

This contestation together with the above mentioned jobs-housing mismatch leads to difficult living conditions and those who can flee these into the suburbs – a vicious circle that nourishes itself. Increased fear of violence (not necessarily violence itself) increases this movement and carries the metropolis and its segregation to the fringes (Blakely and Snyder, 1997, p. 146).

This urbanization of the suburbs is accompanied by an extensive growth of gated communities that enlarge the social gaps even more and make a large part of former public space inaccessible for ‘outsiders’; the so-called ‘civil society’ ‘seems to melt into the airwaves and freeways and other circuitries of the sprawling urban scene’ (Soja, 2000, p. 136). Gated communities allow for social control of the urban poor and cater to the middle class’ desire for intimacy and community (Low, 2003, p. 391). That this social control and intimacy is a fiction at best is meticulously depicted later on in novels like *Nurseries*.³¹

Los Angeles’ residential segregation is enforced by bad public transportation. While the inhabitants of suburbia can afford their own means of transportation by owning at least one car, the poorer parts of Los Angeles have to rely on the public bus system which is

³¹This fear of invasion runs the danger of creating a ‘Carceral Archipelago of fortress cities’ (Soja, 2000, xvi) or even an entire ‘Fortress America’ (Davis, 2006, p. 221), an ‘intensification of social and spatial control brought about by new developments in the privatization, policing, surveillance, governance, and design of the built environment and the political geography of space’ (Soja (2000, p. 299), emphasis orig.). Möllers (1999, pp. 197–199) also claims that public space is privatized and that LA means the end of public space. Soja contradicts and claims that there has never been a clear distinction between public and private space. The former had been romanticized and mythologized in Western urban theory and practice. He claims that city space is a fully lived space formed by class, gender, race, ethnicity that also allows for resistance and social change to emerge, a fact that Davis overlooks (Soja, 2000, p. 320). Some scholars also criticize Soja for painting a too macro-perspective picture of Los Angeles, remaining in the voyeur’s ‘god’s eye view’ instead of rendering a ‘living spatiality’ (Latham, 2011, p. 383) and staying too theoretic and intellectual (Villa, 2000, p. 240).

complicated, decentralized and slow (Thies, 2009, p. 219). While the car and the freeway are a visible sign of Los Angeles' lifestyle, the poor – mostly immigrants – are rendered invisible, not only in the streetscape, but also in Hollywood movies and the Anglophone mass media (López-Calvo, 2011, pp. 12–13). The freeways hence serve as a double symbol of deterritorialization and dominant Anglo capitalism for the Mexican-American community: on the one hand, they represent the inaccessibility of the main means of transportation because of economic constraints. On the other hand, they remind of the destruction of the community in the 1960s by their very construction as depicted in *Their Dogs*:

...in popular Chicano imaginative figurations of dominant urbanism, no other single element comes close to occupying the symbolic place of the freeways as a resonant symbol of the community's historical geography. (Villa, 2000, p. 83)

Class in Los Angeles is 'defined fundamentally by one's capacity to move faster than others and to decide where one can go without being sanctioned' (Thies, 2009, p. 218). Mexican Americans are confined to their ethnically defined localities or, if they are maids and other domestic workers that venture into the White exclaves, their mobility is limited and channelled by the collective transport system (Thies, 2009, p. 219). They are thus cut off from the American promises of individuality and independence that are perfectly symbolized by the automobile (Rieff, 1991, p. 45). Migrants are hence not only limited by their status as illegals, but also by their limited access to LA's freeways that are a living space through which to grasp the city. As a pedestrian or sitting in a bus, one does not speak the adequate language of the cityscape, the language of movement (Möllers, 1999, p. 29).³²

This mechanisms of segregation lead to social tensions, creating a narrative of everyday violence such as gang culture or the war on drugs. According to scholars like Davis (2006, p. 270), this violence may exist, but it is dramatized and exaggerated by the police and the media to expel and control the urban other, namely the poor and immigrants, and to justify segregation. Black and Latino/a youths are in constant suspect of being 'gang members' which has been declared a crime per se. The city equips their police with Robocop-quality equipment, such as infrared camera-equipped helicopters. This leads to media images that

³²This language of movement hence serves to continue practices of othering, singling out non-locals : 'To move around the city on foot is like being lost in the desert that the Los Angeles basin once was, and will doubtless become again, or like floating in space. [...] They are easy to spot, these recent arrivals from south of the border, walking along aimlessly – or is it just that they still have a long way to go? – under street signs they are far from likely to be able to decipher' (Rieff, 1991, p. 120).

suggest determination, but at the same time demonize the immigrant other. As can be seen in *Nurseries*, illegals are hunted down by helicopters and then cannibalized by the media.

However, the image is more complex than it seems at first sight. Mexican Americans and other Latinos/as also spread outside East Los Angeles, they even ‘conquer’ the White suburbs (like the Torres-Thompson family in *Nurseries*) and expand their spatial boundaries (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 9). Ethnic minorities now constitute about one third of US suburbs (Saunders, 2010, p. 95). They have created a ‘heterogeneous public realm’, a ‘*unity of disunity*’ (Gámez, 2002, p. 108; emphasis orig.) and have reconfigured the “cold” frozen geometries of the old spatial order to accommodate a ‘hotter’, more exuberant urbanism’ (Davis, 2000, p. 54). The houses of Mexican Americans are painted in brighter colours, the yard is delineated with artful wrought-iron fences and the streets are appropriated in a different way from Anglo ones: swap meets, garage sales, murals and vendor carts conquer space in an unplanned, but very effective manner (Priewe, 2007, p. 37; Gámez, 2002, p. 108). These semi-public spaces can be read as signs of cultural retention or everyday acts of resistance against a hegemonic national culture (Hise, 2004, p. 556).

Villa (2000) sees these spatial practices as culturally affirming ‘barriological’ (p. 8) practices that ‘reveal multiple possibilities for re-creating and re-imagining dominant urban *space* as community-enabling *place*’ (p. 6, emphasis orig.). The opposite would be socially deforming ‘barrioizing’ (Villa, 2000, p. 8) spatial practices which deform Mexican American communities and place them within racialized space. Acts of barrioization

represent intentional and systematic structures of disenfranchisement designed to limit life chances for Chicana/os and other Latina/os in urban environments. Racist spatial practices are thus part of the fabric of the transformation of cities like Los Angeles from formerly Mexican villages to global cities. (Vázquez, 2018, p. 26)

Only through the interplay between these practices is it possible to understand the form and meaning of the barrio (Villa, 2000, p. 8). ‘Chicano/a and Latino/a communities in Los Angeles have transformed parts of the city through the occupation and appropriation of existing places’ (Gámez, 2002, p. 108). Hence segregation can also have positive aspects, allowing for social networks, support and control, if it still allows for mobility and is not overly restrictive (Saunders, 2010, p. 320). Soja (2000) sees this ‘Fractal City’ as a place of ‘creative new ‘hybridities’ and a cultural politics aimed not just at reducing inequalities but also preserving difference and fostering flexible ‘transversal’ identities’ (p. 155). This heroic

bricolage’ or ‘opportunistic maneuverings’ (Crawford, 1999, p. 117) can transform social space and ascribe power to those who usually are powerless:

This Raza second city – contrary to the rigid laws of physics but consonant with the fluid arts of urbanity – exists in the same *space* of the putative Anglo-American first city (signs of diminution are everywhere to be seen), yet in a significantly other *place* from its dominant cultural milieu. (Villa, 2000, pp. 234–235)

The ability of Los Angeles to be an Arrival City remains thus ambivalent. On the one hand, it is a segregated city that destroys public space, on the other hand it creates ‘counterpublics’ (Crawford, 1995, p. 4) that contest dominant space and appropriate alternative public spheres. The barriological practices could be seen as practices of insertion into dominant city space which enable a sense of emplacement and consequently opportunities for arrival processes. However, this appropriation of space is constantly challenged by notions of racial othering and colonial continuities. Los Angeles can hence be an Arrival City, but it also shows that arrival remains a process that will never reach a stage of closure. Los Angeles is an ‘urban transfrontera’ (Priewe, 2007, p. 44) that mixes borderization and urbanization, leading to multidirectional lives, societies and forms of arrival.

4 Locating Mexican-American Literature in Los Angeles

At first sight, the authors of the three novels do not have much in common: John Rechy, author of *The Miraculous Day*, had his first success in the 1960s with his novel *City of Night* (2008 [1963]) which has a focus on queer night life in Los Angeles. Mainly for this reason, he was for a long time neglected by the Chicano community which during the 1960s focused more on gaining a voice in front of the Anglo majority than paying attention to their own minorities. The latter did not change until the 1980s, when Chicana writers gained momentum and struggled for a more feminist approach to Mexican American literature. Helena Viramontes, author of *Their Dogs*, can be clearly situated within this feminist current which has a strong political approach and a strong network across universities and political organizations. *Nurseries'* author Héctor Tobar is not even a Chicano author. He is of Guatemalan descent and more famous as a journalist than as an author although he has published several novels. In spite of these differences and although the books were written and take place at different times, all three novels have similar features so that they invite for a comparison: they feature mainly female Mexican-American protagonists that have to cope with the same city: Los Angeles, a place of freeways, bad public transportation, natural disasters, gangs, barrios, violence, and a feeling of threat, loss and segregation. To understand these similarities, it is necessary to take a closer look at the recent history of Mexican-American literature and the selected authors' connections to it.

4.1 Mexican-American Literature and LA

As can be seen by the example of Héctor Tobar, the first question to address is: what is Mexican-American literature anyway? Most of it is subsumed under the more popular term Chicano/a literature, ignoring the second-generation implications of the term 'Chicano/a', but bearing with it the political implications that the term gained during the Chicano Movement when the formerly pejorative term gained a 'political subjectivity' (Aldama, 2013, p. 80) that seems to have transferred to the field of literature. Due to these historical political implications, I will refer to Mexican-American rather than Chicano/a literature here, as my chosen novels not all share this background, some (like *The Miraculous Day*) even implicitly criticize it.

Mexican-American literature is seen as a subgroup within the ethnic niche of Latino/a literature that includes other Latin American ethnic literatures within the United States, such as Cuban-American, Dominican-American, or Puertorican literature. Whereas Aldama (2013, p. 2) sees an overarching sense of *latinidad* develop in the literary field that crisscrosses the diverse minority literary traditions, Caminero-Santangelo (2009, p. 174) argues that lingering national ties hinder a Latino/a panethnic identity. In this sense, Mexican-American literature is a more precise term that avoids brushing over these still lingering national ties. That is why I will refer to the novels as Mexican-American and not Latino/a novels; they share the main topic of Mexican-American life in LA.

In this understanding, Mexican-American literature does not have to be written by Mexican Americans only. Pitman (2012, p. 16) states for Chicano/a film that it should be about Chicanos/as, not necessarily also by Chicanos/as or for Chicanos/as. If it is aimed for Chicanos/as, it should also include an empowering, somewhat political dimension and not redraw Western clichés on the Southern other (Pitman, 2012, p. 18). This political notion is often ascribed to Chicano/a literature and the term Chicano/a in general, including issues such as immigration, identity, coming-of-age, community (West-Durán, 2004b, xii), or colonization (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella, 2007b, xxvi).

Heide (2004, p. 6) also argues that the ethnic identity of the author should not be seen as too relevant for the categorisation of a text as Chicano/a literature. Heide (2004, p. 8) understands Chicano/a literature as a discourse that is influenced by the literary format, the author's ethnic identity, as well as the reception and the scientific discourse. To him Chicano/a texts take traces of the specifically American history of cultural contact and hand postcolonial re-framings of these cultural contacts back to 'America' to change it in its literary representations (Heide, 2004, p. 55). In this sense, I argue that all three chosen novels certainly work with these cultural re-framings and can be seen as Mexican-American literature, regardless of the author's ethnic identity.

That said, it is obvious that Mexican-American literature can never deny its political origins and underpinnings: some scholars argue that the origins of Mexican-American literature on US territory can be traced back as far as to Álgvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca's travel account about the Southwest from the 16th century (Aldama, 2013, p. 31). Others see the origin of Mexican-American literature in the 19th century, when María Amparo Ruiz de Burton (*1832 in Ensenada, Mexico) who became a US citizen shortly after the Guadalupe-Hidalgo treaty, published *The Squatter and the Don* (2004 [1885]), a novel dealing with the

expropriation of the Californio *hidalgos* by Anglo settlers during the land act from 1851. Brady stresses the ongoing history of internal colonization suffered by Chicanos by denominating Viramontes' *Their Dogs* a 'disturbingly curious sequel' to *The Squatter and the Don* (2013, p. 172), as both novels deal with displacement and oppression.

In the 1930s, Vasconcelos' idea of the *raza cósmica* reached US territory and initiated a kind of racial pride in the Mexican-American literary field. This finally led to the Chicano Movement of the 1960s where a growing Mexican-American population discovered their voice to rally against socio-economic problems and race-based discrimination (Aldama, 2013, p. 79). This could be seen as the real starting point of Chicano/a literature (Villa, 2000, p. 17).

Many reknown Chicano authors, such as Rudolfo A. Anaya, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Ron Arias or Oscar 'Zeta' Acosta started their career during this time (Aldama, 2013, p. 86). Most of the literature was genuinely political, searching for an own Chicano identity, raising a conscience for ethnicity and oppression and rejecting Anglo-American values. What today is seen as problematic is that these authors often had a tendency to idealize Mexico and the Mexican past, such as the pre-Columbian period or the revolution, and to simplify and stereotype everything Anglo-American (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, pp. 179–181). An important metaphor to create a unique Chicano identity was the trope of *Aztlán*, a mythical Aztec homeland in the Southwest which represented the pre-border origin and thus spiritual unity between Mexicans on both sides of the border (Lomelí, 1993, p. 92). Also here, problems emerged: it was a reterritorializing discourse and only reversed the Eurocentric binary oppositions. Anglo-America was seen as Mexico's negative, racialized other. Besides, it negated the voices of homosexual and/or women writers until the mid-1970s (Priewe, 2006, pp. 47–48).

This explains why John Rechy (*1934), who published his first novel *City of the Night* in 1963, has long been treated as an outlaw in the field of Mexican-American literature and has adopted this label for himself: although ethnic issues are underlying in his texts, the main focus of his earlier novels lies on the finding of a sexual identity as a homosexual (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, pp. 153–154). This did not fit into the often nationalist and latently patriarchal and homophobic veins of 'mainstream' Chicano literary scene. Scholarly interest in Rechy was not raised until in the 1980s, when feminist and queer issues surfaced and Rechy's *The Miraculous Day* featured Chicano/a identity as a main issue (Saldívar, 1997, p. 108). *The Miraculous Day* criticises *Aztlán* in a mural that states that

‘Aztlán es una fabula’ (Saldívar, 1997, p. 117), continuing the critique on movimiento literature. Rechy himself is wary of being labeled as an ethnic author, as he sees the danger of self-ghettoisation, but at the same time he recognizes the political function of minority literature (Heide, 2004, p. 257). Today, Rechy is a renowned author of several novels, has lectured at several universities, and published articles in newspapers such as the *The Nation*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and others. He was the first novelist to receive PEN-USA-West’s Lifetime Achievement Award (Lucas Crown, 2013, n.p.) and the first Latino/a author to publish with a mainstream Anglo-American press and land a best-seller across America (Foster, 1999, p. 288). With *The Miraculous Day*, he finally entered the Chicano/a literary canon even though this meant that his reputation as one of the pioneers of queer literature faded a bit into the background.

Helena María Viramontes is linked to the 1960s in another way. According to Grandjeat (2013, pp. 111–112), Viramontes recurs in *Their Dogs* to the barrio novels of the 1960s that share their sense of emplacement, the embeddedness in the barrios’ specific locales that testifies the power of fiction, and storytelling that contributes to maintain a sense of community. Contrary to the 1960s precursors though, Viramontes’s novel does not retrieve a ‘*tierra firme*, no solid ground, but rather, an open territory haunted by a sense of *unhomeliness*, and harbouring shifting, multiple identities in constant (re)formation’ (Grandjeat, 2013, p. 112, emphasis orig.).

In the 1970s, Chicano literature slowly abandoned the nationalist tone of the 1960s and focused on new writing techniques and crafty writing. During this time, it also left its niche and started to acquire an international readership (Lomelí, 1993, pp. 98–99). The 1980s and 1990s then saw the emergence of feminist and queer writers that had been subdued before. As mentioned above, the literature of the movimiento was often sexist and homophobic, so that feminist and queer writers did not only struggle against an Anglo mainstream, but also against patriarchal Chicano dominance and Anglo feminist activists who were colour blind to issues of race and racism (Aldama, 2013, p. 98). In the late 1980s and 1990s, feminist and queer authors broke these restrictions and contributed to the massive expansion of Latino/a letters. Issues often addressed were questions of gender, sexual orientation, technical innovations, cultural frameworks and identity. Chicano/a literature developed into a ‘mosaic of difference’ (Lomelí, 1993, p. 103).

Helena María Viramontes (*1954) belongs to this first generation of Chicana authors. During her early years she had problems in getting recognition by fellow students or professors

(Aldama, 2013, p. 100). She published her short story collection *The Moths and Other Stories* in 1985 which was reviewed positively by critics. Since then, she has published two other books (among them *Their Dogs*) and won numerous awards, among them the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature. She studied English and Creative Writing and is now Professor for Creative Writing at Cornell University (Department of English at Cornell University, 2011, n.p.). She belongs hence to the large group of Chicana authors that are also scholars and have close ties to one another, e.g. Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, or Lucha Corpi who established the presence of Latina literature (Aldama, 2013, p. 103). Hence, as more and more Latinas started publishing and networking, a sense of empowerment ensued (Aldama, 2013, p. 100).

Whereas in the beginning, Chicana feminism and feminist texts were considered outside or not part of a genuine Chicano literary canon, Viramontes is now considered part of it as she explores familia ideology and migrant experience (Jacobs, 2006, p. 110). *Their Dogs* resists dominant conventions of the Latina literature genre, as it is neither a family saga, coming-of-age story, nor a migration tale, nor can it be subsumed under labels such as realism or magic realism (Cuevas, 2014, p. 41). Its hard-to-grasp structure mirrors the in-betweenness its characters find themselves encased in. This was also the time when issues such as cultural identity started to acquire an in-between notion, overcoming the binary cultural thinking of the 1960s. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (2012 [1987]) established the border as an in-between space that is identified as refuge and home. Latinas claim the borderlands in writing, spirit and physicality, inhabiting this physical wound, national and cultural rupture (Aldama, 2013, p. 103).

Tobar's writings have been situated within the more recent streak of a more mainstream, entertaining vein of Latino/a literature which highlights its diversity and increased coverage (Aldama, 2013, p. 135).³³ Tobar itself is of Guatemalan descent, but grew up in Los Angeles. He was a correspondent for the Los Angeles Times and won the Pulitzer Prize for his report on the 1992 LA riots in the LA Times. *Nurseries* has received positive reviews by critics and was translated into several languages (Tobar, 2014, n.p.),³⁴ proving the range of this author, something still not granted for Latino/a authors. This Latino/a categorization is still upheld

³³Aldama (2013, p. 135) situates Héctor Tobar's novel *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998) within the genre of historical fiction, a novel about the consequences of the Guatemalan civil war and one of the first novels by Central American writers to be published in English in the US (Caminero-Santangelo, 2009, p. 174).

³⁴An Amazon search yielded a German, Italian, French, and Polish translation, but interestingly no Spanish one (Amazon, 2018).

by some critics who call *Nurseries* a ‘true Latino novel’ (Arias, 2003, p. 169) and compare it with the works of Gabriel García Márquez (Rayner, 2011, n.p.) in spite of Tobar’s US-American upbringing. His publishers in contrast prefer to compare his work to *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Wolfe, 1988) and Heredia (2013, p. 116) not only contextualizes him as a Latino/a author, but also as engaging with the urban experience in a broader sense.

In spite of their difference, the examined novels all use postmodern features of storytelling, such as fragmentarity or unconclusive structures (Martín-Rodríguez, 1993, p. 122).³⁵ Viramontes’s fragmented *Their Dogs* can surely be placed within this vein, as she uses ‘techniques of the open-ended work to ensure the complicity of the readers’ (Martín-Rodríguez, 1993, p. 122).

Although *The Miraculous Day* is narrated in a more linear fashion than *Their Dogs* – only interrupted by flashbacks but focusing on one protagonist – it still challenges the reader which is typical for Latino/a fiction:

But even in the seemingly linear narrative arc, Latino/a fiction values digressions and interruptions, backtracking and temporal shifts as characters recall past events and other spaces that impinge on the novelistic present. In this way, although Latino/a fiction might be more linear in the new century, it is also less so. (Delgadillo, 2011, p. 603)

Heide (2011, p. 135) states that with its postmodernist aesthetics, literary meta-commentary and textual subversion of prevailing views, *The Miraculous Day* is representative of the recent Chicano/a literary discourse and a postmodernist literary turn of the 1990s that takes up topics that earlier Chicano/a writers might not have wanted to address. In general, postmodern strategies are used in a ‘tricksterlike reinterpretation and reacquisition of assigned spaces as places of their own by right of struggle and resistance’ (Bus, 2000, p. 115).

Although *Nurseries* uses a more conventional approach to storytelling, its constant interweaving of LA city space with fictional allusions such as fantasy novels and movies places it within the realm of postmodern storytelling with its mixing of fictional and real world (Aldama, 2013, pp. 137–138), a feature it shares with the other two novels. This trait places the novels within the field of hyperrealistic literature, which is characterized especially through its play between reality and fiction, stressing their awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 5). Hyperrealistic novels mix different styles of storytelling (Rings, 2010, p. 92) – *The Miraculous Day* e.g. blends social realism

³⁵Other prominent examples include Salvador Plascencia, Junot Díaz or Alejandro Morales (Aldama, 2013, pp. 137–140).

with fable (Clontz, 2005, p. 110) – and history is distorted to destabilize traditional structures of thinking (Rings, 2010, p. 97), like in *Their Dogs* which invents and conflates historical events such as roadblocks and curfews.

Additionally, *The Miraculous Day* and *Their Dogs* have been placed within the realm of magic realism³⁶, which is a form of writing that makes no distinction between events that conform and those that defy the laws of nature, and this in an organically whole, stylistically and tonally seamless way of storytelling (Aldama, 2013, p. 142). Whereas in *The Miraculous Day*, the appearance of the Virgin would be such an event, Aldama (2013, p. 142) names other examples such as Daniel Olivas' ironical *Book of Want* (2011) or Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1994) where the protagonists levitate, a trope that also appears at the end of *Their Dogs*.³⁷ Labelling Latin American texts as magic realism is seen critical by many scholars because it supposedly depicts a typically Latin American independent culture and hence only recalls discourses of exoticism and nationalism (Borsò, 1994, pp. 88–99). There are also postmodern interpretations in the sense that magic realism creates gaps in the text through which the neglected, the other can enter the discourse and carry resistance into the imperial centre (Slemon, 1995, pp. 408–409). The latter would perfectly suit the discourses of resistance dominating the interpretation of Chicano literature, but as Hamilton (2011, pp. 3–9) reminds us, this paradigm also recreates the old binaries and has to be taken with caution. As can be seen in the literary review overview below, the interpretations of the novels allow diverse and divergent interpretations.

Mexican-American literature now is hence a recognised genre with numerous sub-genres, for example urban literature (Aldama, 2013, pp. 3–4). *Their Dogs*, *The Miraculous Day*, and *Nurseries* belong to this vein, more specifically on literature in and about Los Angeles. They are by far not the only Mexican-American novels dealing with Los Angeles: Terri de la Peña's novels such as *Faults* (1999) or *Margins* (1992) are all located in Los Angeles, as is Daniel Olivas' *Book of Want* (2011), and Alejandro Morales' *Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) plays partly in a futuristic Los Angeles-Mexico City transurbanation. *The Miraculous Day*, *Their Dogs*, and *Nurseries* stand out from these novels in the sense that their characters are linked to the urban city space of Los Angeles in a very specific manner. Los Angeles is not only the backdrop for the story, it is a character or agent of the story itself which is why these novels were chosen for analysis.

³⁶See e.g. Giles (2000, p. 127) and Huehls (2012, p. 160).

³⁷I will deal with magic realism in the novels in the according literary analysis chapters in more depth.

In contrast, scholarly research about Los Angeles literature has ignored writings by Mexican Americans, anthologies about Los Angeles do not list them: 'Worse than being "othered", they have been completely ignored' (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 14). This may partly have to do with the fact that Los Angeles has always been regarded as a movie city where writers never were the centre of attention (Murphet, 2001, p. 4). This is changing only recently: McNamara's (2010) *Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles* houses one article about Asian-American and Latino/a literature (Kyung-Jin Lee, 2010) and Fine (2003, p. 407) mentions ethnic writers, although rather briefly, in his essay about Los Angeles as a literary region. Nonetheless, it is time to focus on Mexican-American writings in Los Angeles. This is even more important as these writings fit very well into the general writings about Los Angeles.

Los Angeles has always provoked some literary tropes that can be found in almost any literature about this city: the weather (be it sun, rain, or Santa Ana winds and earthquakes), Disney or suburban kitsch, death, the movies or movie-like descriptions, banality, freeways, beaches, the future, and apocalypse (Murphet, 2001, p. 31). Indeed, these points can also be found in Latino/a fiction about Los Angeles (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 20). These tropes also appear in the analysed novels: *The Miraculous Day* is dominated by hot Santa Ana winds and an underlying fear of earthquakes and catastrophe; the protagonist meanders through a decaying concrete jungle and her epiphany is witnessed by camera flash bulbs and takes place in an artificial shopping mall. *Their Dogs* is also invaded by apocalyptic anticipations, namely torrential rain falls, chopping helicopters and earth-biting construction machines, not to mention the invasion of the freeways into the barrio. *Nurseries* seems to be missing this doomsday touch, although the camps of homeless people along the railways remind one of the children of its post-apocalyptic science fiction books. However, *Nurseries* plays as well with the contrast between nature and civilisation when the Torres-Thompsons substitute their lush rain forest of their American-Dream-home with autochthonous desert plants; and the mediatization of Los Angeles is fully played out in the media coverage of Araceli's 'kidnapping'.

It is no surprise that writings by non-ethnic and Mexican-American writers use the same tropes: writers in Los Angeles have always been outsiders, or at least newcomers (Fine, 2003, p. 397). According to Murphet (2001), this is because only the newcomer can condense the 'otherwise imponderable lessons of a bizarre locale into palpable aesthetic forms' (p. 15). However, the glance of the outsider, the voyeur, has lost its appeal. Now, due to the spatial

segregation and ensuing limited range of motion, everybody becomes an insider (Murphet, 2001, p. 15). Maybe this is why Mexican-American writers are especially apt at delving into the contradictions of Los Angeles: on the one hand, they are outsiders to the Anglo mainstream; on the other hand, they are insiders of Los Angeles, of its barrios and its negotiations of space and place (Villa, 2000, p. 111). They can create new insights into the postmetropolis:

Since the Latino presence in the daily life of this Aleph [...] increases by the day, it is paramount to take into account how these urban dynamics are recreated in Latino literature and film. Their collective re-creations, regardless of their fragmentary or even contradictory nature, offer an oppositional counterhistory... (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 6).

These fragments create a liminal sphere in which postmodern literature challenges border lines and meta-narratives to enable the postmodern subject to dwell in the actual moment and survive on a day-to-day basis in order to establish a sense of stability in a world of transition (Brandt, 2009, pp. 575–576). That is why this literature is also obsessed with dream worlds such as Disney or Hollywood. This obsession is a liminal strategy to blur the lines between reality and copy, past and future that enables the transition of fixed borders in more than one sense (Brandt, 2009, p. 569). This reciprocal dramatization of reality and media, myth and truth, is especially typical for Los Angeles. It is a mythologized space, dominated by ‘a tension between utopia and dystopia, hope and apocalypse’ (Möllers, 1999, pp. 49–50).³⁸ Los Angeles is a

‘metaphysical reality’, a place where the real and the imagined are persistently commingled in ways we have only begun to understand. [...] An increasing blurriness intercedes between the real and the imagined city, making ‘the city’ as much an imaginary or simulated reality as a real place. (Soja, 2000, 147;150)

This liminal space between real and imagined is a space that can allow for arrival processes to take place.

4.2 Fables, Metaphors, and Erasure – the Novels in Literary Criticism

The three selected novels have all experienced scholarly attention. Due to their supernatural endings, a main focus with *The Miraculous Day* and *Their Dogs* lays on magic realism,

³⁸ Own translation, orig.: „[Eine] Spannung zwischen Utopie und Dystopie, Hoffnung und Apokalypse“ (Möllers, 1999, pp. 49–50).

religion, and redemption as a means of resistance, whereas *Nurseries* has mainly been treated as uncovering racial inequalities. Scholars have also covered the novels' spatial implications, but where they have done so, this is mostly to support other research focuses. My work will build and expand on these spatial focuses. To this end, this chapter will provide a literary review to highlight where an expansion of this focus promises to be especially fruitful. It will start with research on *The Miraculous Day*, to then move to *Their Dogs* and *Nurseries*, as this is in line with the following chapter structure and the novels' publication dates (from oldest to most recent).

The Miraculous Day has been reviewed with a focus on several main research areas, namely magic realism, fable, and religion, flânerie, queerness, and redemption and resistance. All these topics draw links to Amalia's spatial experiences, but so far, few works cover space as its main focus. In the following, I will show where these spatial implications lie and how I will expand upon them.

As before publishing *The Miraculous Day*, Rechy had been considered mainly as a writer of queer literature, it is no surprise that some scholars lay the focus of their analysis on this topic. Aldama (2005, pp. 52–53) claims that Rechy engages and then disengages different literary conventions and racial, sexual, and cultural figurations and hence resists and intervenes the dominant heteronormative discourses.³⁹ Alvarez (2007) connects homosexuality with spirituality: as Amalia denies the sexuality of herself and her children because she is caught in nationalist and malinchist Chicano discourses, she is prevented from participating in spirituality. Liberation Theology tries to enable this spirituality by acknowledging the homosexual identity (Alvarez, 2007, p. 98).

Other scholars focus more on the miraculous and religious aspects of Amalia's spirituality. According to Kevane (2008), Amalia is able to re-interpret the Catholic dogma of passive endurance into a faith in self-empowerment through the miracle in the shopping mall (p. 22).⁴⁰ León (1999, p. 206) claims that Amalia develops a survival tactic of religious (re)creation through her walking, which is seen as a pilgrimage or 'quest' for the sacred

³⁹He also connects her experience of a day in Los Angeles with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (2008 [1922]): both novels take place in one day, in one city. Aldama enumerates more similarities, major and minor, but some of them might be over-interpretation, such as Amalia's trinity of beers, divorces and children mirroring *Ulysses* threefold chapter structure (2005, p. 68). This connection seems obvious, but as Kunow (2003, p. 198) states there is no direct correspondence in spite of the sense of transitoryness and loss of closure.

⁴⁰Kevane (2008, p. 21) sees Amalia as a role model that is able to protect the future of her whole raza, but this notion is perhaps overly optimistic. Without a doubt, Amalia regains faith and strength through the miracle, but I doubt that this makes her a spokeswoman for all Chicanas.

(León, 1999, p. 223). For León, this appropriation of religious space through physical and psychic movement is an act of empowerment through which she escapes the internal colonization mechanisms and malinchismo of the Catholic Church (p. 211). In my analysis, I will consider how these religious spaces can or cannot serve Amalia to create arrival spaces within the limits of LA city space.

By some scholars, the novel has been interpreted as a magic realist fable. Whereas in his article 'In Search of the "Mexican Elvis"' (2003), Saldívar describes *Amalia* mainly as a gendered being that is subdued to globalization mechanisms and a capitalist transmodernity (p. 90), in his book *Border Matters* (1997) he describes the novel as a 'postnational' (p. 111) or 'displaced fable' (p. 122) and situates it within the realms of magic realism where Los Angeles is an unreal 'postmodern myth' (p. 115).⁴¹ The novel deconstructs the tone of 'blistering urban realism' (p. 119) that otherwise dominates the story and destroys the readers' concept of positivism and realism (p. 119-120). Hamilton (2011, p. 49) criticizes Saldívar's interpretation as being too fixed on the negative aspects of Los Angeles, and indeed Saldívar almost omits the miracle that de facto has a changing impact on the tone of the novel.

Clontz (2005) sees *The Miraculous Day* as a 'realistic fable' that criticizes an ideology of conquest which he sees as one of the negative results of Manifest Destiny (p. 109). According to him, Amalia attempts to find thirdspaces between the competing claims on her identities that allow for 'a space of personal resistance' (p. 111).

Resistance, redemption or empowerment are features many scholars seem to find in *The Miraculous Day*. Giles (2000) claims that in spite of the borders that surround her, Amalia gains affirmation and redemption, transcends the 'capitalist urban gaze' (p. 128) and is able to transport a message of social protest (p. 122). It seems inadequate though to reduce Rechy's multilayered text to a novel of social protest. Besides, the term 'redemption' is a strong choice, as Amalia is able to regain strength to solve her problems, but no immediate redemption from them.

Gutiérrez-Jones (1995) more cautiously claims that Rechy discovers ideologies of consensus and desire (such as the American Dream) that limit personal development and empowerment (p. 106). Fernández de Pinedo Echevarría (2007) discovers another disempowering element

⁴¹Priewe (2007, p. 156) agrees with Saldívar that the text becomes a postnational Chicano fable. He states that Rechy criticizes and deconstructs national master narratives, such as the American Dream, but also nationalist Chicano identity constructions and representations and parodizes the aesthetic tenets of cultural transnationalism.

in *The Miraculous Day*, namely the telenovela which supports dominant ideology and limits women to a passive role (p. 134).

Hamilton (2011) criticizes this strong focus on resistance as it ‘fosters an understanding of cultural interactions based on a binary opposition between dominant and subordinate that is always contextualized by conflict, contestation, and distance’ (p. 3). Hamilton claims that the novel maps a discourse of persistence, which means the ‘continued existence of cultural differences within and despite oppressive and hostile conditions’ (p. 46). Whereas I agree that the novel challenges monocultural assimilationist notions, I do not think that it just insists on cultural difference, but seeks to highlight how this cultural difference is constantly shifting and in need of permanent re-negotiation.

I will intend to trace these processes by using the concept of arrival which seeks to avoid the criticized conflictual binaries. Heide (2011) provides useful insights for this purpose when he asserts that the text deliberately creates an ambivalence to avoid the creation of a simplifying, binary picture of power structures. The ambiguous ending enables the creation of contact zones and spaces that are continually opening out and remaking boundaries to communicate identity in its processual property (Heide, 2004, pp. 285–286).⁴² Vázquez (2018, p. 17) in contrast focuses on how preservation efforts such as the Chicano Movement or environmental activism can add to racial and spatial oppression instead of liberation, especially when appropriated by statal forces, rendering Amalia an outsider in her own home space (Vázquez, 2018, p. 23). In my analysis, I will examine where Amalia is able to create opening spaces and contact zones which are crucial for allowing arrival processes to emerge, and where racial and spatial oppression remain too strong to allow for arrival.

Scholars have examined how Amalia manages to counter oppression by walking. In his essay ‘Aztlán es una fabula’ (2006) and his book *Writing Transit* (2007), Priewe describes Amalia as an ‘ethnic flâneuse’ (Priewe, 2007, p. 133) on a ‘quest for meaning’ within the unstable urban text of Los Angeles (p. 144). According to Saldívar (1997), Amalia’s flânerie maps an ‘imperialist capital of culture’ (p. 119) that she attempts to escape by walking.

Priewe (2007, p. 142) claims that Rechy modifies the flânerie concept to show that a Chicana’s access to the city is limited by several forces and borders: ‘...both cultural departure and arrival remain deferred and Amalia’s transculturation is marked by transit and

⁴²In a later publication, Heide (2011, p. 135) elaborates how the novel, through ‘narrative sabotage’, intertwines narratives of nationalism, mass media, exploitation, discrimination, racism, and homophobia to challenge essentialist narratives of the Chicano/a.

conflict: a constant pushing and pulling of two national cultural narratives' (p. 147). Kunow (2003) similarly argues that Amalia is an ethnosocial urban flâneuse who 'encounters the urban other of her marginal space, a location at which she will never arrive' (p. 197). As I will show in my analysis, I consider it problematic to describe Amalia as a flâneuse, but Priewe and Kunow introduce the concept of arrival to the analysis of *The Miraculous Day* and are thus important points of reference for my argument.

Overall, most scholars' reviews of Rechy's Amalia are diverse and positive, in contrast to early literary reviews who according to Aldama (2005, p. 64) were taken aback with the female Chicana protagonist, as contrasted to his usual biracial and queer ones, and saw it mainly as an 'ethnographic text that documented a hot and spicy Chicano/a way of life' (Aldama, 2005, p. 64). As has been delineated above, today's reception of *The Miraculous Day* is much richer and more multi-faceted, as is the novel itself. My analysis wants to base itself on these wide fields of interpretation to then elaborate whether Los Angeles can be an Arrival City for Amalia. Especially the flâneuse and resistance aspects will be central keystone for the present analysis.

Although Viramontes' *Their Dogs* was published over a decade later than Rechy's *The Miraculous Day*, it has gathered more attention in literary criticism.⁴³ This mirrors both Rechy's late (re)discovery as a Mexican-American writer as well as the increased weight of Chicana studies and the intense linkage of its scholars within the last decade.⁴⁴ Similar to *The Miraculous Day*, research focuses have been resistance, magic realism, and queerness. Other main topics include story and reader reaction as a means of social critique, and *Their Dogs* has experienced a far more nuanced critical focus on space that my work will expand upon.

Scholars have found several aspects of resistance in *Their Dogs*, one of them being the magic realism or miracle of Tranquilina's levitation. Kevane (2008) compares the novel directly with *The Miraculous Day*. Whereas according to her, Amalia draws her self-empowerment from a *mujerista* miracle (p. 22), Kevane sees Tranquilina's levitation as a powerful

⁴³Sixteen articles for *The Miraculous Day* and 21 for *Their Dogs*. There are two dissertations that include *Their Dogs* which are currently unavailable: *Borders Beyond Borders. Women's Mobility in the US and Mexico* (Anderson, 2017) and *Intimate Terrorism and Mundane Violence. Remapping 'Terrorism' through Queer, Multiracial Feminist Theories, Fiction, and Stand-Up Comedy* (Sibbett, 2013).

⁴⁴Gutiérrez y Muhs (2013) has published a complete critical reader, *Rebozos de Palabras*, about Viramontes work, out of which alone 4 of the articles about *Dogs* are taken. The tight interlinkage of the Chicana literary community can be proven by simply having a look at Viramontes' acknowledgements in *Their Dogs*, where she pays tribute to a number of well known Chicana/o writers and critics.

syncretistic narrative of hope and faith (p. 29) that conveys a message of resistance (p. 36). Her interpretation still remains rather positive, considering the brutal ending of the novel. Other scholars also interpret Tranquilina's levitation as a hopeful ending. Wald (2013) argues that the magic realist frame of Tranquilina's vertical movement becomes a form of spatial resistance that fights for the right to bodily mobility that the inhabitants of the barrio, especially the females, had been denied by colonial and neo-imperial forms of spatial control (p. 70). In a similar vein, Muñoz (2013) states that by the use of movement, metaphor and memory, Viramontes creates a narrative that opens gaps where resistance can dwell unreached by oppression (Muñoz, 2013, p. 36). In my analysis, I will delve deeper into the spatial implications of this ending and how it influences the possibilities of arrival within the novel. The analysis will also bear in mind Hamilton's (2011, p. 3) above mentioned critique of the resistance paradigm to see whether more fruitful interpretations are enabled by the non-binary term of arrival.

Other scholars claim that the ending in itself does not convey resistance, but that through the response of the reader, the novel gains its social impetus. Franco (2015) claims that through the use of miracles which interrupt everyday reality, the novel challenges the reader and allows for the creation of a place beyond, namely the world of the reader, which may make metaphors happen (Franco, 2015, p. 357). Rodriguez (2015) agrees that the reader plays an important role to counteract loss and perpetuate the destroyed barrio's memories. By rewalking and retelling the streets through fiction, the reader is transformed into an honorary barrio resident (Rodriguez, 2015, p. 142). To Seliger (2012), Tranquilina's performative refusal to halt in spite of the rifles aimed at her occupies a third space of 'utopian possibility' (Seliger, 2012, p. 276) that engages the reader in 'productive participation, i.e., a compassionate political response' (Seliger, 2012, p. 263). As I will argue in my analysis, arrival is not possible if it can only take place beyond the novel in the imagination of the reader. My work will show whether these arrival spaces are also to be found within the realm of the fiction itself.

Consequently, Pattison (2014) does not believe in these encouraging effects on the reader. He states that the reader remains entrapped by foreshadowing and fragmentation like the protagonists remain entrapped by the freeways (p. 134-135). In Pattison's view, this does not lead to the realization of metaphors, as Franco claims, but involves the reader in the 'traumatic erasure of memory and the silencing of political voice that the novel describes' (Pattison, 2014, p. 136) which encourages the reader to reflect on the political consequences

of urban development. Huehls (2012, p. 160) sees *Their Dogs*' magic realism as a sign of the power of stories, such as the girlfriends around Ermila create them. These transcend the barrio space the inhabitants were disowned of (p. 169). Although they cannot retrieve this loss, they can address injustices (p. 162). Similarly, Wyse (2013) does not see transgression, but rather a never ending painful struggle (p. 62). She stresses that the barrio needs a communal response to overcome oppression which is not possible in the novel, but possibly outside of it (p. 51). Again, just addressing injustices or relegating spatial appropriation processes to the realm outside of the novel in my opinion does not do justice to the novel's aim to transcend binary spaces. As I will argue, spatial appropriation takes place within the novel although these processes remain highly contested.

More recent articles focus especially on Turtle as a queer character. Blanco (2016, p. 252) connects this topic with an argument of memory politics by arguing that Turtle's undefinable, queer gender identity works to recreate an inclusive story of East Los Angeles (Blanco, 2016, p. 232). In a similar vein, Galván (2015, p. 95) frames Turtle's body as that of a Chola who through her fragmented identity and gender mirrors the barrio's desolation and is threatened by erasure. Through her narrative, Viramontes fights this erasure and stresses the importance and empowering aspects of memory (Galván, 2015, p. 89). Cuevas (2014, p. 30) focuses on the time-disrupting aspect of queer identity, claiming that non-normativity disrupts conventional, straight lifeline milestones (such as marrying and getting children) which places queer subjects outside the logic of capital accumulation. This focus on non-linear time as challenging normativity is an interesting approach, but in my view a rather narrow focus for such a complex work such as *Their Dogs*. I will rather focus on Turtle's and other bodies' connection to city space which in itself is depicted a body within the novel to examine how their corporeality can work to establish a sense of emplacement and thus arrival in disconnected LA city space.

Other scholars focus on the novel's political implications. Similar to Cuevas (2014), López González (2011, p. 61) claims that the protagonists challenge money-based urban capitalism. Heredia (2013) calls Viramontes an 'urban feminist' and sees *Their Dogs* as a 'milestone in representing gender and the city in multiethnic American urban literature' (p. 115). As scholars have noticed, the novel does not only criticize capitalism, but even more prominently displays the consequences of internal colonization. Similar to Wyse (2013), Heredia argues that the freeways, signs of progress and modernity, are new means of colonization that dehumanize the inhabitants and lead to a colonized imagination (Heredia,

2013, p. 99) or colonizing of the mind (p. 114). The female protagonists resist or decolonize this legacy of the Anglo-American 'invasion' of their neighbourhood and homes (p. 114). Reséndiz Ramírez (2013) even ascribes to Viramontes the qualities of an Aztec healer that resists US neo-imperialism (p. 218) and excavates the history of colonization (p. 223). In contrast, Ahuja (2009) in an article about the colonialist implications of animalizing human beings interprets the novels' dogs as 'symbols of racial dehumanization and victims in their own right' (p. 559). Whereas this critique is certainly inherent to the novel, I argue that focusing merely on the novel's political colonial critique would not go far enough in laying open the multilayered possibilities of alternative narratives within the novel, which I intend to expand upon in my analysis.

Other scholars focus not so much on the metaphorical qualities of the novel, but rather on its connection to place politics. Brady (2013) sees the statal invasions of freeways and curfews as a consequence of scalar processes that omit the micro (barrio networks) in favour of the macro scale and impose a 'scaffold imaginary' (p. 175). These scalar processes are seen as the workings of coloniality which can be 'circumvented through literature and the imagination' (Brady, 2013, p. 182). Similar to Vázquez (2018) with *The Miraculous Day*, Hsu (2011) in his analysis of *Their Dogs* focuses on environmental justice issues. He regards *Their Dogs* as a novel that criticizes 'the effects of environmental risk factors on bodies, minds, social relations, and lived space' (Hsu, 2011, p. 164).

Grandjeat (2013, p. 111) stresses especially the sense of place that the novel conveys. Its sense of emplacement anchors it in restless motion, '(up)rooting it into a shifting, transient, territory' (p. 116). Through narrative, the novel enacts a 'symbolic, imaginary retrieval of a lost or beleaguered territory' (p. 112). Its absences and gaps convey meaning, which connects the narrative to the in-between qualities of arrival (Kunow, 2003, p. 182). In the same vein, Riebová (2016, p. 506) argues that the novel is not only about the overly simple conflict between external 'barrioizing' and internal 'barriological' forces (Villa, 2000, p. 8), but also about the internal contradictions of the barrio which originate in a lack of empathy and intergenerational communication. She states that Viramontes adds a third space to the LA border space through irony, contradiction and multiplicity which opens up 'espacios en blanco' (Riebová, 2016, p. 514) that entice the imagination of the reader. These works will be important starting points for my discussion of space and place within the novel, especially as they find emplacement, gaps, and third spaces which are crucial for my understanding of arrival.

Overall, Viramontes has received very positive appraisal by critics; her work, together with other recent Chicano literature, has been considered as expanding the boundaries of Mexican-American fiction with Viramontes at the vanguard (Cutler, 2009, p. 167). *Their Dogs* is lauded as a ‘monument of Chicana literature’ (Cutler, 2009, p. 164) that is an ‘argument for the continued relevance of literary production to Chicano politics’ (p. 165). The next chapters will try to dissolve the rich, fragmented entanglements of memory, metaphor, community, loss, emplacement and resistance to see if despite the deep roots of colonialization and modernization, Los Angeles can be a place of arrival for its Mexican American inhabitants.

Héctor Tobar has only recently been discovered by literary scholars. He rather earned his fame as a Pulitzer-price winning journalist and is hence not connected to the university or activist literary scene such as Helena Viramontes. Besides, he is a Guatemalan American, and this group has long been neglected by publishers and critics alike (Caminero-Santangelo, 2009, p. 174). A sign that this might be changing is Arias’ assertion that Tobar’s first novel *The Tattooed Soldier* is a ‘true Latino novel’ (2003, p. 169) and the first real Central American Latino novel published in English.

So far, scholarly attention for *Nurseries* has only started to pick up recently, with three scientific works including this novel. As *Nurseries* frequently uses literary allusions and connections to describe Los Angeles city space which blur the distinction between fiction and interdiegetic reality, Kinnally (2016) notes that the novel plays on the quixotic. According to her, this literary filter is used to capture the ‘bizarreness of contemporary life in Los Angeles’ (Kinnally, 2016, p. 76). In her view, the novel aptly portrays the ‘vast inequality and sharp contrasts of Los Angeles’ (Kinnally, 2016, p. 79), highlighting especially that the thoughtless copying of past architectures, such as the Torres-Thompsons’ mission-style home, erases a history of colonization (p. 80). According to Kinnally, the novel also critically portrays the erasure of racial discourse which in turn only leads to a loss of historical and cultural identities which ultimately only serves to reinforces the racial hierarchies that are ignored by not mentioning them (p. 85). I will expand upon how these racial and colonial disparities leave their traces within LA city space and negatively influence to protagonists’ ability to arrive.

Walker also stresses how the novel uses the depiction of domestic work space to highlight the continuation of colonial practices in White suburbia (Walker, 2014, p. 180). According to her, Araceli uses strategies of creativity, such as the garbage phoenix made out of salvaged

domestic objects, to enable less exploitative forms of intimacy (Walker, 2014, p. 182), creating new homes out of the displacements that are enforced upon her due to her fragile legal status and ultimately flight out of California (Walker, 2014, p. 198). Poblete (2018) accentuates the sociopolitical aim of the novel, claiming that *Nurseries* is an epic about the contact between Latino/a and White people in the US (p. 116). According to him, through a game of defamiliarizing origins, contradictions and clichés, the novel highlights the inner frontier zones and thus challenges the monocultural White imaginary of the United States (Poblete, 2018, p. 125). My analysis will expand upon how the novel attempts to challenge these colonial and monocultural spaces and is able to create in-between spaces of arrival.

Whereas *Amalia* and *Dogs* are thus fully acclaimed within their niches by Chicano studies critics and their literary value is put at the bottom of the list due to their political implications, *Nurseries* has yet to be fully discovered by literary scholars. Overall, scholars have mainly focused political terms such as resistance, empowerment, or racial inequality. They have also found transgression of boundaries through magic realism, miracle, memory, or story which demands active engagement of the reader. Where the scholars have analysed the role of LA city space within the novels, they have either done so with a focus on space politics, or they mainly considered space in its symbolic form as metaphor or a memory space. There, they have found the third spaces (Seliger, 2012, p. 276), gaps (Muñoz, 2013, p. 36), and contact zones (Heide, 2004, p. 285) necessary for the analysis of arrival. I will hence draw on these notions to expand the scholarly analysis of LA city space within the novels, attempting to connect the material and symbolic spaces scholars have mostly considered apart so far.

5 An Epiphany in a Shopping Mall – Imaginations of City Space in *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*

The previous chapters have elaborated on Los Angeles as a ‘real-and-imagined’ (Soja, 2000, p. 12) city where the perception of the city’s spaces and places is shaped by dominant narratives of Hollywood, violence, segregation, apocalypse, and the struggle with nature. As Murphet writes: ‘The pervasive irreality of an arbitrarily introduced and always shifting mélange of appearances bedevils the city’s representation, since, in that sense, it is already its own best representation’ (2001, p. 13). Similarly, Mexican-American literature is dominated by narratives of identity, the barrio community, family, myth and religion.⁴⁵ In *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (2006 [1991]), John Rechy sends his main protagonist Amalia on an odyssey through this maze of narratives. The city space is dominated by gang and police violence, and nature threatens with earthquakes and hot winds. At the same time the asphalt is embellished with flowers, walls display empowering murals and gang graffiti, and the Hollywood dream is constantly evoked.

The barrio narrative for example could hence be used to establish either an image of a resistant Mexican-American place or a violence-ridden gang area. In the following, I want to elaborate on how the novel constructs these different dominant narratives throughout Los Angeles city space. Amalia’s movements are limited by these dominant city images, but as they are clashed against each other, they are finally deconstructed. It remains open though if out of these shattered city images something new and productive can be created and if the city space allows for the arrival of its protagonist or whether Amalia remains stuck and trapped in these shattered images as in her dilapidated stucco bungalow.

The novel is deeply rooted in Los Angeles city space. Places are explicitly named and Amalia’s trajectory seems to be traceable. However, at the same time, the precise locations remain surprisingly blurry: Amalia arrives in Los Angeles at the Greyhound bus station, then moves to Torrance. The first is a rather precise location, the latter an independent town at the fringe of LA. Her home is located first somewhere in East Los Angeles, then in Hollywood, ‘near Western Avenue and Fountain’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 73), which sounds precise, but

⁴⁵ By narrative, I mean a ‘process of configuration through a world-making “assemblage” of affects, associations, images, sounds, and words [...]. [N]arrative rearranges established meanings and thus contributes to ongoing affective orientations in the (larger) world, not in a mode of radical liberation from or excess vis-à-vis the surrounding socio-symbolic context but through movement within it’ (Breger, 2014, p. 70).

as the narrator himself adds, quite interchangeable because it is ‘a bungalow in another of the ubiquitous clutches of stucco courts that proliferate throughout Los Angeles’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 73).

On her stroll through the area, Amalia passes Sunset Boulevard, the Hollywood freeway, Whittier Boulevard, Boyle Avenue, and Melrose Boulevard, which on the one hand lets the readers feel as if they could follow in her steps, but as these streets are all huge main streets, this feeling remains deceptive and the locations rather vague. Only sometimes, this vagueness is interrupted by landmarks, such as the ‘chapel of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 73), which is a historic East LA church (Ramirez, 2000, n.p.) near Amalia’s former home in East LA. Other landmarks include the Fox studio, Hancock Park, the Griffith Park Observatory, the MacArthur Park area and Lafayette Park, which increases the spatial qualities of the novel. Yet again, at important points of the plot, the location remains vague: Amalia has her epiphany at a shopping mall at the edge of Beverly Hills (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 199), which contributes to the feeling of aimlessness that accompanies her meandering through the area. Hence even the overall setting of the novel conveys a sense of being lost. Despite its seemingly clear place indications, it conveys a certain sense of blurriness and insecurity, which can also be found in the streams of consciousness of its main protagonist.

Localisation in time remains equally blurry. Amalia is born in El Paso shortly after World War II has ended (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 15). Due to a rape by neighbour boy Salvador, she is married to him at age fifteen, and her son Manny is born some years later (p. 24, 26). Manny dies in prison in his early twenties, which means the present time of the story is likely to be the late 1980s. This also coincides with the helicopter sweeps described in the novel that took place during police operation HAMMER in the 1980s (2006, p. 268). However, more precise indications of time are difficult to make, which heightens the feeling of disconnectedness and out-of-placeness which permeate the novel. This is stressed by the many flashbacks that intrude into the novel’s present time without being specifically marked as such. Very often, only a new paragraph separates flashback actions from present time. The reader needs to differentiate for example between the present time episode of Amalia visiting her co-worker Milagros to find out about the whereabouts of her friend Rosario and the flashbacks describing the criminal career and death of Amalia’s son Manny (Rechy, 2006 [1991], pp. 81–82). Similarly to Amalia, readers have to navigate through vague territory, left alone to decipher the meanings of the (literary) surroundings. As the next chapter will

show, Viramontes will carry this navigation in lost territory to extremes in her novel *Their Dogs*.

The structure of my analysis in this chapter will loosely follow the structure of the book and on this way make visible and explore the narratives within the novel. The novel starts at Amalia's home, where she lives with her teenage children Gloria and Juan and her partner Raynaldo. In the diegetic present of the novel, her eldest son Manny and her mother, who had lived with her as well, have died yet. The home is the realm of the female and family and at the same time the antagonist to 'the outside', the city space. I will examine how exactly Amalia is located within these narratives and how they influence her perceptions of and dealings with city space. Then, we follow Amalia out onto the streets, which leads us to her barrio, a genuinely Mexican-American space, which is also a quintessential part of Los Angeles city space. Does the barrio allow for an appropriation by its Latino/a inhabitants or does it remain oppressed by dominant space and how does this influence Amalia's sense of belonging?

As Amalia ventures into other parts of Los Angeles, city narratives that have been marginalised in the barrio seem to become more dominant: violence and segregation invade city space as Amalia witnesses gang shootings and police squad cars. Nature struggles through asphalt and bush fires, hot winds and the threat of earthquakes are a violent intrusion of its own. The promises of the Hollywood dream are used by Amalia to suppress these intruders, but with little success: in a perfectly dream-like, artificial shopping mall, she is taken hostage by a criminal and is only able to free herself by an apparition of the mother Mary. In this final episode of the novel, the competing narratives finally clash even more explicitly: the LA trope of artificial beauty and escapism is confronted with the Mexican-American tropes of myth, religion, and magic realism. The analysis will trace the construction, confrontation, and de-construction of these narratives to ask whether this clash of narratives helps to open up city space for Amalia and makes it accessible and ready for appropriation, or whether she is threatened to get lost in this entangled accumulation of city images and is hence negated arrival not only by space itself, but also by the overlapping narratives about it.

5.1 'Glad to Live in Hollywood' - Imagining Home and Family

I will start this chapter with a look at the various Mexican-American tropes that relate to home, as this is where the novel starts: on the very first page of *The Miraculous Day*, the reader is introduced to at least three tropes: the barrio, here in its precarious version as 'one of the many decaying neighborhoods that sprout off the shabbiest part of Hollywood Boulevard' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 3). Religion also features prominently: Amalia awakes to the sight of a silver cross in the sky, which she is inclined to interpret as a divine sign. One paragraph later, the reader is introduced to her family, another major feature of Chicano/a literature:

No, Amalia was a logical Mexican-American woman not yet forty. There had been no real cross. No miraculous sign would appear to a twice-divorced woman with grown, rebellious children and living with a man who wasn't her husband, although God *was* forgiving, wasn't He? (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 3)

For now, I want to focus on the family trope and pick up the barrio and religious narratives in later subchapters. Family does not seem to be connected to space on first sight, but within the novel, the issue is closely related to the place of Amalia's home, as her life story is told in flashbacks that are interspersed with a description of a morning in her home, a 'dilapidated stucco bungalow' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 3). It is there where we are introduced to her family members and where she carries out the conflicts with them. Besides, the dominant image of the woman in the Latino/a community is that of the mother, tied to home and family, dependent from male patriarchy, at the same time docile and sexy to keep her partner interested (Rivera, 1998, p. 502). At first sight, Amalia fits these images: she is a good-looking, 'lush' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 4) woman who loves her children, is diligent to her mother, and in spite of her bad experiences with men (rape, domestic violence, twice divorced) lives with a partner because she thinks that her children need a father. She earns her income by typical Latina working class occupations, such as cleaning homes and sewing in a sweatshop.⁴⁶

⁴⁶In 2016, 89.6% of maids and housekeeping cleaners were female, and 47.3% were Latinos/as (compared to 16.7% of the total). For sewing machine operators, the picture is similar: 71.5% female, 46.9% Latinas (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017, n.p.). See also a blog article where the author complains that the dominant narrative of Mexican employment needs to change: 'Mexicans are here to do the dirty jobs. They are the construction workers and the nannies, the gardeners and the janitors, the fruit pickers. They don't mind doing these jobs, and they will do them on the cheap because they are just grateful to be here in America' (John Paul Brammer, 2015, n.p.).

Rechy himself was confronted with the question of whether Amalia was a stereotype, but in the preface to Amalia he insists that ‘those “stereotypes” reveal a powerful source of enduring, often ancestral courage, even as, today, they challenge the insistence that they no longer exist’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], pp. ix–x). In an essay, he asserts this notion:

Banish all stereotypes and you banish figures of daring – outlaws who fought lonely battles before war was declared – questioning, challenging, courageous, these noble flaming queens, these roaring bulldykes. These are enduring lessons in courage to be found in stereotypes, those shock troops of the advance guard preparing for battles to come and proclaiming, “I am not what you want me to be.” (Rechy, 2004, p. 166)

For him, stereotypes can be an antidote to the danger of ‘passing’ that any minority runs, of adapting too much to the mainstream and denying one’s own identity (Rechy, 2004, p. 163). He sees Amalia and others of his outlaw characters as powerful revolutionaries who question political correctness (Rechy, 2004, p. 163). He asserts that Amalia is based on real women he met at his mother’s home or at a drug store (Rechy, 2006 [1991], vii).

While I agree that he may be right in claiming that it is not helpful to depict Mexican Americans as if there was no difference to White mainstream society, I would also argue that there are social differences such as residential segregation, limited employment opportunities and unmerited disrespect, which have to be taken into account. The challenge is that these differences are turned into a stereotypical depiction if the focus lies too much on social problems. Also, although the novel immerses the reader into Amalia’s stream of consciousness, she does not appear as an individual, but rather an archetype of Latinaness. One might gain the impression that the narrator re-creates the White, external gaze, rather than allowing for subjective impressions. Seen through the dominant White gaze, Latina mothers’ culturally recognized power about children and home has a matriarchal, castrating quality, thereby reinscribing the delusion that male power depends on female powerlessness (Iglesias, 1998, p. 509). The limitation of the female realm to home and family is hence not only a disadvantage that limits individual freedom, but can also be the basis for an empowering network:

The interpersonal practices found in the matrifocal extended family of Black and Latin culture offer women a wide variety of psycho-social resources that are simply ignored in the various discourses that portray these families as failed versions of their White, male-headed nuclear counterparts. (Iglesias, 1998, p. 509)

This is what renders the depiction of Amalia’s family relations in *The Miraculous Day* problematic: family to her is only a duty, a limitation, and not a resource of strength or

support network. As we will see later, this is completely different in Helena Viramontes's *Their Dogs*, where families may also be dysfunctional sources of conflict and where men are not to be relied upon either, but where other informal female networks offer support and diffuse the sense of loneliness created by the shattered city space.

Amalia's family ties in contrast are shattered territory itself: her father continuously beats the family and sexually harasses Amalia, her mother is full of reproach, she is raped and forced into a marriage so that her whole family life is characterised by the 'inevitability of loss' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 13). Her family haunts her in the form of her mother, who follows her to Los Angeles after the father has died and disturbs her by setting up a sombre statue of 'la dolorosa', a mourning version of mother Mary, which her mother Teresa prefers over the more forgiving Virgin of Guadalupe. She also haunts Amalia's sleep with her constant coughing, which only ceases when she dies one night in Amalia's little stucco bungalow (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 89). The relationships to her husbands are dysfunctional as well. Salvador is an abusive gang leader, Gabriel an unsteady soldier and her boyfriends and affairs are equally disappointing.⁴⁷ She settles for the more earthly Raynaldo who helps her to sustain her family, but is not to be trusted either because he sexually harasses her daughter Gloria, after which Amalia throws him out.

The connection to her three children appears to be very tight, she works hard to sustain them. Especially her first-born Manny, a fierce gang leader, is deeply connected to her, spoiling his mother with gifts (that are most probably financed through gang activities) and apparently committing suicide to stop troubling his mother (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 192). On the other hand, Amalia is so keen to realize her vision of a perfect family that she denies all signs which destabilize her Hollywoodesque family picture. For a long time, she thinks that Manny was killed and did not commit suicide (which is a sin according to Catholic belief). She overlooks that Gloria was molested by Raynaldo, and she does not notice that her son Juan is a homosexual hustler. When Amalia finally finds out, she flees into denial and runs a serious risk of losing her strong ties to her children due to this lack of understanding. Only at the end is she able to accept the new circumstances and find understanding for her children.

Her other contacts to female Latinas do not present a supportive network either: her sewing factory co-worker and loose friend Milagros is a chatty, superstitious woman, but Amalia shares a passion for telenovelas with her through which she dreams herself away and

⁴⁷Emilio, who 'looked like a Mexican gypsy' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 47), has another wife he did not bother telling her about, and her affair Angel is a 'coyote' who likes to humiliate her.

imagines rich, noble families who do at least not have her problems. Her only other true friend, Rosario, disappears one day because she covers the murderer of a 'coyote'. Hence even her friendships are defined by instability and loss. Critics have claimed that Amalia's dialogue with her extended family has an affirmative function (Giles, 2000, p. 114). In particular when she stops to deny reality and starts an open dialogue with her children, she starts to empower herself and undertakes an 'individual quest for redemption' (Giles, 2000, p. 125). In contrast, Kevane (2008) argues that only her epiphany facilitates a working connection to her family again: '...this journey [...] allows her to finally resolve to protect the new generation of Chicanos in East LA, her gay son, her rebellious daughter, and the future of her *raza*' (p. 21; italics orig.). Alvarez (2007, p. 104) in contrast stresses the dysfunctional aspects of Amalia's communication with others and links them to her suppressed sexuality which replicates the lack of communication that existed between herself and her mother, a lack which threatens family unity necessary for their survival in the US. To see Amalia as protecting the future of her entire 'raza' to me seems exaggerated, and it remains open whether the epiphany can retrieve connection to her family.

I argue that Amalia's family relations remain ambivalent: on the one hand, she is strong in her role as mother who tries to protect her family; on the other hand, she is a female who is subject to male dominance and has no other support than a divine apparition. In my eyes, this makes the novel's depiction of Amalia's role as a mother and woman highly problematic: it reproduces the White, male external gaze of the Latina woman as a sexy, but docile woman who only has power within the domestic sphere. Other images, such as that of the mother in Latino/a culture as a unique, stable, hard-working force (Iglesias, 1998, pp. 509–510) do exist within the novel: Amalia can sustain her children economically if she has to, she tries to establish strong bonds with her children, and the home she lives in is hers; she throws Raynaldo out in the end. But these positive images are mostly limited to the domestic realm, hence reinforcing the Latino/a stereotype because the more positive and complex aspect of Latina interpersonal support networks (Iglesias, 1998, p. 509) are missing entirely in *The Miraculous Day* and therefore leave Amalia and exposed to the White male gaze and reproduce the narrative of the subdued, threatened Latina.

This narrative is perpetuated in the depiction of Amalia's sexuality. On the one hand, she enjoys being a woman, carefully working on a beautiful feminine image of herself. She likes her body and works on enhancing its features: 'Lush' was a word she liked' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 4). She likes little flirts and good-looking, romantic men such as Angel whom she

meets in a bar the evening before the day described in the novel (p. 11). This also leads to problems: the men whom she attracts are romantic only at first sight and deceive and abuse her. She knows how to use her femininity to her advantage (e.g. she opens her blouse to distract an immigration officer), but she is also victim to it: in front of abusive men such as her father or Salvador, she falls into a petrified silence and endures violence because it is the only reaction she learned. Her Mexican-American upbringing, incorporated by her honour-focused mother, forces her into a marriage she did not want. As a Mexican American and a female, she is silenced both by dominant male and by Anglo culture, the first subduing her by 'tradition'⁴⁸ and the latter for being 'other', a Latina: 'a carload of ugly young men with shaved heads' (p. 193) throw a chicken bone at her and call her '*Fuckin' Mexican Bitch*' (p. 193, italics original).

According to Saldívar (1997, p. 116), by shaping his protagonist this way, Rechy criticizes patriarchal and homophobic practices in Mexican-American male culture, mirroring a tendency in postmodern Mexican-American literature to search a third way between male-dominated Chicano and othering Anglo culture (Aldama, 2013, p. 98). Similarly, Gútierrez does not only see oppression in the depiction of Amalia's sexuality, but also at least attempts of self-expression through sexuality that is not bound by violence (1995, p. 106). It may be true that Rechy criticizes Chicano male culture, but in my view there is no third way of Chicana identity to be found. Amalia remains stuck between monocultural notions of femininity and remains rather passive: Amalia attempts to find sexual self-expression in her romantic choices, but due to internalised images of gender roles such as the 'macho' male, her attempts fail due to male violence.

Kevane (2008, p. 21) and León (1999, p. 211) relate the female image in *The Miraculous Day* closer to Chicano/a iconography: according to them, the female image of a Chicana is dominated by two stereotypes or extremes: mother Mary or the Virgin of Guadalupe as a nurturing female ideal vs. Malinche, the traitor or whore. For León (1999, p. 227), Amalia is classified by the 'whore' archetype through her corporeality and sexualized image, which degrades and others her. Male control over her sexuality is not complete, though, and always connected to other differences: 'As Amalia Gómez demonstrates, struggles over the meanings of religious signs [such as the virgen de Guadalupe] often congeal around material differences: gender, class, and ethnicity' (p. 227). Kevane (2008, p. 21) develops this argument further and argues that Amalia does not have to choose between virgin and whore,

⁴⁸Her mother refuses to let her wear white on her wedding day because she is pregnant (p. 23).

but can draw from a third model: Mary Magdalene, the redeemed sinner. One might argue that this role transcends the virgin-or-whore-binary and is hence an empowering image, but Mary Magdalene still fits into the binary, first sinner, then saint, and does not dissolve or question it. Scholars have equalled Mary Magdalene to La Malinche, which represents the 'whore' of the trinity of female Chicana gender attributes of virgin, mother, whore (Gaspar de Alba, 2005, p. 51). It is hence no empowering image, but that of the traitor of her own kin. While feminists have re-read her as a mediator and translator (Gaspar de Alba, 2005, p. 54), this interpretation does not fit for Amalia, whose intents at crossing borders are always sabotaged by dominant male society.

Amalia remains hence stuck in restricting religious images of body and sexuality that perpetuate Chicano/a stereotypes. As we will see later, these images become highly problematic when being confronted with the disputed Los Angeles city space because they are signposts of the other: 'Her "otherness" is encoded by the semiotics of her body because, like the undocumented population, her body sends class and cultural significations or messages to the world about her' (León, 1999, p. 220).

Traditionally, home has been seen as a place where the female can protect herself from this exposition of otherness. Home has been denoted the sphere of the female, an expression of family, domesticity, but also female power and shelter from the outside world (see Anderson, 1997, p. 132). Amalia tries to turn her little stucco bungalow into a sheltering home to make up for this power imbalance. She only leaves her home and ventures into Los Angeles after the first half of the novel, in chapter six of twelve. As home is to be seen as an important aspect in arriving at a place, 'making a home of it', the following chapter will deal with the different notions of home in the novel and whether Amalia is able to appropriate her various apartments, houses and the city space as a home or if more differentiated concepts of making home apply here.

The novel acquaints the reader with several of the different homes inhabited by Amalia: it starts by following her gaze 'past the screenless iron-barred window of her stucco bungalow unit' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 3). As this citation is taken from the very first sentence of the novel, it states the importance of Amalia's surroundings and her home while at the same time introducing the reader into her less-than-perfect living circumstances. In subsequent flashbacks, the reader accompanies Amalia on her journey through the US and Los Angeles in search of a home of her own. She leaves her parents' house to move in with her then-husband Salvador, but both government-subsidized apartments leave her exposed to male

violence and state government workers and could be seen as non-homes. At her first place in Los Angeles, Torrance, she does not feel at home because she is surrounded only by 'rednecks' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 42). Through family relations, she manages to move to a pinkish bungalow in East Los Angeles, a Latino/a barrio (p. 42). First, she feels at home there and enjoys the local customs such as the low-rider car parades; but soon, she is driven out of the quarter by increased violence. With the financial support of Raynaldo, she manages to move to the stucco bungalow in Hollywood.

The area cannot be deemed safe as the windows are iron-barred (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 3). A page later, the close description of her home continues: 'The artificial flowers she had located everywhere to camouflage worn second-hand furniture were losing their brightness, looked old and drab' (p. 4). Apparently, she does not have the financial means to make her apartment meet her expectations. Flowers are introduced as an important part of Amalia's surroundings, something we will focus on in more detail later. One sentence later, it becomes very clear that she is more driven by outer circumstances than by choice: 'She heard the growl of cars always on the busy streets in this neighborhood that was rapidly becoming a barrio like the others she had fled' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 4). This flight betrays a sense of inner and outer disquiet, strengthened by the roar of passing cars and Amalia's discovery of the cross in the sky. Her old fantasy that the sound of traffic almost resembles the sound of the ocean has lost its power (p. 73). Outside, lawns surrender to weed and dirt, cars are left mounted on bricks, houses are boarded up and homeless people roam the streets. Graffiti that announce the presence of gangs have followed her from the home she fled to her new one (p. 6). Only a rosebush tries to withstand the general ugliness.

In her bungalow, Amalia is confronted with 'more aging furniture, more barred windows. [...] Here, too, were the graying paper and cloth flowers with which she had gradually tried to overwhelm the house' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 68). The flowers serve as a repression mechanism to avoid her real social standing and living situation, a mechanism that can be found throughout the book. The necessity of this overgrowing decoration becomes clear when one recalls that the house is not only a private space, but also sends a social message: 'In its decommodified form, the house becomes a vehicle for mobilizing social mobility, making a publicly legible statement that provides a new sense of agency' (Crawford, 1999, p. 118). In Amalia's case though, this de-commodification has not taken place. Her house does not mirror her desired social status (decay instead of economic and physical security), which seems to increase her feeling of uneasiness with her home. As she flees the reality of

her crumbling home, she also flees the deteriorating relationship to her children as she ignores their problems. Her house is a precise mirror of her overall situation, and it is not surprising that she tries to flee her problems by leaving home and venturing on to the streets later on.

When she locates a crack in the wall caused by a recent earthquake, it becomes clear that as hard as she tries to flee violence and decay, it always manages to enter her house.⁴⁹ In order to escape this grim environment (and to gain money), she works as a cleaner in pretty houses (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 6). The different houses supply her with a variety she does not have. She always dresses her best so that a customer remarks that she dresses more for a visit than for work (p. 6) – maybe an indication that Amalia secretly envisions herself living in these houses. This is also hinted at when she plays a game with herself that she could choose any house she wanted when cruising with Raynaldo (p. 69). The pretty houses seem to be more real to her than her employers who remain only outlines (p. 56). This seems to mirror a tendency that material things almost seem more important and real to her than human relationships: she bears the company of men only to have a father for her children and economic security. Except for Rosario, the relationship to her other colleagues is limited to talks about telenovelas, and she loves her children, but is also very conscious that this contributes to her image of a good mother. This trope of the good mother again resonates with the image of the Latina as either mother Mary or whore. In the desperate attempt to fulfil the demand of fitting into the female image, she neglects her children's problems because acknowledging them could highlight her failure as a mother.⁵⁰

A dispute with her children is stopped by Juan giving and helping her put on earrings; hence by gifting her a flattering item of consumption (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 94). She does not miss a happy relationship, but the white wedding dress and flowers denied to her due to the rape. This unrelatedness and focus on beauty and consumption contributes to the uneasy feeling of the novel. One could argue that her consumerism strengthens monocultural tendencies⁵¹ within the novel, she falls victim to 'the homogenizing logic with which finance

⁴⁹She manages to keep physical violence out of it, though, as Raynaldo with whom she lives now is 'the only one of her men who had never hit her' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 5).

⁵⁰I do not consider her problem-avoidance to be a conscious effort, but rather a subconscious mechanism of self-protection so that she can keep her self-image of being a good mother.

⁵¹There is a pattern in the novel that whenever Amalia tries to venture into mainstream society, she is rejected: her breakfast at Carl's Junior is a disappointment, Hollywood turns out to be another violence-ridden ethnic neighbourhood, and her venturing into the shopping mall ends in a disaster.

capital tends to level markets in order to facilitate profits' (García Canclini, 2005, xli).⁵² Amalia is disconnected from space and merely drifts on the surface of the places that resemble homes. Again, this resonates with the stereotype of the vain and beautiful Latina who at the same time is a dutiful wife and mother. One might argue that the desolated condition of Amalia's home deconstructs this stereotype, but in my view it is just another side of the same coin: the economic hardship and social struggle in general associated with Mexican Americans. This contributes to the overall impression of disconnectedness from space and placelessness: the outside world is hostile and dangerous, but her home is no safe place either which leaves Amalia dominated by a space she cannot control.

A visit at her co-workers Milagros' home at MacArthur Park shows that indeed Amalia's home could be even worse off: Milagros lives in a grim tenement that might once have been a hotel, but is now overcrowded with immigrants. Her room shares two features with Amalia's bungalow: measures against vermin (rat traps at Milagros', borax against cockroaches at Amalia's) and an abundance of paper flowers (Rechy, 2006 [1991], pp. 144–145). So even if Amalia pretends to have escaped from the problems her surroundings face, the paper flowers and also the fact that Milagros' son is a criminal similar to Manny constantly remind her that as a Mexican-American woman, she cannot flee the violence and deprivation that overwhelm most ethnic neighbourhoods in LA during the 1980s (McCarthy and Vernez, 1997, p. 279).

It is repeated various times that she works hard to sustain her children and that she moves out of East LA precisely to spare Gloria and Juan from the bad gang experience that ultimately led to the death of her oldest son Manny. She tries to create a home for her family, but as her home's descriptions reveal, she has not been successful. Additionally, her home is invaded by haunting family memories in form of her mother, who moves in with her and haunts her with her sombre Mother of Sorrows (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 72) and hacking cough.

This pattern of invasion to the home is repeated later in the novel. She is raped by Salvador very close to her parents' home and accosted by her father at home, making this supposedly safe space unsafe (Rechy, 2006 [1991], 21, 19). Cockroaches, symbols of dirt and disease,

⁵²This homogenizing tendency of finance and hence globalization is disputed: for Welsch (1999, p. 198), globalization helps forming a transcultural world. García Canclini's (2005, xli) viewpoint becomes understandable though by framing him with scholars of the leftist spectrum such as Hà (2005, pp. 60–66) or Parry (2004, p. 71), for whom globalization and capitalism try to uniformize and shape local cultures according to their pecuniary goals.

are barely held away from her kitchen by ‘streaks of grey borax’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 90). The state invades her private sphere repeatedly: when her son Manny is arrested, the police literally invade her home with guns twice (p. 59, 79), and an Anglo woman controls her for welfare fraud in her government project flat that she inhabits with Manny when he is a baby (p. 26).⁵³

In another context, Bauman (1995, pp. 135–136) states that the city stroller is overwhelmed by the threats and temptations of the street and tries to recede into his/her home, which implies that the latter is laden with a demand for safety it cannot fulfil. Bauman (1995, pp. 135–136) concludes that this overburdening of the home with a demand for safety leads to gated communities and territorial warfare. In Amalia’s case, the reaction is however opposite: as safety and peacefulness are negated to her at home, she ventures into the even more unsafe city streets, increasing her insecurity and discomfort, but finally also leading to an empowerment which would not have been possible with her unsolved problems at home.

On the one hand, Amalia has internalised Anglo norms by reconstructing her Hollywood dreams. On the other hand, she wants to transmit Mexican-American traditions (such as her devotion to the virgin, the Mexican actress María Felix⁵⁴, and a seemingly intact family), which leads her to a dilemma typical for Chicana women, as Anderson states (1997, p. 125). Amalia wants to provide a beautiful home for her children and tries thus to fulfil the role of a nurturing Mexican-American woman who performs influence and power within the female domestic sphere. Her home embellishment moves between the two extremes of consumerism and Chicana femininity: ‘For working-class women, housing adequacy and privacy constitute significant issues in the organization of their work and family lives’ (Anderson, 1997, p. 139). Her mother focuses only on the female role of passing on traditions, not understanding Amalia’s intercultural dilemma of also having to fulfil consumerist expectations for her family. That is also why she is constantly dissatisfied with her home, leading her on an uneasy flight away from the demands of home she is unable to fulfil due to different cultural expectations and economic constraints.

Home for Amalia is not a safe haven but just another place of intercultural negotiations often leading to frustrations and unfulfilled needs instead of hybrid solutions. In general, the house is a place that reveals tensions between culture and personality (Crawford, 1999, p. 117).

⁵³This is also the reason why she insists on her economic independence, which she only gives up when moving in with Raynaldo to move away from gang violence.

⁵⁴Her admiration of María Felix could also be seen as an aspect of the Hollywood dream, hence connecting these two desires.

The house is a ‘master metaphor for the construction of identity’ (Kaup, 1997, p. 363). A house of one’s own means to take possession of an egocentric territory which withdraws itself from the codification by the community (Gewecke, 2013c, pp. 401–402).

These tensions might be manoeuvred by creative resistive practices such as Crawford (1999, p. 117) or Villa (2000, p. 5) see them at work in the barrio, but in Amalia’s case, these practices are very limited by her social and economic situation. The only way to recover some of the place of her own is to overwhelm it with paper flowers. Otherwise, the place is too crowded with the needs of her family and other demands. Home and the roles assigned to Mexican-American women within it are too limited to allow the creation of a creative third space where conflicts could be carried out to meet a solution. Amalia is thus not able to create a place of arrival within her own home space. However, flight into the public is not a solution for Amalia as we will see later, as public space is a space supposedly controlled by men (Anderson, 1997, p. 132), not leaving enough space for Amalia either. As Low states, this gender-differentiation of space is an indicator of a power imbalance (2003):

The clear separation of gender-differentiated spheres occurs most often in state-level societies and in colonial and postcolonial settings. [...] the domestic sphere has been used to denote physical settings, as well as domestic work activities, relationships, and production and exchange. [...] Although gender may be one of several characteristics, including class and ethnicity, expressed in space, it is most often revealed in relations of power where men dominate and women are a ‘muted’ group. (p. 8-9)

This reveals that the supposedly private space of home is shaped by the public sphere, which in *The Miraculous Day* is male and Anglo-dominated. In this context, Amalia becomes an almost ‘compulsory homemaker’ (Kunow, 2003, p. 195), but the home never becomes entirely hers; her place-making fails, which is the reason why she leaves her home and starts her walk through LA to look for places of her own.

Amalia develops several escape mechanisms from this rough environment, one of which is her consumption of telenovelas. She enjoys her favourite ‘semanal’ later in the morning and gossips about it with her colleagues at the sewing factory (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 48). This highlights exactly the main purposes of telenovelas: escapism by watching them and socializing by talking about them (Fernández de Pinedo Echevarría, Eva, 2007, p. 134). Amalia’s attempt at escapism fails though as she connects the turmoils of the series to her own problems. In the text, the font size changes every time Amalia’s thoughts interrupt the action so that the story cannot unfold undisturbed. Similarly, Amalia’s thoughts remain

fractured and she does not manage to gather the sorrows that perturb her mind. On the one hand, the telenovela appears artificial with its unreachably rich setting and rich-people-problems (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 104). This telenovela is in this respect typical for the genre as the plot is unrealistic and overly dramatic and reproduces stereotypes (Fernández de Pinedo Echevarría, Eva, 2007, p. 133). Nonetheless, telenovelas can also have meaningful social, cultural and political functions: ‘...this mass-cultural expression allows women to socialize and to assert their cultural identity’ (Fernández de Pinedo Echevarría, Eva, 2007, p. 137). In Amalia’s case, though, the series only serves as small talk to avoid the discussion of bigger problems when talking to her work colleague (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 145) or to still remind her of her own problems when she is alone (p. 102).

Amalia watches an artificial world in this artificial, mediated movie city of LA, but at the same time she connects the dramatic story to her own experiences. Amalia’s life could be the content of a telenovela, only that the setting is not an architect villa but a stucco bungalow. On this meta level, Amalia’s dream of living in Hollywood becomes true, even if in another way than imagined by her. She lives her life as if acting for an audience: on the streets, she is very conscious about the impact she leaves on men. She tries to create an image of herself as good mother, good wife (being attractive and pretending to be married to Raynaldo), and good Catholic (covering her head in church and going to confession).⁵⁵ It seems that she allows only these images of her to interact with images of city space, which makes a real interaction with her surroundings difficult. She remains stuck between her imaginations of home and the actual demands of her family. She is unable to interact with space, it remains abstract and thus does not offer opportunities of emplacement to Amalia who is consequently denied agency and the possibility of arrival.

5.2 A Rosebush in the Yard – the Garden as a Transitory Space

When Amalia finally leaves her house in chapter six, she still does not enter the streets, but first steps into her little garden to water a feeble rosebush. This patch of cement between the private sphere of home and the public city streets is loaded with meaning. In the brief instant she spends on her porch, she encounters three different flowers: First, she waters her semi-

⁵⁵This artificiality can also be found in Rechy’s way of writing: his writing style resembles paintings by Wayne Thiebaud, delineating contour and solid shapes of colour without depth, constantly undermining realism by calling attention to artifice (Jaén, 1999, p. 219).

dried rosebush, which holds only a few feeble rosebuds, some of them crumbled like ‘long-dry blood’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 109). But also here, Amalia seems to cling to hope as last resort as she waters it anyway. Secondly, closer to the garages, she encounters a wild plant that has managed to squeeze through a crack in cement:⁵⁶

She had noticed it, but today it had blossoms. In the center, their petals were rolled into folds, like candles, and then they opened at the bottom; and they were white. (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 109)

This scene is rich with religious symbols: the flowers resemble candles and they are white like the wedding flowers Amalia never had. Consequently, she puts one in her hair. Unfortunately for her, it is later revealed that they are probably poisonous (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 125), denying her the amendment of her wedding memories and hence agency.⁵⁷ Thirdly, in front of another apartment, she spots lilac and yellow flowers that remind her of a bridal bouquet, emphasizing again her lost opportunity for a white wedding (p. 110). Fourthly, she encounters deep-red gladiolas, which are semantically located closely to garbage (p. 110), recalling the scene where Salvador rapes her near garbage cans where she could smell thrown-away flowers (p. 21).

These floral interplays interweave the entire novel as a key stylistic device. Los Angeles is depicted as a city of concrete that is overwhelmed by nature: ‘And everywhere, everywhere, trees and flowers splashing the neighborhood with desperate beauty!’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 111). Hamilton (2011, p. 49) even suggests that *The Miraculous Day* is based on the two constitutive elements soft flowers vs. hard concrete and iron. The latter is supposed to symbolize oppression and violence through which Amalia has to force her way through like the flowers do (Hamilton, 2011, p. 50). It is true that Amalia is inclined to see these flowers as godly signs of signals of hope, but as mentioned before, her hopes are scattered as the flowers are poisonous, remind her of her sombre past, or the beauty is described as ‘desperate’. Hence the persistence of the flowers is associated with something negative, not serving as an analogy for Amalia’s own persistence as Hamilton might want to believe. Besides, Amalia’s persistence could also be seen as problematic: in contrast to an adaptive

⁵⁶The trope of the flower breaking through asphalt is a recurring theme in Chicana literature according to Rebolledo (1987, p. 115), signifying an ambivalent response to the urban environment: the barrio as desperate city space vs. hope and regeneration exemplified by the flower.

⁵⁷According to Vázquez (2018, p. 25), the flower is most likely jimsonweed, a species adaptive to many environments and invasive to North America, but at home there since early colonial times. To him, through its adaptability and invasive property, it suggests a ‘naturalization of the transnational’ (p. 26), but I would deem this an overinterpretation as the species’ name is never revealed within the novel and this interpretation would hence require some research by the reader to come to this conclusion. Nonetheless, his observation fits well with the prominence and meanings flowers acquire within the novel.

flower, she stubbornly clings to her version of reality, avoiding her family problems and insisting on her cultural heritage, hence reinforcing monocultural structures which deny the emergence of liminal arrival spheres.

Amalia's garden is not only the first place where she encounters the struggle between cement and flowers that is so typical for Los Angeles. The garden, together with the house, is the opposite to the Los Angeles language of mobility, part of the American Dream, invention of an American utopian ideal (Rieff, 1991, p. 45). Mexican Americans have extended this dreamy ideal. For them, gardens are personal statements or visions of paradise and a rural past, often complete with rosebushes (Crawford, 1999, p. 121). This also resonates with the trope of California as a flowered garden Eden (Möllers, 1999, p. 73), a paradise that attracts people in search of a better future. In *The Miraculous Day* (but also in *Their Dogs*, as we will see later), this utopian ideal has failed, Amalia's garden could be considered a personal statement of neglect and surrender. However, at the same time, the garden appears as *pars pro toto* which links up to Foucault's notion of heterotopia. In this sense, Amalia's garden 'is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world' (Foucault, 1986, p. 26), i.e. a place where the 'real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).⁵⁸

5.3 'Aztlán es una fabula' – Amalia and the Barrio

Before stepping out of her front porch, Amalia remembers her first time in Los Angeles and the places where she lived. Her arrival in Los Angeles condenses several of the typical LA tropes:

She arrived at the Greyhound station near skid row in Los Angeles. It was a day of fearful hated winds. In the distant horizon a fierce fire raged and coated the sun with a veil of smoke. The red, yellow, and green traffic lights glowed strangely out of the film of ashes. Hot, shrieking wind whipped into the city as Amalia stood outside the Los Angeles bus depot with her two children and wondered where Torrance was. (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 38)

⁵⁸Not by coincidence, the garden scene anticipates all the main tropes Amalia is going to encounter: one step outside, and she encounters lush flowers, grey cement, the freeway, whose vibrations remind her of earthquakes (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 110), and sirens: 'At times it seemed to her that the city itself was shrieking, protesting violence everywhere, even under the earth, stirring into earthquakes' (p. 109). The reader is as overwhelmed by these impressions as is Amalia, again there is a clash of narratives which denies an individual approach to the city.

Within these lines, one can rediscover the nature trope from the previous chapter. But this time, instead of deed-red, lilac and yellow flowers (p. 110), the only colours in the scene come from red, yellow, and green traffic lights, a symbol for the car and concrete city that Los Angeles is as well. Nature in contrast comes as an invader into the city, in the form of bush fires and hot winds that with their ‘raging’ and ‘whipping’ are the harbingers of the violence Amalia is to encounter later within the city. The brief scene breathes an apocalyptic mood, evoking one of the other dominant LA narratives: a city on the verge of disaster, the imminent apocalypse. The recurrent earthquake threats can also be subsumed under this trope.⁵⁹ As her physical arrival in LA is foreshadowed by apocalyptic overtones, one might argue that this hints at the difficulties she will encounter in her attempts at metaphysical arrival later.

In further flashbacks, the reader follows Amalia’s trajectory through different homes. When she moves to Los Angeles, she first lands in Torrance, a predominantly White neighbourhood, but soon moves to East Los Angeles, the Mexican American barrio in Los Angeles. She acquires the habit of meandering through the streets in her free time. She likes the area; flowers again play an important role for this:

There were flowers and vines everywhere [...]. In wreckage yards – which were everywhere, too – enormous yellow sunflowers with brown velvety centers peered at twisted chrome veins on mangled metal bodies. Along every street were rows and rows of palm trees. (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 43)

Together with the flowers, even wrecked cars gain organic qualities, enhancing the lush feeling of the barrio. Nonetheless, beauty is always counteracted with decay, for example through the mention of wreckage yards. The cars are compared to ‘mangled bodies’, as if they were victims of an automobile war or the scenery of a dystopian science-fiction movie.⁶⁰ Apparently, there is no escape to decay in Los Angeles.

This juxtaposition of different barrio impressions continues throughout the novel. It recreates various common narratives about East Los Angeles. At first sight, the novel evokes a vivid alternative cultural space with inhabitants who take control of social space and transform them by their ‘opportunistic maneuverings’, creating a landscape of ‘heroic bricolage’ (Crawford, 1999, pp. 117–118). In the novel, these transformations of urban space are described in colourful details: near Amalia’s house is a famous Latino church, the chapel of

⁵⁹This almost cinematic, visual scene is typical for the novel, gaining an almost screenplay-like quality.

⁶⁰The image of the mangled body will reappear later in *Their Dogs*, this time referring to the construction-site-bitten city space itself.

Nuestra Señora de la Soledad.⁶¹ On Whittier Boulevard, young men cruise with their customized cars (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 44); on a plaza near Boyle Avenue, mariachis advertise their services (p. 44). When Amalia moves to Hollywood, it is depicted as a barrio as well: young men work on their customized cars, ‘Rock music and Mexican ballads waged battle’ (p. 111), and neighbours put out their goods for sale in yard sales (p. 112).

Murals are scattered throughout the whole area, one displaying a proud Aztec prince.⁶² The painting and its political implications are explained to Amalia by a veteran of the 1960s riots: the 15th century Conquista scene stands for the fight for Aztlán of the 1960s Chicano civil rights movement (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 45). On another occasion, she overhears a ‘veterano’ brag about how in his gang days, battles were fairer and manlier, recalling the zoot-suit riots and claiming that ‘we belonged!’ (p. 72). These car parades, murals, and street businesses (such as the *mariachis* or yard sales) can be seen as an appropriation of public urban space:

This process of place-making through enactment involves architectural props – such as murals, fences, vendor carts – that are incorporated into the existing urban fabric and help to create distinctive cultural landscapes... there are processes by which marginalized communities recreate their surroundings in order to create spaces of resistance. (Gámez, 2002, p. 110)

Villa (2000) interprets these street activities as ‘resistive tactics or defensive mechanisms to secure and preserve the integrity of their cultural place-identity within and against the often hostile space regulation of dominant urbanism’ (p. 5).

In the novel, in contrast, these tactics remain unsuccessful as violence seeps into the barrio from within and without: police helicopters hover over the car parades, which is commented with ‘Just the usual harassment’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 44). Anglo police cruises the area like ‘leisurely invaders’ (p. 44), ‘klikas’ are frisked by them and still roam the streets. The ‘veterano’ who explains the Aztec mural to her remembers his shouts of ‘No más’ during the 1960s Chicano protests, but has to admit that ‘nothing’s changed’ (p. 46). The Chicano

⁶¹In 1981, the church was home to political activist and priest Luis Olivares before he was transferred to La Placita, making it one of the strongholds of the grass-roots United Neighborhoods Organization (García, 2015, n.p.).

⁶²Another mural continues the Aztec theme, but with more somber tones: ‘She avoided a mural that had startled her recently: A tall, plumed Aztec held a bleeding, dying city boy in his arms’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 56).¹ Possibly, this mural reminds her of her eldest son who becomes the leader of one of the toughest gangs of East LA (p. 62) and later dies in prison.

movement has failed to overcome the social segregation and its veterans prefer to dwell in the past rather than to work on today's problems.

Additionally, Amalia wonders about where the women are. The novel thus criticizes Movement iconography where women are written out of Chicano/a history and city space (Vázquez, 2018, p. 32). This critique of the Chicano community is also reflected in Amalia's actions: she clearly is an example of social segregation and marginalization. However, her problems seem to correlate more with her own passivity, utopian dreams, and the hostile and violent Chicano surrounding shaped by gangs and domestic violence, than with Anglo majority behaviour.

She moves to Hollywood to flee these invaders, but the barrio follows her everywhere: she passes a boarded up bungalow unit where not even the plants can withstand the decay anymore: 'Drying vines and trees arched across the unit' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 113), creating a sharp contrast to the flowers which splashed the neighbourhood 'with desperate beauty' (p. 111) just a page before. The novel itself mentions the sharp differences it creates:

What contrasts in the neighborhood! The area around the Fox Studio, sealed off by high walls and watched over by security guards stationed at every entrance, looked like a well-tended private park. Yet on almost every block in the neighborhood were declining houses, windows smashed, shells of cars left in dirty lawns. (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 111)

On her walk through the neighbourhood, Amalia feels menaced (p. 113). 'There were always sirens screaming now. At times it seemed to her that the city itself was shrieking, protesting violence everywhere, even under the earth, stirring into earthquakes' (p. 109). An old woman in the decayed unit asks her '*Qué ves?*', to which Amalia answers that she is not looking at anything (p. 113). This statement could be seen as a general attitude towards her surroundings: she does not want to look too closely at the surrounding places of the city, but again and again, she has to face unpleasant encounters. She cannot avoid city space, it represents another invasion.

This feeling of invasion becomes physical when she finally discovers undeniable gang signs in her neighbourhood, a wall with a graffiti that reads 'LOS VATOS NUEVOS' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 114). This reminds her of police raids in South Central where the police had left their own graffiti (p. 114), an incident which resonates strongly with police operation HAMMER (Davis, 2006, p. 268). Amalia feels cornered as her familiar blocks turn into a threatened barrio she cannot escape any more because she cannot afford a better area (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 114). The novel traces the image of a city where no safe place is to be found

and where Amalia's intentions of fleeing her problems are always interrupted by another menace from her surroundings. Her inner torments are mirrored and reinforced by the space she moves through, leaving her no safe space, neither in- nor outside. The city's violence does not allow her to create a safe place, she remains haunted and does not manage to create the sense of emplacement necessary for arrival.

A brief scene clearly illuminates this connection between inner torment and outer decay: when her son Manny is in detention, Raynaldo takes her out on a drive in the affluent neighbourhood of Hancock Park to lift her spirits. On these occasions, she always plays a game of pretending she could pick one of the beautiful houses to live in. When she almost got lost in this illusion, a noise like a gunshot draws her back to reality. It was just a flat tire, but from this point on, the novel goes on to enumerate disturbing occurrences which interrupt her Sunday outings: on the way back from the Griffith Park Observatory, they observe male prostitutes (which alone is enough to confuse and anger Amalia) who are suddenly attacked by a cluster of young men with clubs and bottles (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 70). After this, she frequently talks about leaving East Los Angeles, especially when she encounters a mural that states in 'red, bleeding paint' that 'Aztlán es una fabula' (p. 70).

Hence, the barriological practices of appropriation seem to give way to another dominant narrative about LA city space: that of the carceral archipelago (Soja, 2000, xvi) where the control of space by dominant forces is so strong that the re-creation of urban space into a community-enabling place (Villa, 2000, p. 6) remains impossible. The text very explicitly evokes a feeling of being trapped in a ghetto of violence:

In other cramped neighborhoods, too, in communities with beautiful names – Pomona, Florence, Echo Park – violence swept in, intended victims and bystanders felled by gang bullets, cop bullets. There was talk of barricading certain areas 'to contain the violence, seal off drug zones'. (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 71)⁶³

This violence serves as a pattern of closure that threatens 'to prevent Amalia from ever recovering the self that can sustain her and give meaning to her life – it thereby makes redemptive dialogue impossible for much of the text' (Giles, 2000, p. 115). This closure thus counteracts arrival as it hinders gaps and openings to emerge which would be necessary for the insertion into city space.

⁶³As we will see later, in *Their Dogs*, this idea has been put into practice, at least in fiction, only claiming that the reason for the barricade was a disease, not the violence itself.

Amalia's fragmented memories which recreate the barrio scenes are mirrored by the fragmented quality of city space on the one hand and the clashing and fragmentation of city images on the other hand. This fragmentation of LA city space is typical for LA literature: nation-state borders become more permeable, which translocates the border into the nation-state itself:

This postborder condition is defined by a simultaneous centrality and marginality, by ambiguity and ambivalence. It is creating in Southern California a new type of liminal space – a transnational borderland, a type of blurred macrofrontier. (Leclerc and Dear, 1999, p. 5)

López-Calvo (2011, p. 18) calls this phenomenon the 'third border' which does not separate countries, but divides the city itself and marginalized Latinos whose motions are limited by visible frontiers such as freeways or the LA river but also through more invisible demarcations such as gang turfs and street violence.

Amalia constantly moves between these frontiers, feeling the limitations that city space sets up for her. It seems like one stereotype counteracts the other: the colourful Latino barrio is contrasted by the carceral archipelago, almost like setting up the background for a seedy LA gangster movie. Some scholars see this tangle of images as leading to a positive reading of barrio space:

Conceptualizations of the barrio, for instance, range from the nostalgic idealization of a comforting refuge from 'the other side' [...] to overt anti-urbanist images that conceive it as a haven for drug dealers, gangbangers, violent husbands, and unscrupulous developers. But, as we will see, barrio fictions ultimately yield to transnational and even post-nationalist narratives where more open categories, such as liminality, heterogeneity, hybridity, transculturation, and mestizaje take center stage... (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 16)

In my opinion though, *The Miraculous Day* does not manage to convert the dominant narratives into something new, a hybrid where Amalia could be able to find an empowering place within the barrio. Admittedly, the novel deconstructs the nostalgic idealizations of the Chicano barrio to show that the limitations of the Chicano movement (persistent neglect of female needs and standpoints, machismo) are an undeniable reality, which does not alleviate the struggle for the barrio inhabitants. At the same time, however, the novel reconstructs the *noir* narrative of the barrio as a place of violence and gang dominance.

One might argue that the recycling of well-known imagery 'provides a means by which to maintain traditional roots while simultaneously transforming them to meet the changing needs of marginalized communities' (Gámez, 2002, p. 101). Hamilton (2011) adds that only acknowledging the postliberal LA of Davis' *City of Quartz* within *The Miraculous Day*

‘misrepresents it as wholly oppressive, repressive, and violent. Such an interpretation emphasizes what is a single constitutive force in the novel’s story world as the only one’ (p. 49). According to him, the novel maps a discourse of persistence into the textual space, defining persistence as the ‘...continued existence of cultural differences within and despite oppressive and hostile conditions’ (Hamilton, 2011, p. 46). He claims that Rechy shows how Chicanos can persist alongside (and not separate from) the hegemonic society in spite of oppression and violence (Hamilton, 2011, p. 47). In my opinion, existence alongside hegemonic society is not enough to facilitate places of entry and opening which could allow for more hybrid readings of city space. ‘Existing alongside’ implies Mexican-American life next to the dominant Anglo society without an opportunity for third spaces to emerge. Consequently, the borders remain thin lines without offering the possibility to expand into liminal spaces where an arrival could be possible.

Following Hamilton’s line of argument, the novel defies the American melting-pot myth by insisting on difference and accusing the all-too-real segregation within Los Angeles. While this is definitely an attempt at claiming an own space, through the mere juxtaposition of stereotypical barrio tropes it also solidifies the segregation it so fervently accuses. The exaggerated style of this juxtaposition could be seen as an ironic commentary on the mediatedness of LA city space and its manifold and often contradicting interpretations, but this tangle of images leaves the novel’s main protagonist stuck in a maze of city images without giving her a chance to establish a place of her own. The overlapping narratives are so dominant that they leave no place for Amalia to develop a cohesive narrative of her own that might help her to decipher and inhabit LA city space.

Amalia apparently feels like a victim of these dominant narratives, she rather passively endures the violence and misfortunes she encounters daily. Whereas her friend Rosario wants to encourage her co-workers to take their destiny in their own hands, the women, including Amalia, prefer to escape into their telenovela dream world. As Rosario puts it, Amalia lives as ‘with a loaded gun’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 77) held to her head. The novel certainly criticizes majority culture and the ongoing segregation and domination of space, but through the voice of Rosario, it also accuses the self-destruction and lack of agency of the Latino/a community. Gang violence only hits the own community so that the police can ignore them (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 132), ‘coyotes’ prey on their own people (p. 141), and the Chicano movement excluded women and others who did not fit their machismo image. Rosario encourages Amalia to think (p. 77), but throughout the majority of the novel, Amalia reasons

with herself to create her own reality and reacts rather than acts. Only in the end she finds inner strength, but even this agency is not caused by planning and deliberate thinking, but rather by a reflex action. Possibly, Amalia will develop courage and consequently act, but the novel leaves this open.

5.4 María Felix in a *Noir* Movie – Amalia's Take on Hollywood

As we previously have seen, on the one hand, Hollywood is just another barrio with all the contradictions between gang invasion and creative appropriation of space that the barrio has to offer. On the other hand, Hollywood obviously resonates with the myth of the movie city, one of the paradigmatic LA tropes. The novel plays with this myth, enriching and intertwining it with other typical LA tropes such as nature and the Apocalypse. In the following, I want to unravel Amalia's perceptions of these myths and how they influence her perceptions and actions of and in city space.

Again, similar to the barrio scenes, the novel draws a contradictory image that oscillates between dream and nightmare, jumping from decay to movie stars, and lush palm trees to earthquakes in one sentence. On the one hand, the novel recreates Hollywood as a safe haven and place of yearning for Amalia. The stucco bungalow in Hollywood for her means a way to escape her social problems. One can see the 'Hollywood' sign from its windows and her stucco bungalow has previously been inhabited by film people.⁶⁴

The scene also introduces another typical theme of LA, the freeways which are audible from her flat. Raynaldo tries to console her that they sound like the ocean, but this deception is doomed to fail as Amalia has never seen the sea (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 73). Again, the novel plays with stark contrasts when it immediately counters the Hollywood myth with 'exaggeratedly painted women' (p. 73) who parade on Sunset Boulevard and raise an unsettling feeling in Amalia. Her neighbourhood is hence a highly contradictory place. On the one hand, she is still threatened by the imminent invasion of violence that finally occurs in the form of the graffito mentioned earlier. On the other hand, the Hollywood myth helps her to forget her torments and feel glamorous:

Yet if Amalia proceeded only two blocks in another direction, toward Sunset, or toward Melrose Boulevard, she would encounter television studios and

⁶⁴ Amalia first thinks of movie stars, but it were rather grips and extras (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 73).

tourists, men and women, young people, children – always many in shorts – lined up to gain entry to their favorite shows. [...]

Think of it! This was Hollywood! (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 113)

In the progression of the novel it becomes clear though that ‘This was Hollywood!’ just expresses the unattainability of its lifestyle for Amalia. Her American (movie) Dream is only held up to make clear that for her as a Mexican American woman and single mother this Dream will never fulfil itself. Hollywood as a place becomes a constant reminder that it exists only for a privileged minority while Mexican Americans like Amalia remain separated from it as if looking through a windowpane. This dream is not rooted in space, it is a ‘simulacrum that could easily be deterritorialized, displaced, and relocated to more affluent and safer parts of the city, the nation, and even the globe’ (Priewe, 2006, p. 51).

Amalia has not understood this disconnectedness of the Dream of Hollywood from the city area of Hollywood she moves through. This gives her movements a fleeting quality; she is not able to find the ‘entry or opening’ (Kunow, 2008, p. 160) to set foot on which is necessary for arrival and the making of a third space of her own. As Möllers (1999, p. 163) states, LA looks like a Southern Californian theme park where a nice façade hides a structure of control and hinders interaction. Precisely this interaction however would be necessary to allow Amalia to find a footing.

A key Hollywood theme within the novel is Amalia’s constant allusion to how much she resembles María Felix and other movie stars of the first half of the 20th century. Her work colleague greets her with “Here’s la Liz Taylor!” (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 76), at a yard sale, she is compared to a picture of a movie star (whom Amalia believes to be María Felix) (p. 112), and a woman on the street briefly mistakes her for Ava Gardner, who looks exactly like a fair version of María Felix, as Amalia notices (p. 42). María Felix is Amalia’s idol, ‘always indomitable, always triumphant’ (p. 127). As la Felix had played a virgin Mary-like role, Amalia’s adoration for the actress and the virgin merge into a strange syncretistic veneration. Amalia identifies herself with the actress: María Felix’s son purportedly got arrested in Los Angeles for drugs, similar to Amalia’s son Manny (p. 127).⁶⁵ The actress incorporates the type of strong woman Amalia tries to be for her children, but like the actress in the movies, she is held back by patriarchal powers. Amalia uses the movie star to distract herself from her longing for a miracle, which again enhances the alluded to closeness

⁶⁵Manny is a recurring character in several of Rechy’s novels, and he claims that the character is based on an actual boy whom he knew from his childhood. Like Amalia’s Manny, he had his hand burnt by his mother to erase a gang tattoo and committed suicide in detention (Hernandez-Jason, 2015, p. 157).

between the actress, Amalia, and the virgin Mary. Hollywood⁶⁶ becomes here a variation of Catholic veneration of saints, stressing on the one hand the mythical qualities of the movie city, and on the other hand the stagedness and affected artificiality of Catholic practices, something I will come back to later.

Similar to the East LA barrio earlier, Hollywood and the hopes Amalia connects with it become invaded by fear and violence, not only by gangs, but also by yet another LA trope: earthquakes. A ‘moderate earthquake’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 74) leaves a split in the wall of her stucco bungalow, and the (yellow) press predicts an earthquake, which does not take place, but still scares Amalia. Additionally, the sounds and vibrations of the freeway do not remind her of the ocean any more, but of earthquakes, mirroring her downward-shifting mood (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 110).⁶⁷

The earthquake theme is one of many threads that permeate the novel, similar to the flowers mentioned earlier: in a diner at Sunset boulevard, she overhears a tourist family who ‘survived’ Universal Studio’s ‘earthquake extravaganza’⁶⁸ and are glad to not live in this earthquake-threatened city, which angers Amalia deeply (p. 122). In another scene, she again mistakes a car rumble for an earthquake (p. 134). It is claimed that there is a special earthquake weather, ‘hot and still’ (p. 75). Similarly, bush fires are mentioned repeatedly throughout the novel. For example when Amalia first arrives in Los Angeles, the sun is covered with a veil of smoke and hot winds rip through the city (p. 38).

These natural disasters add up to the counter-image of LA as the city of dreams. It becomes a city on the verge of apocalypse, a phenomenon López-Calvo calls the ‘Los Angeles paradox’ (2011, p. 3). Los Angeles turns into a place of entropy (Priewe, 2006, pp. 50–51) where natural and social disasters are marketed by Hollywood:

Appropriately for the home of American movies and television, the city of Los Angeles, obsessed with denying its lack of a saving past, has concocted a surreal formula of commodified suffering, death, sexuality, and violence and marketed it in numerous ‘tourist attractions’. (2000, p. 123).

⁶⁶María Felix never acted in Hollywood movies (Dillon, 2002, n.p.), but as the scene takes place near Sunset boulevard and connects to Los Angeles, it just adds to the Hollywood myth although Felix was a genuinely Mexican actress.

⁶⁷As I will elaborate on in my analysis of *Their Dogs*, the Aztecs believed that our world or age would be destroyed by earthquakes (Smith, 1998, p. 205).

⁶⁸This was cancelled after the 1994 Northridge earthquake, the ‘big one’ Amalia so fears in the novel (Klein, 2008, p. 119).

Amalia tries to leave her disillusioning past and life behind by fleeing into the fantasy world of Hollywood, a ‘survival mechanism that allows her to compensate for the horrors of her childhood’ (Kevane, 2008, p. 15). However, this escapism is annihilated by the Apocalypse trope. City space mirrors and reinforces her torments instead of being a diversion as she hoped. Again, a jumble of narratives puts itself in her path so that she gets lost in her thoughts as well as in the ‘wilderness’ (Kevane, 2008, p. 21) of LA.

In his article on the postmodern city in recent US literature, Brandt (2009, p. 553) picks up de Certeau’s (1988, p. 93) walking rhetorics, asserting that postmodern literature turns fictional literature into a tactile event. Whereas Rechy’s novel certainly is postmodern in the sense that it creates a city image that oscillates between empowerment and disorientation and fragmentation, it loses the afore-mentioned tactility through the accumulation of stereotypical tropes and images that further alienate Amalia from city space:

In a dystopian Los Angeles, everyone is, in a sense, lost – without clear attachment to moral/symbolic and spatial formations – for ‘moral landscapes’ become indistinguishable from one another, and it becomes impossible to demarcate a clear ethical place from which to evaluate situations and make ‘rational choices’. (León, 1999, p. 217)

The images of city space overshadow the space itself, which therefore becomes inaccessible and shattered like a broken mirror. The notion of closure transcends that of liminality, ambiguity and in-betweenness that is generally possible in a fragmented, but lived city space such as Los Angeles. One might argue that the city is itself a representation, but in *The Miraculous Day*, one gains the impression that the novel does not offer an individualistic reading or imagination of the city, but a stereotypical conglomeration of city images which hinder an individual approach to cityscape – which would be needed to make de Certeau’s tactics work and enable processes of arrival to emerge.

5.5 The ‘Subaltern Flâneuse’ – Taking a Walk in Freeway City

As the different city spaces – home, the barrio, Hollywood – cannot fulfil their promise of peace and withdrawal for Amalia, she attempts to connect and appropriate these spaces through walking, using this act as an ‘enunciation’ (Certeau, 1988, p. 98) that has the potential to challenge the existing spatial order.

After finally having left her home in chapter six, Amalia sets out for a walk through the city. Her walking is never aimless, but follows self-established goals: have breakfast in a diner,

visit a garage sale, a church, ‘curanderos’, her co-worker Milagros, and a shopping mall. Only in the flashbacks, she sometimes strolls through richer neighbourhoods to imagine in which house she would like to live. These strolls are repeatedly also made in a car, and hence in the more usual means of transportation for Los Angeles. Indeed, her walking is untypical for this car-dominated city.⁶⁹ She manoeuvres through the city on foot and by bus, the latter being a typical transportation vehicle for the urban poor. Despite LA’s fame for being a car city, her walking does not attract attention, possibly because she moves in relatively pedestrian-friendly areas: the touristy area around Sunset Boulevard and Latino/a barrios which in general are more centred on street life and interaction and hence advantage walking. Only in the shopping mall, Amalia’s walking becomes aimless as she moves according to the window shopping rules of consumerism. Where her walking loses purpose, she suddenly feels at unease.

Critics have referred to Amalia’s pedestrian experience of the city as *flânerie*, originally meant to describe aimless wandering by the male *flâneur* in 19th century Paris (Friedberg, 1991, p. 421). De Certeau (1988, p. 96) attributes a subversive quality to this aimless walking. He distinguishes two ways of experiencing the city, depending on the viewpoint of the city dweller. The first one is the voyeur, viewing the city from within a distance, having a similar view of the city as the planners or subjects of power of Lefebvre’s (2008, p. 51) abstract space: the projection of the city as a distanced panorama forgets and neglects the practical processes of the city (Certeau, 1988, p. 93). The voyeur wants to create a space that is clean, timeless, without resistance, anonymous. To this end he excludes and rejects the uncontrollable stranger (Certeau, 1988, p. 94).

The opposite of this abstracted view is the *flâneur*, the pedestrian who refers to another spatiality through his activity: ‘Walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language’ (Certeau, 1988, p. 97). It is an appropriation of the topographical system by the pedestrian, a spatial acting-out of place (p. 98). The walker hence breaks the ordered city space up by demarcating his own way through the city, he ascribes it a meaning. The different viewpoints and stories generated by the walker’s different itineraries break up the dominant city narrative: ‘The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order’ (Certeau, 1988, p. 107). Walking breaks the order of the voyeur, it is a subversive act of resistance. The periphery enters the centre and

⁶⁹However, as becomes clear throughout the novel, she does not have a choice because she does not own a car. Her rare car trips are undertaken with Raynaldo who takes her out for a cruise.

challenges it (Chambers, 1996, p. 29). It is hence a form of an arrival process that creates entries and openings (Kunow, 2008, p. 159):

Through the metaphor of walking, the city in postmodern fiction is staged as a liminal space, a space that symbolizes transition and chance. [...] Like the literary and cinematic flâneur, we 'walk' through the lines of the text, attempting to make sense of a logic that carries components of both delimitation and empowerment. The city is constituted here simultaneously as a field of closure and as a site of openness and indeterminacy. (Brandt, 2009, 561, 576)

The Miraculous Day presents facets of these subversive pedestrian tactics: garage sales, car parades and Mariachi bands occupy the sterile city space and colourfully display the Latino/a presence in an Anglo-dominated city. As Margaret Crawford states, East LA is a landscape of 'heroic bricolage', expert in de Certeau's tactics of 'making do' where residents take control of personal and public spaces by transforming them (Crawford, 1999, p. 117).

This process of place-making through enactment involves architectural props – such as murals, fences, vendor carts – that are incorporated into the existing urban fabric and help to create distinctive cultural landscapes. (Gámez, 2002, p. 110)

This optimistic notion is not shared by all scholars. Although de Certeau's theories have been very influential, a main point of critique is that his view is decidedly that of a European intellectual and cannot be transferred to all urban lifestyles (Crang, 2011, p. 111). Priewe (2007, p. 140) states that dream-like flânerie has lost its innocence in the American city, borders are not necessarily porous places of cultural production:

such an intellectual appropriation of the border should be viewed with caution because it tends to de-emphasize the realities of poverty, violence and suffering in favor of the benefits and newness of border phenomena. [...] certain site-specific experiences remain local and cannot be extrapolated to a global level. (Priewe, 2007, pp. 43–44)

These problems can also be found in the *The Miraculous Day*. Violence and resignation aggressively counteract barrio life, 'nothing's changed' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 46), as the old man in front of the Chicano mural explains. Also, Amalia's walking does not seem to inscribe new meanings into the city or to break up dominant space. She does not determine her way through the city, although she would like to, but the city imposes its ways on her: her walking is constantly interrupted by meal bargains, born-again, gang shootings, earthquake signs, and her own thoughts. Priewe (2007) sees capitalism as the main hindrance:

This presence of late capitalism is so overwhelming that Amalia's walk in the city represents neither a tactical reappropriation of urban space, nor an intrinsic act of transgression or resistance in the Certeauan sense. Rechy's text

portrays little hope for people such as Amalia to gain agency to 'write' urban space; the possibility of selecting, rejecting and manipulating spatial and cultural elements of the city seems denied to her. (p. 143)

Priewe claims that Amalia becomes a subaltern flâneuse (Priewe, 2007, p. 142) to show that a Chicana's access to the city is limited by several powers:

As an ethnic flâneuse through the city, Amalia becomes lost in a surplus of culturally coded signs. The polyglot sights and sounds she perceives on her urban odyssey represent the 'tropical' and hybrid makeup of her neighborhood. [...] The boulevard [...] functions as a metaphor for the overall cultural hybridization and economic decline in urban Latina/o communities. (Priewe, 2006, p. 52).

In spite of the ethnic re-interpretation of the flânerie concept, the notion remains problematic as the postulated aimlessness cannot be fulfilled in the novel. Amalia's walking is meant to be purposeful: she plans to have breakfast at a coffee shop, visit some yard sales, pay a visit to the 'brujos' in her neighbourhood and stop at the big church at Sunset boulevard (Rechy, 2006 [1991], pp. 108–109). This distinguishes her from the 19th century male European flâneur who walks the city aimlessly and keeps an aesthetic distance to the urban masses (Priewe, 2007, pp. 140–141). Amalia in contrast interacts with the city streets and the people who dwell in them: she barter at a garage sale and closely observes the changes in her neighbourhood, such as gang graffiti on the walls (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 113). Instead of detaching herself from the problems that drove her to the streets, the city interferes in her thoughts and puts itself almost aggressively in her way. Protestant born-again try to convert Amalia in the midst of her Catholic neighbourhood, which causes her to hurry to Sunset Boulevard 'within the crazy maze of fast-food stands, malls, variety stores' (p. 118). To avoid religious turmoil, she flees into consumerism, purchasing a fast-food meal that includes summer shades. The meal and shades turn out to be disappointing, the service lacks respect, Amalia is approached by an annoying neighbour and some tourists talk about earthquakes again (p. 122).

Bauman (1995) calls this flight into consumerism a postmodern version of flânerisme. Postmodern flâneurs want to distance themselves emotionally from the city, they are on a hunt for pleasure without any commitment. This pleasure-hunting is a typical middle-class activity, or at least one for consumers (1995, pp. 131–134). Possibly this is why Amalia fails at escapism through consumerism: she is not a typical consumer because she lacks the financial means and additionally, she is unable to emotionally detach herself from the city. The city evokes feelings of fear, menace and threat in her, which cause her to resume her

frantic walking activity. Hence also the postmodern flâneur trope does not seem to apply to Amalia here, rendering the notion even more problematic.

Her purposeful walking gets distracted when she sees a free mobile clinic where she decides to get her blood pressure checked. On her way there, she witnesses a gang battle. Her memories, Earthquakes and street violence continuously intermingle with her walking plans (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 136), almost as if the city was interfering with her escape plans on purpose. Hence, she decides to tackle at least one insecurity, the whereabouts of Raynaldo who left the night before at El Bar & Grill. For this purpose, she enters the Mexican restaurant and orders tamales, Mexican food to which ‘American food just couldn’t compete’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 141). But instead of finding out about Raynaldo’s whereabouts, she has to hear that her love affair from the night before, Angel, who mistreated her, is also a despised ‘coyote’ who preys on his own people (p. 141). Instead of disentangling her problems, her flânerie hence only adds to them.

In the beginning, her purposeful walking could have been seen as refuting the dominant victimhood-trope that permeates the novel. Whereas when encountering violence at home, Amalia freezes and does not know how to counter violence, in the city streets she at least has the opportunity to evade the violence by walking on, which turns her from passive victim into active agent. As her walking is increasingly interrupted and distracted by the occurrences in the streets, this impression changes. Violence follows her around and revives the victim-trope, hindering her self-empowerment and limiting her again to the role of haunted Mexican-American woman. Although the novel intends to depict its protagonist in a vivid, compassionate way, it limits her to the classical tropes of Mexican-American femininity and hence repeats the dominant narratives it tries to criticize throughout the narrative. These narratives hinder her to gain an own access to city space which would be necessary for arrival processes to emerge.

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, home as a space of security and comfort is a failed concept for Amalia, which is why she enters the streets. As Kaup (1997, p. 389) argues, the street as a public space can be a space of contact for Latinos/as and the ‘urban equivalent of the homeland’ (p. 390). Through the example of Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, she maintains that the street is not anonymous. Residents take an interest in each other’s lives so that a complex social world beyond the confines of the house is created (p. 391). In *The Miraculous Day*, in contrast, the streets are depicted as anonymous, menacing and repellent and do not serve as a home away from home.

Amalia's trajectory is further complicated by her decision to visit her work colleague Milagros to find out about the whereabouts of her former co-worker, activist and friend Rosario. To visit Milagros, Amalia has to take the bus:

From years of riding buses, Amalia was an expert in maneuvering throughout Los Angeles. She knew the bus system, its connections, even some of its schedules, the way others in the city know the maze of freeways... She had to wait only a short time for the bus, and so she reached the MacArthur Park area in minutes. (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 141)

Amalia here changes from being a distracted flâneuse to an experienced, determined bus rider. The public transportation system in Los Angeles is notorious for being slow, comparatively expensive, and inefficient,⁷⁰ but for Amalia it is a quick means of transportation. Where in the past, she used the car to dream herself away into rich houses, the bus is used to disentangle her problematic realities. Los Angeles as a car city remains a dream. Seeing Los Angeles from a bus in contrast helps Amalia to gain determination and eliminate distraction. The bus ride is only short though; to find Milagros's house she has to walk the park area which looks like a 'ravaged battlefield' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 142). There is also spontaneous, peaceful street life, but this almost idyllic scene is interrupted by a police squad. Also, the building Milagros inhabits is dilapidated and she has even more existential problems than Amalia (p. 144). Her excursion to Milagros does not reveal anything new about Rosario, so Amalia rides back to Sunset to visit the large church there (p. 147). One could almost gain the impression that the scene in MacArthur Park was inserted into the novel to display the full array of Latino/a milieus and its problems, such as marginalization, segregation, and the inner separation of the Latino/a community, which hinders the emergence of a common agenda.

Amalia's tour through the city has quickly turned from a distracting consumerism tour into a search for disentangling her problems (by finding Raynaldo and Rosario) and when the latter is not successful, into a religious pilgrimage (León, 1999, p. 223): she visits the church on Sunset Boulevard and afterwards a couple of 'curanderos' because she 'needed to talk' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 164). These religious interventions fail to bring her alleviation from her sorrows: the priest in the church uses her confession to masturbate (p. 158) and the *curanderos* only tell her what she wants to hear without establishing a conversation. Critics have seen these religious interplays as a pilgrimage or quest for redemption from Amalia's

⁷⁰The public transportation system in Los Angeles may have improved by now, but for the 1980s, this certainly holds true (see Hutchinson (2003, p. 3) about how the devaluation of public transportation deepened the racial divide).

side (León, 1999, p. 223). Kevane (2008) similarly argues that Amalia sets out for a ‘spiritual journey’ (p. 13) to flee the wilderness of Los Angeles. She moves through LA like an outlaw that separates itself from the authoritarian mainstream and shows that the conventions questioned are wrong (p. 20). However, the focus on religious pilgrimage and redemption does in my opinion not sufficiently cover the spectrum of meanings as it is only one aspect of Amalia’s wandering. As shown above, her motivations include distraction, consumerism, and an intention to disentangle her problems, which the above mentioned scholars ignore. Overall, her religious encounters do not manage to empower her against the city’s violence. She again reads a cloud as a sign, this time in the form of a finger pointing to the Hollywood sign in the hills. This sign remains illegible to her though, and is followed by another eruption of violence, this time a drive-by shooting (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 172). Her attempts to arrive at a safe city space are hence continuously sabotaged.

She interrupts her city itinerary and returns home where her problems become inevitable: she finally realizes that Juan is homosexual, Manny committed suicide in jail, and Raynaldo tried to molest Gloria. Tormented by these revelations, she sets out into the streets again, this time looking for diversion in a Beverly Hills shopping mall. Here, she feels utterly out of place, the consumerist dream turns into a nightmare for her.

Amalia uses movement as a strategy to escape her problems, but the problems, such as violence, follow her even when moving homes. This paradox of movement without progress recalls Holert’s and Terkessidis’ (2006) ‘frozen movement’ (p. 247) where migrants are in constant movement, but sessility is denied to them. Persons are present and absent at one place at the same time, but their ‘real’ life or a relevant mental part of it takes place somewhere else (Holert and Terkessidis, 2006, p. 247). This is also true for Amalia, but for her, it is not even clear where the relevant part of her life could take place. She seems to be lost in a city space that denies a home to her but it is unclear whether she could ever experience this notion of home and belonging due to her history of domestic violence.

Amalia is not a subaltern flâneuse, as she is neither able to detachedly gaze at the city like the 19th century flâneur nor are the tactics of walking the city as de Certeau suggests them successful for her. Possibly, the concept of a female flâneuse is also bound to fail because one key feature of the flâneur is that he gazes and is not gazed upon. Traditionally, though, the female in the city streets was the subject of the gaze, she was not regarded as equal (Wolff, 1985, p. 42). Judging from Amalia’s city experience, this not only holds true for the 19th century woman in Paris, but also for the 20th century Latina in LA: young men slur a racist

insult towards her (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 193), and in the shopping mall, she notices how people stare at her (p. 202).

The postmetropolis of Los Angeles interferes with Amalia's wish for escapism, but also denies her the richness of realities a city space as diverse as Los Angeles's should be able to offer. Instead, she is limited to violent barrio experiences, which hinder her personal development. It is as if the city space rejects the ethnic wanderer, stopping her from interacting with city space. She tries to interact with space – she buys flowers, walks, rides buses, discovers new graffiti, and purposefully observes Los Angeles city street life: she sees despair, poverty, violence, but also emerging flowers and bustling street life. But as soon as she tries to enter a dialogue with city space, allowing her thoughts to grasp hope or enter a deeper conversation with city dwellers, the city itself interferes through its meaner aspects: Amalia is haunted by born-again, gang shootings, and earthquake insinuations.

An appropriation of this space for arrival is impossible, her walking tactics remain at an escapist surface. The novel only allows a very selective image of the walkable Los Angeles city space to emerge: walking the city limits the experience to inescapable encounters of violence. However, driving is no option either, at least not for the Latino/a inhabitants: if it can be used in spite of economic constraints, it is only suitable for short time escapisms into dreams of bigger houses. The city can hence neither be walked nor ridden, it remains a foreign place that belongs to others. This is a quite uni-dimensional city image which the author seems to set up on purpose to show the limitedness of city space for Latinos/as. However, this depiction runs the danger of reproducing the dominant LA narratives. In Rechy's novel, the city remains a capitalist-dominated White space. Priewe (2007, p. 145) sees this as a critique on the limitations of US national narratives and hence of dominant cultural narratives. In my opinion though, this reproduction of dominant narratives reinforces the monocultural tendencies the novel intends to criticize. It does not show the ambiguities and hybridities that can emerge by walking the city: as Crawford (1999, pp. 117–118) states, the pedestrian space of East Los Angeles has a provisional quality, the occupants allow time and memory to control space. Through this provisional quality, the rigid dominance of violence in the walked space could be broken up and challenged and an entry and opening could emerge to facilitate arrival. The novel excludes this possibility and draws a unidimensional picture of a rejecting, unidimensional city space.

5.6 Virgin Mary in a Shopping Mall – Amalia and Religious Space

The previous subchapters have elaborated that the novel is shaped by a number of images: flowers and violence hold the different parts of the city together, and the same is true for Amalia's walking which tries to connect the different aspects of city life as well as Amalia's identity. This also holds true for religious motives, which are interwoven within the different cityscapes and connect such divergent spaces such as Amalia's home, her backyard, the barrio, Hollywood, and a shopping mall with each other. In the following, I want to trace and explore these connections between religion and city space and how they shape Amalia's spatial experience.

The novel begins with Amalia waking up to a 'silver cross in the otherwise clear sky' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 3). She is inclined to interpret this as a godly sign, imagining a virgin Mary in a 'dazzling white radiance' (p. 3), but renounces it as the trace of airplanes. Ironically, her fantasy will turn true in the end when she sees a 'dazzling white radiance' caused by a camera flash within which stands the Blessed Mother (p. 206). The novel is hence framed by the notion of religious apparition. The fact that the exact same words are used, 'dazzling white radiance', in both passages, suggests that the author has purposefully constructed this framing. This is also true for the rest of the novel, which is permeated with religious overtones and signs, as perceived and interpreted by Amalia: in a coffee shop, an old woman bursts into a song, singing about the 'yellowest rose of Texas / that ever God made bloom' (p. 121), which Amalia immediately refers to herself because she is from Texas and there is a rosebush in her court.⁷¹ In another scene, she sees how a cloud twists into a finger, but this divine limb only points to the Hollywood sign, again linking the sacred and the profane in ways which leave Amalia confused (p. 171). Afterwards, she buys some plastic flowers, which she still clutches when she witnesses a drive-by shooting where the victim lays 'sprawled in a growing blossom of blood' (p. 172), thus shattering her hopes of a miraculous sign. In contrast with this, when she briefly returns home, the rosebush in her yard has produced a flower, which she interprets as a second sign (p. 174).⁷²

For the first time, Amalia has a feeling of hope, 'strange, foreign to her' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 174). Briefly afterwards, Rosario destroys her hopes for miracles: 'Those happen only in

⁷¹This is possibly a reference to the song 'The Yellow Rose of Texas' which was popular during the American Civil War and in its original version refers to a Black woman (Dunn and Lutzweiler, 2015, n.p.). The seemingly harmless song hence carries associations of race and violence which again secretly invade Amalia's environment.

⁷²The rosebush is indeed the symbol flower of virgin Mary (León, 1999, p. 218).

fábulas,' Rosario said. 'And we have too many fables' (p. 177; italics orig.).⁷³ Amalia searches for signs of resurrection in the streets, but even the palm trees appear to be ignoring her (p. 191). These signs all take place in different places: home, the Hollywood streets, and her yard, thus connecting the different locations of Amalia's city trajectory. She reads the city as a religious text where space encodes secret signs she has to decipher. Her reading of LA as a supernatural, mystical space fills it with new meaning aside from the previous Hollywood, barrio and violence tropes. This could be seen as an act of appropriation of space, but as her interpretations constantly end with deceived hopes, this miraculous reading and scanning for signs of hope is just another disillusionment she has to suffer. The miraculous signs leave her without a congruent image neither of her past, nor of her present, leaving her lost between the different interpretations of the potential signs.

Another major religious theme within the novel is Amalia's relation to the institution of the Catholic church, which is at best ambivalent. Her mother brings a priest who performs an exorcism on her (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 33), and on a procession to a holy mountain near El Paso she witnesses the drowning of some illegal immigrants on the US-Mexican border river. Hollywood and religion intertwine again when she discusses her doubts about miracles with a priest based on the movie *The Song of Bernadette* (p. 29). Her experiences with priests repeatedly involve sexual tension or even abuse (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 157), but also women accentuate hostile aspects of Catholic religion: her mother haunts her with her Mother of Sorrows, and on the front steps of the church on Sunset Boulevard, she witnesses an old woman repenting her sins by walking on her knees until she leaves blood traces on the church floor (p. 148), another invasion of subtle violence into a sacred realm. Amalia's belief is much more personal, denying the influence the authoritative Catholic system wants to enforce upon even the private aspects of her life. In this light, León (1999, p. 227) sees her personal interpretation of profane city occurrences as signs as a challenge to the hierarchical and male-centered system of Catholic church. This would allow for a more personal interpretation of faith, but instead of liberating her from institutional pressure, this free interpretation in my opinion just leaves her without orientation.

The dramatic church scene with the lady in black is an entrance to a dramatic religious space: the church on Sunset is filled with brightly painted statues of saints: 'Light flowing from one side of the church carved shadows on the body of Christ nailed to a large crucifix, his

⁷³This mention of fables connects to the earlier mentioned graffito 'Aztlán es una fabula', continuing the disillusionment Amalia has to cope with throughout the novel.

loincloth revealing carved sinews over his groin' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 151).⁷⁴ This vivid, sensual image evokes memories of her night with Angel in Amalia, again hindering her from forgetting her problems. Later, she returns to the church, and the plasticity of the statue almost seems to fill it with life: 'The Madonna's eyes seemed about to pull away' (p. 198) when Amalia tries to pray to her. In the end, she demands a miracle, desperate and angry at the neglect of her Catholic faith (p. 199).

From this scene, she immediately ventures into the Beverly Hills shopping mall, juxtaposing and connecting at the same time the location of her demand of a miracle and the site of the miracle itself. The setting hence changes from one artificial and overwhelming place to another, from church to a temple of consumerism. On first sight, this mall seems to be a perfect world of cleanliness and consumption, with flowers so clean they look artificial (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 201). The mall seems to be the precise opposite of the outside world, everything being clean, ordered, and violence being an invader instead of a part of the city. For a moment, Amalia manages to pretend that she belongs to this place, but soon enough, from the looks of the other mall-dwellers, she notices her out-of-placeness. As a foreboding of the invasion from the outside world, she notices a homeless woman.

Briefly after this, chaos invades. Amalia first thinks of an earthquake, but in fact is taken hostage by a shoplifter. The premonition of Rosario that as Latinas, they live with a gun held to their heads, becomes true for Amalia, the image turns into reality (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 204). In contrast to her former passive behaviour in front of violence though, this time she discovers her strength, shouts '*No more*' (p. 205; italics orig.), the old Chicano movement cry, and thrusts the assailant away who is then shot. As he asks for a blessing from her (p. 205), Amalia on the one hand resembles mother Mary, but on the other hand also her cinematic alter ego María Felix, the 'Blessed Queen' (p. 127).

When Amalia finds her inner strength, she has an apparition: '...she saw a dazzling white radiance enclosed in a gleam of blue and within it on a gathering of red roses stood – [...] *The Blessed Mother, with her arms outstretched to her*' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 206; italics orig.). As mentioned before, Amalia had envisioned the apparition this way when she saw the first sign. In another scene, it becomes clear where her inspiration stems from: in a film with María Felix, the Blessed Virgin appears in a 'dazzling radiance of miraculous light' (p. 127), equalling Amalia's experience to a Hollywood movie. Amalia's apparition hence gains

⁷⁴In an interview, Rechy elaborates on how the colourful style of Hispanic Catholic church art sometimes leads him to write in 'Mexican-Catholic-Church style' (Castillo, 1995, p. 118).

a less religious and more cinematographic quality. It is not a sign of religious empowerment, but another aspect of Amalia's Hollywood dreams.⁷⁵

The shopping mall may seem to be an odd space for a religious apparition, but as the apparition itself gains an artificial quality through its movie-esque quality, the place seems not so inappropriate after all:

Shopping malls are, in effect, temples of American consumerism – sacred spaces of exchange in the American capitalist or civil religious system. The religion of American capitalism has its own myths, its own rituals, and its own moral codes; and it is here where Amalia will receive her miracle. (León, 1999, p. 218)

A shopping mall is a semi-public space, excluding the 'other' in the form of the non-shopper (the poor, the homeless). It is a place of neither inside nor outside, but a place of liminality (Priewe, 2007, p. 152). Shopping malls are hence heterotopias according to Foucault, counter-sites 'in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted' (1986, p. 24), similar to the garden Amalia enters earlier in the novel. According to Hamilton,

[w]hat Rechy's imagined shopping center specifically inverts are the 'normal relations' of his novel's storyworld. In a 'normal' world, for example, violence is omnipresent while nature only appears in sporadic splashes. In the shopping center, this relationship is reversed: the violence is a sporadic presence within an overall peaceful environment. [...] And in this heterotopic inversion, the shopping center provides the necessary setting for Amalia's own perception of the world, to likewise be subverted and challenged. (Hamilton, 2011, pp. 58–59)

In the end, however, the otherness of the mall is challenged, as finally the outside again invades in the form of violence, equalling it to outside city space where this has happened repeatedly before to Amalia. Hence, her perception of the world is only briefly subverted, it returns to be the violent world she knew. Only her attitude towards violence has changed, she has finally found the inner strength to withstand her aggressor. The strange feeling of hope she had earlier is allowed to triumph here. The apparition opens a gap into another perception of the world for her, allowing at least for an instance to open up an opportunity of arrival for Amalia.

Giles claims that the ending is hopeful because it uses the means of magic realism, which is supposed to have a liberating power (Giles, 2000, p. 114). Likewise, Saldívar describes *The*

⁷⁵Apparitions of the virgin Mary in general, also in profane spaces, are widespread in Chicano/a cultural production. In Carmen Tafolla's short story 'The Holy Tortilla' (2010) for example, the virgin appears in the steam of a tortilla, attracting a whole crowd of worshippers whose mood she considerably improves.

Miraculous Day as a ‘postnational fable’, comparing it with Gabriel García Márquez’ writing (Saldívar, 1997, p. 111), the quintessential magic realist author. The denomination fable is quite ironic as the novel states that ‘we have too many fables’ (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 122). According to Priewe (2006), ‘...by casting the protagonist’s fate into the escapist realm of the fabulous, the text both probes and parodies the limitations of cultural nationalism and its narrative formulas’ (p. 55).

Magic realism is by itself a disputed concept. It is used to differentiate a particular form of Latin-American writing from Western literature, claiming that the Latin-American characters in that writing perceive reality in a different manner from Westerners and see occult, magic phenomena as part of the real world whereas in Western thinking, these are expelled into the realm of the supernatural and unreal. From a Western perspective, this world view seems archaic and uncivilized, but has also been considered as enriching and colourful (Gewecke, 2013b, pp. 14–16).

On the one hand, it could be regarded as a problematic tool of othering or tropicalization (Gewecke, 2013a, p. 452), in which case the categorization of Amalia as a magic realist character could be interpreted as a reduction of the subversive character of the hybrid to an other who predominantly exists outside of the order. In contrast, as we have seen, the merging of the real and the imagined is not quintessentially Latin American, but is also a key feature of the postmetropolis. Amalia’s apparition is hence no escape into the fabulous, but an expansion of the mall space into added meaning.

On the other hand, magic realism has also been interpreted in postcolonial terms, arguing that the battle between realism and fantasy embodied by magic realism can open up gaps, absences, and silences through which the previously neglected other can enter the text (Slemon, 1995, p. 409). While it may be true that the miracle de-stabilises the image of the passive and dominated Latina that the novel created for the most part, it does not manage to permanently open up liminal space of ambiguity and hybridity. The apparition is short and does not change Amalia’s circumstances. It may convey hope, but it remains unclear how this hope will be able to solve Amalia’s problems and support her ability to arrive at LA city space.

The novel hence plays with notions of magic realism only to lead them ad absurdum and add one more layer of distraction to Amalia’s dealings with LA city space. This becomes even more apparent when one links notions of magic realism to the city spaces where they appear: Amalia sees signs in her home, in an unhomely diner, in flowers near garbage cans, and in a

shopping mall. In the church or at the healers', in contrast, the virgin Mary or any other saintly entity remain surprisingly silent. The sacred is hence contrasted with the profane, namely LA city space, which is hence reduced once more to the Apocalyptic narrative of being a den of iniquity.

Most scholars still interpret the ending as hopeful and empowering:

Through ritual, Amalia temporarily reinvents this liminal public space into a place of sacrality, resistance, and redemption. From Amalia's epiphanic moment, a new and alternative religious space emerges. (León, 1999, p. 224)

Kevane (2008, 17, 22) states that through faith, Amalia experiences an empowering resurrection, whereas according to Giles (2000, p. 128), she accomplishes secular redemption. Whereas it is true that the ending conveys hope, something Amalia has never experienced before, it remains doubtful whether the apparition has truly empowered her. Her familial problems remain the same and the novel does not disclose how she will deal with them as it ends precisely there. It conveys hope that she is now able to face her problems instead of constantly avoiding them as she did before, but it seems as if her understanding of religion and signs does not really enable her to dwell in the liminality of LA city space. As Heide (2004, p. 281) concludes, the novel does neither offer a definite solution nor an ultimate truth, but rather stresses that appropriation and re-interpretation can have a performative potential for enabling literary encounters (Heide, 2004, p. 285). The text sketches a world of open signs that enables spaces which are opening out and remaking boundaries (Heide, 2004, p. 286).⁷⁶

As argued above, the mall itself is a liminal space, enabling the liminal experience of a miracle. But it does not seem as if Amalia can finally decipher the city text whose signs she so desperately tries to read. Her miracle is more a movie wonder than a life-changing godly mission, leaving her caught in imagined spaces which are not of her own imagination. The miracle may have disillusioned her in a sense that she is now able to see her family's reality more clearly. She is not able to change the circumstances, though, she can only persist, like a plant which breaks through asphalt. Her obsession with supernatural signs could be seen not as a relief from, but as reason for her passivity: instead of facing her problems, she dreams of divine intervention to solve them. She has transferred agency to Virgin Mary, demanding a miracle. When she ascribes the miracle in the end to the Virgin rather than to

⁷⁶Heide refers to Bhabha's notion of contingently opening spaces here (Bhabha, 1994, p. 219).

her own strength, this diminishes her feeling of self-efficacy and self-confidence, weakening the perception of her own resources.

5.7 Concluding Remarks

On her quest to solve her family problems, Amalia has passed through diverse city spaces and interacted with them in different, specific, manners. First, she tries to create home as a shelter from the outside world, re-creating the ideal of the motherly, domestic Chicana. As Saldívar (2003) states, Amalia's domestic sphere is constricted through the pressure of 'capitalist transmodernity' (p. 90). In this sense, the private sphere is dominated by public space, which disables her 'compulsory' (Kunow, 2003, p. 195) place-making attempts at home as she is caught in the contradictions between the ideal of the US consumerist home that she has internalised and her economic situation.

Due to the failure of creating a home, she sets out into the streets to occupy public space. But as soon as she steps outside, she is overwhelmed by apocalyptic LA stereotypes. In particular, an omnipresence of violence, expressed by domestic abuse, gang shootings, earthquakes, concrete, and freeways, hinder her to create her home as a saving heterotopia through which she could create a third space. Violence does not only come from the outside, it is intrinsic to Amalia's experiences as a Latina. Her experiences of violence as inevitable, together with her obsession for the supernatural and Hollywood, contribute to her lack of agency. The Hollywood dream does not manage to be a 'survival mechanism' (Kevane, 2008, p. 15) to her, as violence erects patterns of closure that prevents her from entering a 'redemptive dialogue' (Giles, 2000, p. 115). This violence also blocks access to possible creative barriological (Villa, 2000, p. 8) place-making practices and hence hinders her arrival within LA city space.

The barrio continues these violent images. The novel piles barrio tropes such as street-life, gang culture, murals, and violence on top of each other so that Amalia gets lost in a maze of city images. Her own readings of city space are overlaid with dominant narratives of gang violence and natural catastrophe, hindering an individual approach to open up a place for her. This also holds true of non-barrio Los Angeles, which is perceived as a movie city where one never knows where real space ends and imagination begins. Whereas this might open up possibilities for the personal creation and re-construction of space, in *The Miraculous*

Day, it again overlays personal perceptions and creates an impersonal and menacing surrounding. As the city space does not allow Amalia to settle down, she tries to decipher its meanings and create place through walking. This provisional practice is potentially able to realize place, but violence and segregation disable the 'subaltern' (Priewe, 2007, p. 142) or 'ethnosocial urban' (Kunow, 2003, p. 197) flâneuse, as she is neither able to establish the detached gaze of the 19th century flâneur nor are de Certeau's (Certeau, 1988, p. 101) tactics of walking successful for her.

Finally, Amalia tries to add a new layer of meaning to space through religion. She tries to read the city anew by ascribing it religious signs, but again, hopelessness and disillusion permeate her intentions. She finally flees into the heterotopia of the shopping mall, but here, too, violence invades space. Whereas scholars such as Giles (Giles, 2000, p. 114), León (1999, p. 224), or Kevane (2008, p. 22) see hope and empowerment in her religious apparition, I contend that hope remains merely an option and does not enable the creation of a new, alternative space which Amalia could arrive at.

The novel uses dominant LA narratives and stereotypes to unmask the American Dream, which does not work for people with limited financial means, and certainly not for Mexican Americans who are separated from it by a troubled transcultural history. Additionally, the novel also de-mystifies the Chicano Movement, which due to its male-centeredness and cultural exceptionalism is not able to integrate more complex transcultural identities such as Amalia's. Los Angeles as a city is also stripped of its myth as the paradigmatic American city in the novel by juxtaposition, exaggeration, and deconstruction of city tropes. It hence reveals Los Angeles as a space where it is impossible to find identity spaces in which the individual can locate itself and act in a self-determined way (Gewecke, 2013c, p. 388).

The novel tries several territories to create arrival scenarios in different city spaces, but a successful identity formation is possible in none of them. There is no place for the in-betweenness of identity that Amalia embodies as a Mexican-American woman because all city spaces are thoroughly worked out with stereotypes:

...both cultural departure and arrival remain deferred and Amalia's transculturation is marked by transit and conflict: a constant pushing and pulling of two national cultural narratives. [...] the novel deconstructs both national narratives and projects a de-hierarchical and integrative cultural space between and across the two. Hence, the novel neither replaces one national imaginary (Mexico) with another (US), nor does it position the two in a static binary opposition. (Priewe, 2007, 147, 155)

Clontz (2005) sees these stereotypes, such as Hollywood, Aztlán, or the Catholic imageries, as codes or myths that have power over truth and impose themselves on Amalia (p. 114). According to him, in the end, she is able to craft her own thirdspace (Soja, 2000, p. 11) of resistance and agency out of these codes that have marginalized her (Clontz, 2005, p. 118). By straddling the binary divides of limiting power structures, she 'can construct a radical subjectivity from what are generally viewed as oppositional states of being and identity' (p. 120). The novel does not offer total closure, it rather allows for constant change and rethinking of human subjectivity and its boundaries which leaves the reader with a possibility (p. 120).

I contend though that it is hard to consider Amalia a transcultural protagonist who 'straddles divides'. On the one hand, she often cultivates monocultural features, such as a strong concept of barrio identity and family values, but also Anglo-American ideals such as materialistic accumulation and consumerism. On the other hand, her Hollywood dreams merge the US actress Ava Gardner with the Mexican María Félix, she transplants the Virgin of Guadalupe into a shopping mall, and criticizes Chicano machismo as well as Anglo superiority. I argue that her attempts at transculturality fail because she lacks the agency to transform the binaries according to her own needs. In contrast, she hurriedly moves between the different monocultural concepts rather than appropriating them and moulding them into a hybrid realm of her own.

The novel critically interrogates the power imbalances and injustices Chicanos/as have to suffer in the late 1980s, but it does not allow for the creation of something new, a third space where Amalia could make up a place of her own: when she breaks the boundaries of her space, she 'encounters the urban other of her marginal space, a location at which she will never arrive' (Kunow, 2003, p. 197). As the novel ends on a hopeful note, it alludes to the possibility of change in the future, but it does not offer a possibility of arrival for its protagonist when she is looking for it.

6 Levitation at a Bus Depot – Metaphor and City Space in *Their Dogs Came with Them*

Their Dogs Came with Them (2007) by Helena María Viramontes is set in the Latino/a barrio of East Los Angeles which suffers from severe spatial control: in the diegetic present of 1970, the (fictive) Quarantine Authority, due to a rabies outbreak, enforces a curfew on the inhabitants of East LA from dusk until dawn, installs roadblocks and shoots ‘undomesticated mammals’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 54) with helicopters. In flashbacks, the novel also leads the reader back to the freeway construction of the 1960s, vivisectioning the barrio and erasing houses.

The reader follows the trajectories and memories of several main protagonists, using numerous flashbacks and time levels: Ermila is an orphaned high school student who lives with her sullen grandparents and her cousin Nacho, is girlfriend to gang member Alfonso, and shares her sorrows with her three best girlfriends Rini, Mousie, and Lollie. Turtle is a young female member of Alfonso’s gang who passes for male. Her brother and other half Luis is missing in the Vietnam War, so she left her gang and is now homeless on the streets, perambulating the barrio, constantly trying to avoid the police, the QA, and also her own and other gang members. Her ways cross inadvertently with those of Tranquilina, the daughter of missionaries, who returns to East Los Angeles with her parents after having been raped in Texas. Ben, a mentally ill college student, is a regular attendant of her church service. When he goes missing, Tranquilina supports his sister Ana, a hard-working insurance employee, in her search for him. In the end, all these trajectories clash in a violent finale where, to revenge Alfonso’s masculinity, Turtle stabs Nacho to death and is shot by the police. On her search for Ben, Ana and Tranquilina witness the scene, whereupon Tranquilina first comforts the dying Turtle and then defies the police guns and begins to levitate.

The ways of these characters constantly cross each other, sometimes noted by them, sometimes not, and in numerous flashbacks we learn that most of them shared a childhood in the barrio, too. All these various points of view, time levels, and sudden jumps in the narrative contribute to the novel’s complex structure, which in its disruption resembles the barrio’s topography as well as the protagonists’ jagged lifelines. Whereas *The Miraculous Day* deals with stereotypes, *Their Dogs* is loaded with metaphor and memory: the freeway construction bulldozers have muzzles like the dogs of the Spanish conquistadors, and the bulldozers’ cover tarps bang like the sails of their ships. People are shot like dogs or hunt

each other like a pack of dogs. The city is depicted as a body with mangled limbs, broken arteries, or earth heaps spread like legs apart, connecting the tortured barrio structure to the raped and assaulted female bodies of Tranquilina and Turtle. Constantly, the protagonists get lost in a city that is up-heaved, interrupted, and reshaped by the freeways.

These metaphors have been read as a critique of ongoing processes of colonization that reach back to the Spanish conquest of the 15th century and are continued into the novel's diegetic present by city authorities through measurements of spatial restructuring and control, such as the freeway construction and quarantine roadblocks (Kevane, 2008, p. 25). This colonization is accompanied by an internal colonization of the mind (Heredia, 2013, p. 114) where barrio inhabitants consciously and unconsciously contribute to detrimental spatial structures through internal violence, passive behaviour, and patriarchal structures. At first sight, space in the novel is depicted as tightly controlled, the abstract space of the planners dominates and erases possible barriological practices so that the creation of a liminal sphere of arrival space is seemingly made impossible.

The first subchapters will deal with these metaphors of spatial control and colonization: the first subchapter examines the dog metaphor and its meanings for the perception of city space within the novel. Next, the chapter will take a closer look at the freeways which can be seen as the framework within which the narrative is placed and within which the narrative strands unspool themselves. The freeways have been interpreted as representations of urban erasure (Pattison, 2014, p. 129) that hinder the protagonists' mobility and contribute to a loss of memory. Similarly, a metaphor of disease and invasion in the form of the Quarantine Authority shapes the postcolonial space of East Los Angeles. It has been interpreted as de-humanizing and racializing the barrio dwellers (Brady, 2013, p. 183). I will analyze how these metaphors stress this colonization of city space and if and how the protagonists are able to evade this colonization by creating fluid space through movement and memory which might open up gaps for arrival in the dominant colonial narrative.

Then, the chapter focuses on the home as the typical place of the female which could possibly serve as an escape of the de-humanizing city space. However, home within the novel has been mostly described as a place of exclusion (e.g. for gender-nonconforming Turtle) (Blanco, 2016, p. 240) or loss (Riebová, 2016, p. 510) which cannot be deemed safe as it is threatened both by city deconstruction and domestic violence. In contrast to home, there are several alternative spaces within the novel that the protagonists use as surrogate homes or safe spaces, namely semi-public locations that open up the debate about Mexican-American

women in public space.⁷⁷ I will investigate first whether despite loss and violence, the protagonists' homes and other home-like spaces are able to offer a sense of emplacement which could facilitate arrival. The cemetery where Turtle passes the night is another one where the alterity of the East LA barrio is played out on different levels. I will examine whether the cemetery can serve as a heterotopia (Foucault, 1986, p. 26) which could offer an 'other' place outside of dominated city space enabling arrival or whether the cemetery fails as a 'lieu de memoire' and just reinforce Turtle's ethnic and social isolation (Pattison, 2014, p. 125). Finally, the magic realist ending near the bus depot will be subject to analysis. Critics have interpreted this ending as a form of resistance (Wald, 2013, p. 70; Muñoz, 2013, p. 36; Kevane, 2008, p. 36). I will examine if this resistance will enable an arrival within LA city space or remains at a merely metaphysical level.

Critics have argued that the novel intends to counteract this loss of memory by the act of storytelling itself (Franco, 2015, p. 357; Rodriguez, 2015, p. 142; Seliger, 2012, p. 263). By telling the barrio's history and writing alternative stories, the novel alters communal memory. The novel serves to remember the 'other stories' apart from official historiography and thus inserts a third or liminal space into dominant thinking (Riebová, 2016, p. 514). The novel's analysis will focus on this interplay between metaphor, memory, and narrative to see whether and where these third spaces of arrival can be achieved through spatial narrative strategies.

6.1 Dogs and Earthmovers – Freeways as Metaphors of Colonization

In *Their Dogs*, the eponymous animals are a metaphor that permeates the entire narrative. The East LA barrio where the novel is set it is contained by a fictional quarantine and curfew as the result of a rabies outbreak (an illness associated with wild dogs), accompanied by helicopter hunts of 'undomesticated mammals' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 54).⁷⁸ Even before the novel begins, it uses the dog metaphor to draw a continuous line from the 15th century

⁷⁷Although the novel is located entirely within the barrio of East LA, it never constructs a 'typical' barrio image as Rechy does when describing his Latino/a streets. Viramontes's East LA consists of a kaleidoscope of very specific places that do not sum up to a colourful mosaic of 'resistive tactics' (Villa, 2000, p. 5), but remain the single different memories of different barrio dwellers which do not develop the power of a counter-narrative.

⁷⁸Although the latter is fictional, curfews and roadblocks were a reality for East LA inhabitants in the 1970s as a consequence of the Chicano Moratorium uprising (Rodríguez and Viramontes, 2013, pp. 257–258). According to Kevane (2008, p. 25), there was also a rabies outbreak in LA in 1955 that Viramontes builds on.

conquest of America by the Spaniards to contemporary neocolonial feats of oppression⁷⁹: In an epigraph, it cites a report of the conquest: ‘Their dogs came with them, running ahead of the column. They raised their muzzles high; they lifted their muzzles to the wind’ (Viramontes, 2007, epigraph). Only a few pages later, this image is taken up when the novel alludes for the first time to the destructive force of the freeway construction:

The earthmovers, Grandmother Zumaya had called them; the bulldozers had started from very far away and slowly arrived on First Street, their muzzles like sharpened metal teeth making way for the freeway. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 6)

In another scene, the tarps used to cover the bulldozers at night flap in the wind like the sails of the conquistadores’ ships. The freeway construction even alters the city itself ‘into a beast alien’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 82). The parallelisation of freeway construction and conquest is continued throughout the story, the dogs being a symbol of conquest, dominance, and subjugation (Kevane, 2008, p. 25).

The novel hence picks up on the detrimental impact the freeways have on Latino/a communities in Los Angeles.⁸⁰ Freeways now account for 19 percent of East LA’s land use (Estrada, 2005, p. 290). Latino/a communities are over-proportionately affected by freeway construction⁸¹, leading to evictions, resettlements and the demolition of whole streets while at the same time receiving insufficient recompensation and suffering after-effects such as air and noise pollution and mobility restrictions as the freeway disrupt pedestrian walkways (Estrada, 2005, p. 306). This is partly due to the fact that city planners saw the area as a slum whose erasure was seen as a progress (Klein, 2008, p. 11). This ‘progress has been defined as “American” in contrast to the “un-Americanness” of the Other. Often, that contrast is racialized’ (Avila, 1998, p. 21). In Los Angeles, between 1933 and 1980, 50.000 housing

⁷⁹In this, Viramontes resembles Rechy, who in *The Miraculous Day* lets Amalia contemplate the murals of the Chicano Movement which connect Aztec warriors to gang war victims. But whereas Rechy wants to pinpoint more to the exclusion and ultimate failure of the heteronormative male Chicano Movement, Viramontes stresses the continuities of external oppression to the Chicano/a community that lead to community-internal violence in the first place.

⁸⁰According to Viramontes, it was not her intention to let the freeways play such a predominant role in the novel, but they wrote themselves into it (Gabriel, 2013, p. 254). To Viramontes, the novel’s structure resembles the freeway intersections in its multiplication of stories and the four main characters are like the pillars that uphold the freeways Olivas (2007, n.p.). The freeways are hence the fundament of her novel as well as of traffic in real LA.

⁸¹Only 61 percent of Los Angeles planned freeways were constructed, but over 100 percent of East Los Angeles’ initially planned freeways were built: the East Los Angeles Interchange is three times as big as planned. Freeways in predominantly White neighbourhoods, in contrast, were never built (Estrada, 2005, p. 307).

units were torn down, especially in ethnic neighbourhoods (Klein, 2008, p. 1), implying that this ‘progress’ was a great sacrifice for ethnic communities.

The freeways in the novel are hence a strong symbol of the dominant forces that keep colonizing the barrio inhabitants. They represent the city space of the planner who, from a bird’s eye view or god-like standpoint, plans from a distance without caring for the requirements and practices of the inhabitants (Certeau, 1988, p. 94). The freeways as a symbol of colonization thus serve as a tool of othering (Waldenfels, 2006, p. 20) and exclusion. They materialize ‘the Anglo-American world view, which saw history as a highway – an unbroken path of linear progress toward distant horizons’ (Avila, 1998, p. 20).

Their Dogs makes it clear that this narrative of progress cannot hold true for East LA’s Mexican-American community. Throughout the novel, freeways work as symbols of domination: one of Luis’ and Turtle’s fellow gang members, Lucho, stutters since his father held him above a freeway overpass:

... Lucho’s father held him at the edge, threatened to let him go for the fun of it. The screams that Lucho screamed that night were distinct and everywhere. [...] Just as Lucho had tried to twist and spasm out of his father’s grip, so did all the words the boy wanted to cry out.’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 231)

Just like Lucho loses the ability to speak uninhibited after the incident, the freeways deprive the community of its voice. People are not being heard and their stories and concerns are literally drowned in traffic noise.⁸²

Luis and Turtle try to escape this silencing force by trying to steal a construction bulldozer, turning the vehicle of oppression into a liberating device. They attempt to escape to New Mexico where you ‘sucked on sweet cactus pulp for lunch or watched lizards transform into alligators in the afternoon’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 25).⁸³ Fact and fiction are blurred, reality is overlaid with stories: Luis’ garden Eden resonates with the idea of the Chicanos/as’ promised land in the Southwest, Aztlán, an idea already dismissed by *The Miraculous Day* as a ‘fabula’, and also here, the imagined escape stays exactly this, an imagination. There is no way out of the constrictions of the barrio, not even by bulldozing: ‘...and they would never know what it was to be somewhere else, *be* someone else’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 26; emphasis orig.). At least at the physical spatial level, there is hence no place for liminal

⁸² Lucho’s wailing could also be connected to the wailing of the city sirens that are interpreted by Turtle as the screams of La Llorona. So there is not only voicelessness, but also lament, a crying out of complaint. I will come back to La Llorona later.

⁸³ Luis’ nickname is ‘Little Lizard’, so maybe he imagines his own transformation into something big and dangerous here.

structures to emerge as the barrio space seems to be completely externally controlled without the possibility to creatively adjust it to one's own means and have the possibility to arrive. Freeways, and cars as their pars pro toto, do not only symbolize external oppression though, they also come to symbolize internal power inequalities, especially of the patriarchal system at rule in the barrio. There is not only the struggle between internal 'barriological' and external 'barrioizing' (Villa, 2000, p. 8) forces, but also multiple inner fault lines: Ana's brother Ben is considered too soft by his father. In a flashback, the child Ben is sent out alone to buy new shoes which overburdens him. In an attempt to escape his father's scolding, he lures a toddler boy away from his mother and runs with him to the street (Viramontes, 2007, p. 111). Their escape is stopped brutally by the bumpers of a 'speeding cement truck' (p. 111), leaving the little boy dead and Ben with serious injuries that will inhibit him for life. The accident was caused by a cement truck, a construction site vehicle, hence again connecting destruction and inescapability to cars and freeways, originally caused by the dysfunctional family relations between Ben and his father. The barrio does not only suffer from externally imposed traffic and segregation, it also falls prey to inner contradictions, a lack of empathy and intergenerational communication (Riebová, 2016, p. 506). The novel does not stop at re-creating this binary of internal and external oppression, though. It constantly intersects and cuts these binaries by blurring time and space concepts – narrative levels shift and mingle frequently – so that it stresses the overarching colonial continuities that construct the border for barrio space. These colonial continuities turn arrival into a difficult endeavour Ben continuously fails at, he completely isolates himself from public space and people alike, as will be shown later.

Not only Helena Viramontes, but also Mexican-American writers in general have been well aware of the dominating role of freeways in East LA: 'no other single element comes close to occupying the symbolic place of the freeways as a resonant symbol of the community's historical geography' (Villa, 2000, p. 83). They have sought to change the meaning of the dominant freeway narrative to establish resistance and defy 'the intended meanings of city engineers, public officials, and cultural impresarios' (Avila, 1998, p. 25). Viramontes herself locates her short story 'Neighbors' (1995 [1985]) in East LA next to a freeway. Lorna Dee Cervantes' 'Poema para los californios muertos' (2017 [1981]) equals the freeway scaffolds to cesarean belly wounds, a metaphor that can be found again in *Their Dogs*. In Ron Arias' magic realist novel *The Road to Tamazunchale* (Arias, 2001 [1975]), an andine flute-player

drives his alpacas on the freeway, causing the same chaos among the cars as the pack of chasing dogs in Viramontes's novel.

Freeways in LA have also been a central topic in other LA literature: in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), homeless people begin to settle in cars that have been abandoned on the freeways in a gigantic traffic jam. Even in mainstream literature, like in *Less Than Zero* (Ellis, 2010 [1985]), freeways are not only depicted as places of leisurely cruising, but gain an eerie quality when 'people are afraid to merge' (p.1). Writers hence highlight freeways' violation of the accustomed environment and challenge the dominant narrative of progress and freedom with their writings. Additionally, they depict freeways as places that are occupied by 'the other' (alpacas, the homeless), highlighting the invasive character of this city space as well as its difference from barrio space. They hence charge the freeways with new meanings through story and use narrative as a tool to open up new narrative spaces. These strategies can also be found in *Their Dogs*.

At first sight, Ermila's grandmother seems to have internalized the story of safety and protection created by the city officials to justify freeway construction and Quarantine measures:

If she [grandmother] looked out the window, the freeway construction bit endless trenches into the earth that resembled a moat, fortifying their safety from all that furious violence outside. No sooner would her sense of consolation override any panic than she realized the construction of the freeway was ridding the neighborhood of everything that was familiar to her. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 146)

On a closer look though, she soon realizes that the loss of known spaces also implies a loss of memory that threatens her and the barrio's identity, as place is a container of experiences:

...memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported. Moreover, it is itself a place wherein the past can revive and survive; it is a place for places, meeting them midway in its own preservative powers, its 'reservative' role. Unlike site and time, memory does not thrive on the indifferently dispersed. It thrives, rather, on the persistent particularities of what is properly in place: held fast there and made one's own. (Casey, 1987, p. 187)

Freeway construction hence leads to a 'lack of material sites for memory production' (Pattison, 2014, p. 122) that dissolves the community: 'Memory creates friction with changes occurring in the city that threaten to erase not only the community's streets but also its past knowledge of itself' (Muñoz, 2013, p. 29).

The protagonists try to avert this loss of memory by conserving it through story: Ermila visits her elderly neighbour Chavela, whose house is going to have to make way for freeway

construction. Perhaps precisely because her memories start to get blurry, Chavela tries to pass on her memories to the child Ermila. This is a fragile endeavour not only because her home, filled with memories, will be torn down, but also because Ermila is not a reliable listener: ‘Her hearing sometimes reached and sometimes connected or sometimes didn’t connect...’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 8). One could argue that Ermila still manages to fulfil her task by crossing the borders of age, absence and violence laid out in the barrio (Riebová, 2016, p. 508), even if she will not be able to prevent the ultimate border transgression, death, in the cataclysmic finale. With their storytelling, the protagonists intend to create ‘lieux de mémoire’ (Nora, 1989, p. 7), recreating lost places within their memory to find an emplacement to arrive at, e.g. Chavela’s garden with its lime trees, or the nopales in Turtle’s garden. They are ‘mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity’ (Nora, 1989, p. 19) and are capable of challenging the official history that ignores the barrio denizen’s view.

However, these individual memories are usually overwritten by idealized images and official history (Klein, 2008, p. 2), blurring the boundaries between true or false. *Their Dogs* works precisely with this unreliability of memory, making the phantom limbs and gaps in memory visible again through myth and metaphor. The novel writes stories about spaces and its inhabitants that alter the communal memory. Through writing against forgetting, the novel remembers the other stories and hence inserts an other or third space into dominant thinking. Storytelling can be seen as an imaginary home for a community of exiles (Grandjeat, 2013, p. 114). *Their Dogs* expects an active role from its readers who are supposed to share that alternative story and history or at least to change their thinking about official history:

Viramontes uses these narrative techniques [metaphor] to accomplish more than merely informing an audience; she seeks to incite a response by making her reader recognize, remember, and reach for those bodies underneath the overpass. (Muñoz, 2013, p. 36)

The whole novel tells an alternative story to the freeways-as-progress-narrative, inserting the other into the known space of the self, uncovering the other within the self of LA city space. Remembering also fulfils another purpose here. Chavela’s memories equal freeway construction to an earthquake she experienced in her youth:

It’s important to remember my name, my address, where I put my cigarillo down [...] or how the earthquake cracked mi tierra firme, mi país, now as far away as my youth, a big boom-crack. [...] Pay attention, Chavela demanded. Because displacement will always come down to two things: earthquakes or earthmovers. (Viramontes, 2007, pp. 7–8)

The earthmovers and hence also the freeways are not a man-made disaster, but seem to be a natural catastrophe, something that cannot be avoided and hits the community like a higher force, highlighting the absoluteness of spatial domination effectuated by the city planners. The equation of freeways with earthquakes also hints at the historical continuities of colonization: ‘And under all the rubble, under all the swallowed earth, the ruins of the pyramid waited’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 8). The destruction of the barrio is hence equalled to the destruction of Aztec pyramids by the Spanish colonizers 500 years earlier. Additionally, the earthquake disturbs the normal order, the otherwise buried and neglected indigenous heritage is able to gain visibility again. This is stressed by the fact that the Aztecs believed that our world (or age) would be destroyed by earthquakes (Smith, 1998, p. 205). The same myth has it that people will be devoured by sky monsters, possibly adding a mythical dimension to the QA’s helicopters.⁸⁴

Memory and story also challenge the dominant order in another instant: Turtle’s brother Luis tells her that when building the freeway, the construction workers found bones from a cemetery that they buried under the wet cement. According to Luis, these bones can still be heard tick-tocking at night (Viramontes, 2007, p. 157). So like the earthquake unearthed the Aztec pyramid below the Mexican city, the freeway unearthes another LA history that is different from the dominant, orderly narrative. Neutral space becomes enriched with myths, they are like the ‘cracks in the system’ caused by de Certeau’s superstitions (Certeau, 1988, p. 106). These cracks remain metaphorical though, they do not manage to open up third spaces that enable arrival within the city space itself.

6.2 More Dogs, Disease and Invasion: the Quarantine Authority

As depicted above, the dogs metaphor is used to trace a continuity of colonial forces that are ruling barrio space. Not only the construction bulldozers are ‘invading engines’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 12), but there are also helicopter sweeps by a (fictional) Quarantine Authority which shoot rabid dogs and get ‘closer and louder, just like the unrelenting engines of bulldozers ten years earlier’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 13). Dogs thus also symbolize control, for example

⁸⁴Of course the helicopter locusts also evoke the seven plagues of the bible, especially when near the end, Santos and Turtle are chased by a ‘metallic locust’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 271). Once again, borders and dichotomies are broken up, religious signs gain syncretistic qualities here.

when Ermila mysteriously encounters a dog in her sleeping room and is finally bitten by it (Viramontes, 2007, p. 75).

Additionally, dogs serve as a connective element, weaving the different plotlines together: throughout the novel, a female stray dog appears at various instances, suggesting that it might be the same one all over.⁸⁵ Ermila sees how the dog is chased by a helicopter (Viramontes, 2007, p. 13), Turtle encounters the dogs' carcass and says, 'Sorry, bitch, [...] I didn't make the rules' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 29), which connects the dog to herself who is finally ended up by rules she did not make either. Tranquilina feeds a bone to it in an earlier scene, and the dog is then chased to death by the other dogs precisely due to this bone (Viramontes, 2007, p. 277) in front of a 'gregarious herd of cars' (p. 277). The car herd is invaded by a violent, wild force, like the colonizer's dogs in the epigraph, giving the scene an eerie, surreal quality. This scene is interwoven with Tranquilina's memories of the rape in Cuero, Texas, connecting hers and the dog's fate to the overwhelming power of colonization.

Tranquilina's gentle act is turned hence into a death sentence, maybe an analogy for the seemingly progressive freeway construction and protective Quarantine which both lead to mayhem for the East LA community. Dogs are hence used as a twofold metaphor here: they do not only stand for the oppressor any more as with the freeways, but also for the oppressed, as they are hunted by the QA (Ahuja, 2009, p. 558). That the underdogs meant here are also the barrio inhabitants becomes clear latest in the ending scene of the novel when after the shooting of Turtle, Tranquilina defiantly cries: '*We'rrrrre not doggggs!*' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 324; italics orig.).

Whereas the freeways have ripped openings and wounds into the barrio tissue, the QA is prone to control these wounds to avoid contagion or contamination. Inhabitants' movements are closely monitored and helicopters hover over the scene like beasts of prey. Similar to the police helicopters in *The Miraculous Day*, the QA helicopters convey a sense of threat, insecurity, and invasion. The curfew and roadblocks severely hinder the inhabitants' daily life who, to pursue their jobs and daily tasks, have to enter and leave their barrio through the QA roadblocks. The whole barrio life is altered. What Crawford (1999, pp. 117–118)

⁸⁵There are also other persons and artefacts that fulfil the same function, such as the 'ubiquitous' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 81) bag woman.

describes as colourful manoeuvrings of barriological counter-practices completely comes to a halt:

Friday night and Whittier Boulevard, the cruising, happening place, was virtually deserted, compliments of the QA. Everyone either stayed home (fat chance) or found a whole other party to go to because these stubborn QA culeros were unyielding in upholding safety. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 288)

The stubbornness of the 'QA culeros' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 285) is described in meticulous detail repeatedly throughout the novel, mostly from Ermila's point of view. In one instance, she returns late from gossiping with her friends, witnessing how the QA at the roadblock demands official documents,

paper so thin and weightless, it resisted the possibility of upholding legal import to people like herself... Didn't the QA know that in the Eastside getting a valid ID was more complicated than a twelve-year-old purchasing a six-pack from Going Bananas? (Viramontes, 2007, p. 63)

The scene evokes a sense of doom with hot and muggy 'earthquake weather' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 63). Like in *The Miraculous Day*, in *Their Dogs* the weather contributes to a sense of foreboding, where Santa Ana winds will make 'the earth crack and quake' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 151), and torrential rains leave 'all raw nerves' (p. 83).⁸⁶

The arbitrariness of the administrative machinery awakens Ermila's political consciousness, wondering what would happen if the line of people 'wrapped themselves around the QA officers like a python?' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 64), turning people into a serpent like Luis' dream of turning into an amphibian. The slogan 'Demand, Protest, Organize' of the Chicano Movement emerges in her head, but she is soon cleared from the roadblock and runs home. The snake simile also evokes an Aztec deity, Coatlicue of the serpent skirt who in Chicana feminist readings stands for struggle and resistance (Carbonell, 1999, p. 53). Again, imagination breaks up dominated space, but the resistance stays within the realm of the imaginary, it cannot overcome the realities of spatial control which would be necessary to arrive.

The barrio is hence invaded by an 'alien' force, as other and foreign to the barrio dwellers as the Spaniards must have seemed to the Aztecs 500 years earlier: in a scene where Ermila returns late from a failed date with Alfonso, two worlds are clashing again. On the one side, there are the tired and all-too-human barrio inhabitants. On the other side, the QA officers are described as intimidating and official. They are like an anonymous herd, 'grazing in the

⁸⁶I will come back to the Aztec mythology issue later.

grass' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 288). They bulk from 'loads of cartridges and pistols, [...] batons and flashlights, choke chains, handcuffs and Mace spray' (p. 288). They themselves do not make noise, but their nostrils, the uniform leather, or the walkie-talkies whistle, creak, or spit noise, turning them from human beings into machine-like robocops.⁸⁷ The barrio is hence not invaded by human beings, but by an anonymous 'other' force, insurmountable because of their superhuman nature, 'procurers of security, guardian angels of the quarantine' (288). The image of the invasive foreign species is picked up again when a QA helicopters hovers above the scene like a 'metallic locust' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 271), abstracting the QA further into a biblical plague or natural disaster that cannot be averted by human means. When Ermila finally complains, one of the officers suddenly gains personality and a name.⁸⁸ It is characteristic that he does not seem to be Anglo, but bears the nametag 'Ulysses Rodriguez' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 289) and seems to have grown up in the barrio as his knowledge of Salas Used Cars suggests.⁸⁹ He is one of their own kind then, not an Anglo invader, all of which remain as foreign as aliens from outer space. Maybe because her opponent is not anonymous but 'from her side', Ermila's rebellion wears out. She lets the mother with the wailing child pass, but keeps waiting in line. She does not break out from the system, nor does she 'organize' the weary neighbours. It is hard to protest if one is too tired to even stand in line.

This description of the QA as alien could be seen as an ironic inversion of the notion that they see themselves as containing an invasive force, a rabies epidemic. As mentioned above, the Latino/a working class areas by LA city planners were considered to be areas of blight best to be removed (Villa, 2000, p. 43). The barrio is hence seen not as part of the city, but as a damaging foreign disease or ulcer that has to be removed or at least contained. So whereas the freeways by the barrio dwellers are seen as an invasive force, the city planners see the barrio itself as an invasive disease they have to battle. This ties in with the fact that immigrants – and Latinos/as in LA are still considered as such no matter how long they have

⁸⁷This again evokes a similar imagery as in *The Miraculous Day*, the police being depicted as a violent and anonymous force.

⁸⁸Apart from receiving a name, his fond memories of purchasing his first car at Ermila's employer 20 years ago give him human qualities which distinguish him from the anonymous mass of machine-like officers.

⁸⁹Ethnic minorities were and are still under-represented within the police force in the US (Ashkenas and Park, 2015, n.p.), rendering this encounter with a Latino officer something special.

resided there – have been intentionally constructed as ‘disease (social or physical), varmints, or invaders’ (Chang, 2000, p. 2).⁹⁰

The QA is hence a mechanism of racialization and control (Brady, 2013, p. 185). As Foucault writes, disease can be used to create a disciplined society.⁹¹ The state creates an orderly binary of healthy/sick, dangerous/harmless. Plague is a mixture that threatens this ordering scheme and has to be contained (Foucault, 1979, p. 199).

In *Their Dogs*, this control mechanism takes on an exaggerated form though. Brady (2013, p. 183) ascribes the QA plotline a surreal quality because not even the LAPD would claim to eliminate rabies by shooting dogs with helicopters (2013, p. 183). The occurrences are not as exaggerated as one might think, though: curfews, a rabies outbreak and helicopter searches have happened throughout LA’s history, even if not all at once. I agree with Brady (2013) that this hyperbole is not a flaw of the author inserted for dramatization, but serves a narrative purpose. It is a metaphor, a stumbling block where the reader has to stop and think. It takes the city planners’ prejudices by the word and treats the inhabitants like rabid dogs that have to be controlled at every cost. By this, the dehumanization and internal colonization of the Mexican-American community in LA becomes visible and can no longer be neglected:

The QA plotline doesn’t just tie the novel to the Vietnam war or the long history of imperial conquest, it also underscores the effects of scalar processes. To reduce East Los Angeles to a blighted area entailed a further reduction and dehumanization of its inhabitants. (Brady, 2013, p. 183)

Yet again, the novel highlights and questions the construction of dichotomies and adds another dimension through metaphor, adding layers and challenging technocracy in de Certeau’s sense. Nonetheless, in my opinion this does not suffice to create the entries and openings necessary to creatively rework the binaries in a hybrid sense. The barrio inhabitants still remain trapped between freeways and roadblocks. Framing these obstacles as colonial continuities highlights and deforms the self/other dichotomy, but does not manage to unravel it.

⁹⁰That this rhetoric sadly is still alive today shows a tweet by president Trump where he refers to illegal immigrants as ‘infesting’ the US, a term usually used for pests (Simon, 2018, n.p.).

⁹¹Quarantine as a means of domination and control has occurred within US history as a colonizing force. In 1893, a leprosy quarantine was used to round up native Hawai’ians after having overthrown their queen (Borrell, 2018). Today, fear of leprosy and its higher incidence among immigrants has been used to foster anti-immigrants sentiments in the US (White, 2004).

6.3 ‘If You Don’t Own a Car, You’re Fucked’ – Transportation in East LA

Freeways and Quarantine Authority serve as tools of spatial limitation and control throughout the novel. *Their Dogs* hence defies the dominant narrative of freeways as places of leisurely cruising and comfortable job commutes (Avila, 1998, p. 16).⁹² Through Ermila, the novel clearly shows that this new mobility does not serve the barrio dwellers well:

Four freeways crossing and interchanging, looping and stacking in the Eastside, but if you didn’t own a car, you were fucked. Many were, and this is something Ermila always said in her head: You’re fucked. Though this morning she said, We’re fucked, as the men passed her window to gather on the corner for the Rapid Transit 26 bus where the women already waited, all ready. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 176)

The desolate bus system is mentioned again in Ermila’s plot line when she tries to get home from the beach after a no-show from Alfonso, which leads to her being caught in the QA road block lines (Viramontes, 2007, p. 288).⁹³ In Southern California, 88 percent of all bus riders are people of colour, women being their neediest users (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 3)⁹⁴. The LA public transportation system as depicted in the novel counteracts the progress myth the city tries to establish for itself:

In the streetcar, Grandfather appreciated the surge of electricity zooming through wire cables, the buzzed and clicking speed of God the puppeteer steering the passengers home safely. But in a modernizing mood, the city purchased the sluggish Rapid Transit buses, which became overcrowded, standing room only, murder on his feet. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 142)⁹⁵

Their Dogs contains various means of transportation, stressing that ‘spaces of driving and riding shape consciousness in myriad ways. The sense memories one has of a city street are not the same walking as they are driving or riding the bus’ (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 5). Hutchinson makes it clear that in LA, communities of colour have been neglected and forgotten by American transportation history (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 6). There has been a historic American hostility toward collective memory (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 5) which reinforces colonial notions of erasure and forgetting of Latino/a needs and memories.

⁹²In fact, freeway construction benefitted mostly White suburbs for whom access to work got easier through the new motorways (Estrada, 2005, p. 290).

⁹³Bus routes often disadvantage low-income communities and freeway construction displaces communities of colour (Wald, 2013, p. 71).

⁹⁴Hutchinson focuses mainly on the Black community in LA in her study, but her findings can easily be transferred to other communities of colour in the region.

⁹⁵Los Angeles had a street car system since 1901, which competed for space with cars from the 1920s on and was substituted by buses by 1963 due to car lobby interests (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 4). Interestingly, LA is planning a new street car line that is supposed to be operating in 2020 (streetcar.la, 2018).

Memory can hence be a tool of resistance for communities of colour (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 6). Viramontes' alternative depiction of LA transportation as exclusive, sluggish, and discriminating is hence an act of rebellion against colonization. The novel depicts LA as a transportation palimpsest in Hutchinson's sense: a palimpsest is a document written over many times, thus losing the meaning or integrity of the original. It

provides a means for 'understanding' and interrogating the contradictions of social history. [It] suggests the possibility of positioning history beyond the limitations and biases of Western teleology, challenging the notion that time progresses linearly. The Western belief that past, present, and future are distinct from one another is disrupted within the text of the unfinished palimpsest, whose past emerges from its future. (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 7)

Viramontes constructs and deconstructs this palimpsest in *Their Dogs*. Ermila gets stuck in the dismal bus system, Tranquilina and her parents get lost walking against the freeway walls, and Ana gets gridlocked in her car. The latter makes clear that in East LA, having a car does not imply freedom: in her search for her brother Ben, Ana takes a wrong freeway exit and gets lost 'in the maze of downtown streets' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 276). The city turns into a hostile labyrinth or 'no-man's-land' (p. 276), stressing the binaries that the city is apparently made of:

While highlighting the negative repercussions of freeway construction, her references to driving are minimal, de-emphasizing the centrality of this action, and implicitly combating an autopian vision. Viramontes's use of automotive movement consistently directs the reader's attention away from the anonymous freeway and toward the circumstances of the underclass at street level. (Muñoz, 2013, p. 34)

The car not only fails to fulfil its promise of freedom, it also serves as a symbol of male power and ultimately doom throughout the entire novel: Ermila is deflowered by Alfonso in his car, leaving her hurt and disappointed. The car driver Alfonso is also notoriously unreliable, forgetting to give the girls a ride, forcing them to use the equally unreliable public bus system. Nacho's car is almost as unreliable as Alfonso because of which he wants to take the bus home to Mexico. The wait for the bus will turn out to be his doom, caused by a failing car, as this enables Alfonso to catch up with him and beat him to death.⁹⁶

Nacho's and Turtle's fate are destined also by the appearance of another car: in Turtle's attempt to stay awake to be in time for Ray's job, she runs into Santos and his customized

⁹⁶Of course, the original cause for his death is his challenge of Alfonso's masculinity by locking him in the shed, which in the system of misunderstood masculinity and honour that operates in East LA forces Alfonso to take revenge. Hence it is Nacho's ignorance of the rules (that according to Turtle were made not by her and are abstrat), his being an outsider, that ultimately seals his fate.

car. Entering it for warmth, food, and drugs soon turn out to be her most fatal decision. Cars are hence vehicles of fate and doom, similar to the bulldozers or QA helicopters. First, the car is chased by police or QA helicopters, their capture only avoided due to a traffic accident that required the helicopter's deployment (Viramontes, 2007, p. 296). This scene evokes a typical Hollywood trope, the car chase. But usually, the heroes escape due to their skilfulness at driving or the lack of skill by the police, but here, the author chooses an anti-climatic ending by simply withdrawing the chaser, possibly mocking the conventions of the genre (Muñoz, 2013, p. 34).

This anti-climatic break of conventions is also at play when Turtle's death is revealed by Ray reading the police report of her death in the newspaper well before she dies in the novel (Viramontes, 2007, p. 258), which breaks up the chronology of the narrative and stresses the inevitability of her death: since there is no way to escape 'the rules' in this barrio, the reader is not even allowed to hope for a happy ending any more. The erasure of hope in the reader mirrors the hopelessness of the protagonists' situation, drawing the reader deeper into the novel. This also seems to support the idea that the novel expects the reader to be the agent of a possible change here: by telling the story of the barrio, it takes the reader into responsibility to carry this story on, against erasure and forgetting of the minority point of view. Arrival could hence be possible at least on an extradiegetic level, but in my opinion, this vague and spaceless relegation of responsibility to the reader would counteract the notion of emplacement needed for arrival.

It turns out that Santos was on his way to deliver the weapon for Alfonso's revenge with his car. Due to loyalty to her old gang mates, Turtle is now stuck not only in the car, but also in the spiral of male gang violence that will ultimately lead to her death.⁹⁷ According to Pattison (2014, p. 132), gangs in the novel on the one hand carve out spaces of agency, challenging institutions by sabotaging bulldozers and removing construction site marking flags, reclaiming the space that had been stolen from their community. On the other hand, they also use space to perpetrate violence on one another instead of challenging the origins of the spatial oppression that lead to gang wars in the first place, misdirecting their frustrations and continuing the acts of erasure. They hence counteract the efforts of memory reconstruction

⁹⁷That this loyalty has always been fragile and males are unreliable again becomes visible when after stabbing Nacho to death, her gang companions suddenly flee the scene and leave her behind at the mercy of the police helicopters.

pursued by women such as Chavela and Ermila, highlighting again the pervasive destructive forces of the patriarchy.

Means of transportation hence do not serve to escape restrictive barrio space throughout the novel, but in contrast rather seem to tighten the grip of inescapable dominant forces on the protagonists. Buses as unreliable time wasters and cars as vehicles of doom do not leave options to escape into alternative spaces of arrival, but tie the protagonists inescapably to the dominated barrio space.

6.4 Amputated Limbs and Legs Spread Apart: the City as Body

So far, I have shown how *Their Dogs* uses dogs, freeways, Quarantine Authority and transportation as metaphors to criticize the continuation of internal and external colonization practices to control and dominate city space in East LA. There is yet another prominent metaphor the novel uses to add layers of meaning to space. The city is a body: streets were like arteries connecting parts of the city before ‘the freeways amputated the streets into stumped dead ends, and the lives of the neighbors itched like phantom limbs’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 33).

There is a sense of missing, not only of phantom limb-streets, but also of people, especially the protagonists’ mothers⁹⁸. A bridge resembles an ugly bandage of cement (Viramontes, 2007, p. 82), again referencing to violence and injury. The barrio is, it seems, physically attacked by the freeway construction, they are a ‘dramatic case of urban erasure’ (Pattison, 2014, p. 129). In the novel, the barrio is not an infectious space of blight that has to be removed by the city planners (Villa, 2000, p. 43), but a healthy and living organism that is being destroyed by the freeways as by a cancer or a bullet. The barrio has a ‘living’, or ‘saved’ side and a dead side where the emptied houses will soon be prey to the construction bulldozers. The barrio is under ‘siege’ (Acuña, 1984) in a state of warfare. Again the freeways are linked to the invasion of the colonizers in the epigraph who came in ‘battle array’ (Viramontes, 2007, epigraph).

Turtle’s gang initiation scene, which starts at a freeway construction site, also uses the body metaphor:

⁹⁸Tranquilina’s mother is physically present, but so consumed by her faith that she does not notice Tranquilina’s inner distancing from faith.

But Turtle smelled the belly of the earth. Cool and dry, dark and rich, flat. Dead and alive. Another planet, a crater of another world mixed into her real world all at the same time. To the right and left of her, the walls resembled legs sprawled apart. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 225)

This short scene invites different interpretations. The trench is described as something ‘other’, of another world, at the same time dead and alive, that mixes with Turtle’s world. The borders of reality are suspended and something other can creep into it, a borderline place fit for a border-crossing initiation rite. This in turn also hints at an invasion of non-rational forces into East LA and into the narrative, a challenge of the existing order.

The earth metaphor appears again at other places in the novel: Tranquilina is raped by a rancher’s son-in-law in Cuero, Texas.⁹⁹ The rancher hits her with a shovel so that she flies face-down into the mud (Viramontes, 2007, p. 214). Her memory of the incident begins also with earth, ‘a flat land of hard-packed soil’ (p. 201), smelling of ‘freshly plowed earth’ (p. 201), and the assailant himself smells of earth as well (p. 214).¹⁰⁰ Huehls (2012, p. 163) claims that Tranquilina is connected to the earth, but has been betrayed by it and loses her ground and a piece of herself. According to him, Chicano nationalism ‘also uses the earth to assert a historical continuity between past and present that supersedes the colonial and imperial privatization of space that has occurred in the interim’ (Huehls, 2012, p. 163). Such a belief in ‘the history-transcending continuity of earth’ would suggest a belief in more collective forms of property, but like Tranquilina’s fidelity to earth fails, these expansive political goals would fail, too (Huehls, 2012, p. 163). In my opinion, this connection of earth with a criticism of Chicano nationalism is a bit far fetched, but the general impression that not even the earth is reliable any more remains.

The protagonists’ bodies are not only connected to earth, but through earth also to the city, which is imagined as a female body. The construction site smells like ‘the belly of the earth’, and the walls resemble legs sprawled apart. The wound in the earth is hence imagined as female – a belly, hinting at the fertile property of the female. While the sprawled legs could hint at birth, given the violation of the barrio through freeway construction and the described

⁹⁹Her parents fled from a land-owner in Mexico to the US, so the assault by another land-owner, this time in the US, perpetuates their suppression by the owning class.

¹⁰⁰In an interview, Viramontes notes that her protagonists began to resemble the four elements, associating Turtle with fire, Ermila with wind, Ana with water, and Tranquilina with earth (Olivas, 2007, n.p.). She herself admits that she does not know whether this association came through successfully, and I have to admit that I disagree. Turtle and Tranquilina could be connected with earth due to the above mentioned scenes, and Tranquilina could also be associated with wind due to her levitation.

sexual assaults of Turtle and Tranquilina in the novel, the metaphor is more likely pointing to rape and violation:

Viramontes personifies (or effeminizes) the urban landscape of East Los Angeles as a character and a body (similar to that of a woman) that needs to defend its physical territory from being geographically demolished in the name of 'progress'... (Heredia, 2013, p. 103)

Löw (2006, p. 129) argues that in general, gender is inscribed via body practices in the production of spaces. The body is 'staged, styled, genderized, permeated by ethnic constructions, thus becoming a highly precarious "building-block" of spaces' (Löw, 2006, p. 121). Whereas the male body is conceived as moving and active, the female symbolizes space. 'Like space, she is seen as passive and corporeal' (Löw, 2006, p. 126). It is no wonder then that the city is imagined as a female body here with spread legs, ready for the taking of the conquering bulldozers. This also makes clear why Turtle wants to pass as a man: while the male is active and allowed to direct his gaze, the female is being gazed upon. As Turtle's survival on the streets depends on her being invisible, it is easier to be a male that can pass through the streets inadvertently, in contrast to the female, and especially ethnic, body that is marked as other and thus highly visible (Löw, 2006, p. 126). When Turtle's male camouflage is discovered, she becomes vulnerable: after being caught at shoplifting with her brother, Turtle is stopped by the bagman near the 710 freeway overpass and being searched. When the bagman notices that he caught a girl instead of the expected boy, he starts groping her, pinching her breasts in disbelief:

Not one driver from all those cars zooming on the new freeway bridge, not one driver driving the overpass of the 710 freeway construction, not one stopped to protest, to scream, What the hell do you think you're doing, motherfucker, pinche puto, get your fingers off her tits, baboso! (Viramontes, 2007, p. 24)

The freeway means anonymity and invisibility here, drivers zoom past without even noticing the two pedestrians. On another level, the freeway is connected to sexual assault. Not only is one 'fucked' without a car (Viramontes, 2007, p. 176), as Ermila put it, but also the freeways themselves are connected to sexual oppression: 'The juxtaposition of the overpass and Turtle's body emphasizes that the city's transformation has victimized both Turtle and the community' (Blanco, 2016, p. 236).

Turtle's body is not only connected to the city through corporeal violations. Her fragmented identity and gender performance also mirror the fragmentation of geographical space (Galván, 2015, p. 94). Her body transgresses the borders of gender and gang territory and

acts violently and is hence seen as dangerous (Galván, 2015, p. 100). Galván (2015, p. 191) claims that by depicting Turtle as a 'malflora', the novel articulates a sense of difference and defiance. While this may be true, one can later see that Turtle's difference will ultimately be her doom as she does not fit the rules that she did not make. As a total 'other', neither domestic woman, nor fully cholo, she dies due to a lack of functioning social networks.

Through the connection of the female and earth there is yet another association that comes to mind: The Aztec goddess Tonantzin is an aspect of Coatlicue, a decapitated earth goddess.¹⁰¹ When her enemies slew her, her skin was transformed into fertile soil (Rebolledo, 1995, p. 50). The goddess, similar to the initiation scene, is ambivalent: she is a symbol of death and resurrection, with the power to create and devour life. Another entity, Teteoinnan, represented a complex of female earth deities associated with agriculture and sexual fertility. Earth was the place of birth and at the same time place of death (Smith, 1998, p. 216). The earth upheaved by freeway construction can hence mean fertility, but also destruction, again leaving the reader to imbue city space with meaning.¹⁰²

This totality of domination is broken up in one instance by an infiltration with magic realist allusions. Standing at a freeway bridge, a transitional place, Turtle meets the ubiquitous homeless woman who is one of the recurring connective story elements. Their meeting is purely accidental, 'a grievous breach' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 83), leaving both of them feared and startled. The incident is told at different times in the novel from their two viewpoints. The woman is afraid of the potentially violent cholo, raising a finger to her lips to 'hush any thoughts of him hurting her' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 83). She then follows a stray dog, maybe the one later found dead on the street, again connecting the narrative strands. The scene starts with Turtle contemplating her gang's old graffiti on the bridge, which are crossed out by the competing Lote M gang, 'all bad news' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 217). The street woman appears tick-tocking, startling Turtle because the sound of her chinking bottles reminds Turtle of the tick-tocking bones of Luis' stories: 'Check out the feet to see if she's for real, or a cemetery apparition' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 217). Again, reality is overlaid subtly with story, intertwining the narrative strands and fighting anonymity and rootlessness by ascribing

¹⁰¹The Virgen de Guadalupe's place of worship is based upon an ancient sanctuary for Tonantzin, so the Virgen can be seen as a continuation of the worship of Tonantzin, but dropping her powerful aspects and stressing only the female attributes such as purity, motherhood, and passivity (Rebolledo, 1995, 49, 53).

¹⁰²The earth topic re-emerges later when Turtle sleeps at a cemetery; I will come back to this.

the marginal with meaning.¹⁰³ Ghosts and phantoms haunt Mexican-American literature since the 19th century as persistent figurations of death: 'These figurative images mark the present absences, or absent presences, of people, places, and histories that urban development often obscures or wipes out' (Villa, R. H., 1999, p. 113).¹⁰⁴

Bags and bones is not the only story being told here. The novel picks up the habit of tagging by gangs again. In an earlier scene, it describes how the gang members record their names in the freshly laid cement of the freeway bridges and sidewalks 'to proclaim eternal allegiance to one another' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 163). The novel does not fail to make clear though that this attempt at eternity is destined for failure:

The boys would never know that in thirty years from tonight, the tags would crack from the earthquakes, the weight of vehicles, the force of muscular tree roots, from the trampling of passersby, become as faded as ancient engravings, as old as the concrete itself, as cold and clammy as a morgue table. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 164)

Their tags are described as 'engravings', conjuring the image of a gravestone, especially as Turtle in the next scene seeks shelter in the crypt of a cemetery, where she sleeps under an engraving reading 'Asleep in Jesus, Blessed Sleep' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 236). Not only the engravings are fading, but also the concrete and hence the freeways they are etched into, alluding to the transitoriness of this intrusive power symbol of colonization. The Lote M vatos also announce 'erasure' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 217), an erasure that becomes all too literal when read together with the allusions to death within the scene. It seems that the gang wars team up with freeway construction to erase the barrio and its memories: 'Perforating new conquerors over old ones with a blunt hammer...' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 217). Again, the novel alludes to the colonization of the barrio through internal and external forces. This reading of the tags as omens of death and erasure almost obscures another, in general more popular interpretation of gang tags: they are a 'visual system developed by Mexican American graffiti writers themselves to keep a public check on the abuse of power in the streets' (Sanchez-Tranquilino, 1995, p. 58), located on the periphery of gang territory to mark its borders. The abbreviations and slang are only legible to the initiated, the gang members, and not destined for the public. Turtle is such an insider, she 'could read, Turtle wasn't stupid' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 217). But also to the outsider, the tags leave a message.

¹⁰³The baglady receives even more story throughout the novel. Ben invents a whole biography for her in a writing flash, alluding to the possibility that she could in fact be his disappeared mother (Viramontes, 2007, p. 121).

¹⁰⁴Viramontes herself cites Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (2017 [1955]) as one of her inspirations, being a novel 'full of ghosts in a landscape of spiritual and historical loss' (Kevane and Viramontes, 2006, p. 6).

Even if they are to be erased by time and erosion, they guarantee an otherwise impossible visibility:

...the freeway removes the driver from social contact. For many, the freeway is a safe passage through the ghetto or the barrio that (by design, many would argue) maintains the social distance between separate and unequal worlds. Even so, graffiti works against the 'out of sight, out of mind' principle of urban design. It is a highly visible reminder of the Other – inner city Chicano and Black youth. (Avila, 1998, p. 25)

This marking of space becomes necessary as developers cut public space, for example through freeway construction. The tags become a way to divide what little space is left and 'to signal and monitor visually the social dynamics of power through coded symbology in the economy of restricted public space' (Sanchez-Tranquilino, 1995, p. 77). Gang culture subsequently emerges due to external pressure and public neglect, as a, if ill-directed, attempt at counteracting power imbalances. Placing tags in the other gang's territory is a warning, giving the threatened group time to prepare and eventually avoid a fight (Sanchez-Tranquilino, 1995, p. 77). This reading is not available in *Their Dogs*, though. The novel only conveys the threatening meaning of the tags to underline its message of the critique of the existing power structures.

The freeways are thus connected through metaphor to the female body and death by various means. These added layers of meaning deconstruct the dominant narrative of the freeway as symbols of progress and unmantle the real meaning they have for the barrio community. What the metaphors do not manage though is to break or redirect the power the freeways still are imbued with. Whereas they are stripped of their nimbus and myth, they are attributed with even more power and aloofness by being connected to rape and death. As they block and segregate physical city space, they also hamper the protagonists' attempts at arrival by disordering their known space until no opportunity for emplacement is left any more.

6.5 Shifting Grounds: Homes in East LA

As we have seen, the freeways are a threat to barrio space, they destroy public life and homes in a very physical sense. This loss is continued in the home setting: freeway construction does not only mean the erasure of homes like the one of the elderly neighbour Chavela, but loss is continued within the home or family sphere, leaving the protagonists' houses devoid

of personal connections that would make them a home.¹⁰⁵ According to Riebová (2016, p. 510), the protagonists suffer the most due to having lost their mother (in Tranquilina's case to religion) and lack a safe maternal space to transmit cultural memory. This is not the only kind of personal loss, though. Whereas Ermila has lost her parents to some revolutionary war in Guatemala, Mousie misses her brother who returned from the Vietnam war in so many pieces that her mother opted for cremation in spite of Catholic practice (Viramontes, 2007, p. 60), causing a moral crisis for Mousie.¹⁰⁶ Rini's house gave her the creeps 'until her mother's boyfriend, Jan, came into the picture. He was creepier than the house' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 56). Ana and Ben have lost their mother who fled an ill-tempered husband, leaving the children at his mercy. Ben's single home is no home either, just a place to weather out his migraine bouts. Tranquilina does not have a home, only a mission, her father dies and her mother is absorbed in her faith. Turtle is the protagonist who has lost most: her brother is missing in Vietnam, she has lost contact to her gang, her father disappears (Viramontes, 2007, p. 154),¹⁰⁷ and her mother moves out of state, leaving her alone and without a home.

The novel makes clear though that freeway construction is not the only way in which coloniality is perpetuated way into the 20th century. One might think that the protagonists' homes can provide a shelter from the power inequalities of the outside world. Similar to Ben's car accident scene though, patriarchal rule continues external oppression into the internal domestic sphere, continuing the asymmetrical power structures so characteristic for colonial continuities.

I will start with Ermila's home, as the novel starts with her. Like the other main protagonists', Ermila's story is one of rootlessness, loss, and erasure. She comes to the home of her maternal grandparents at the age of four, having spent the years before at different foster

¹⁰⁵This connection of landscape and loss is a common feature of early Chicana and Hispana writings of the Southwest, as Diana Tey Rebolledo exemplifies in her essay 'Tradition and Mythology' (1987). *Their Dogs* picks up several of these Southwestern female writing traditions, among them the desert, plants and cacti as figurative symbols of female strength (Rebolledo, 1987, p. 99), the city as a woman (p. 109), and men as destroyers and women as preservers of landscape (p. 105).

¹⁰⁶The novel mentions several war victims: Turtle's brother Luis and Mousie's brother are victims of the Vietnam war, Turtle's uncle Angel is a Korea War Veteran, Japanese-American shop owner Ray had been interned at Manzanar during World War II. The novel hence traces another colonial continuity where ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected not only by the internal battles in the barrio, but also by the external wars of the US, some of which (such as the Vietnam war) are based on colonial legacies. As mentioned in chapter 2, ethnic minorities had also disproportionately high death tolls to carry in these wars: during the Vietnam war, the percentage of Mexican American was 10%, but they accounted for 20% of killed soldiers (León and Griswold del Castillo, Richard, 2006, p. 166).

¹⁰⁷Her father might be dead or in prison as a letter whose content is never revealed suggests.

families. Her parents vanish somewhere in a Central American war where they fought as ‘communists’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 58). Grandmother takes over custody against the will of Grandfather who does not want to be reminded of the loss of his daughter by this granddaughter, yelling ‘...hide her so that I don’t have to see her! His graying mustache bristled like the spine needles of the opuntia cactus’ (p. 70).¹⁰⁸ Thus, her life starts with a huge gap and a feeling of not being welcome in what becomes her only possibility of a home. She has to negotiate belonging and non-belonging repeatedly, as her status floats between wanted and unwanted, ‘our flesh and blood’ (p. 70) and a dangerous, uncontrollable female with uncontrollable indigenous hair (p. 67) that will just leave and hurt the grandparents again.

Home has the reputation of being a shelter from the outside world, a protective private space that one can form to one’s own desire (Gewecke, 2013c, pp. 401–402). This promise certainly does not turn out to be true for the protagonists of *Their Dogs*, who similar to Amalia in *The Miraculous Day* live in houses that do not deserve the label ‘home’, a common trait in Chicana literature:

Indeed, for feminist writers the house is no longer perceived as a symbol of security but as a metaphor for prison. It has become a claustrophobic space which enslaves and imprisons women within its four walls. (Herrera-Sobek, 1995, p. 165)

Crucial scenes of Ermila’s negotiation of home take place in the kitchen. If home traditionally is seen as the realm of the female, then the kitchen is the epitome of this female realm, a place where the family meets and interacts (Rebolledo, 1995, p. 202). Household work is filled with associations of nurture (Anderson, 1997, p. 138), and in her own brusque way, Grandmother tries to fulfil this role: she prepares hot oatmeal for the newly arrived child.¹⁰⁹ This female nurturing is destroyed by Grandfather’s male rage, who intrudes into the kitchen (Viramontes, 2007, p. 70).

Ermila’s grandmother’s kitchen is described in close detail in another scene: there are lard-fried potatoes for burritos and hot oatmeal, details and food that might evoke cozyness,

¹⁰⁸Cacti are a recurring trope in the novel. Apart from grandfather’s moustache, a cactus deterred Tranquilina’s birth, and the nopales in Turtle’s garden are the only thing that thrives there. The cactus metaphor is a recurrent one in Chicana literature, meaning strength, the ability to strive in hostile circumstances, and hinting at the fact that Chicanos/as have always been autochthonous to the US-America Southwest, like the cactus who is adapted to the climate, in contrast to the imported crop plants the Anglos tried to grow there instead of the traditional extensive beef economy (Rebolledo, 1987, p. 99).

¹⁰⁹The importance of a hot breakfast to her is revealed later when she shows her incomprehension towards cold cornflakes as a school breakfast: ‘Don’t these huercos have hot oats at home?’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 130).

warmth and familiarity in another setting (Viramontes, 2007, p. 179). But to Ermila, it is only a form of suffocating control, as in this scene she accuses grandmother to have put a guard dog in her room. To distance herself from her grandparents, she rejects the warm oatmeal and pours herself cornflakes with cold milk, a typical American breakfast, pretending to relish it although the flakes are stale. The kitchen is hence a place of complicated mutual cultural negotiations:

The ground had shifted under them and the earth had breached, creating a rift between the two women that began, one could safely say, at puberty, but truly began ten years before when Ermila first arrived on their doorstep. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 179)

As in *The Miraculous Day*, the kitchens described in the novel are scenes of conflict and/or unspoken disagreement. This confirms Kaup's assessment that for Latinas, a house is not necessarily a space of imagination and memory, but of confinement, a disappointment of the American dream, an unpoetic place of domestic duties (Kaup, 1997, p. 386).¹¹⁰

The earthquake trope is picked up again when grandfather sweeps up some glass that he thinks broke to another 'earthquake condenado' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 180), although Nacho rather attributes it to a helicopter sweep. As in *The Miraculous Day*, the outside world intrudes into the seemingly safe space of the home through earthquake or earthquake-like features. Additionally, Ermila finds a dog in her room that brings the disease- and colonizer-narrative right into her home. Ermila suspects that Grandmother put it there to protect her and control her every move (Viramontes, 2007, p. 179), but somehow the whole encounter seems surreal which enhances the supernatural implications of the novel.

It is a 'phantom and figural motif, a signal of the ongoing violence of imperial structures whether they be freeway stacks or rabbies [sic] quarantines or rigged ships' (Brady, 2013, p. 186). The dog can be seen as rupture that haunts and troubles linear time (Brady, 2013, p. 186), challenging the ordering processes of the city officials' freeway construction. Metaphor and story once again serve as a means to break up colonizing binaries and let emerge narrative of the other, entries where imagination can compete with factual rigidity. These ruptures remain imaginary though, there are gaps and openings, but they do not provide a possibility of insertion into space necessary for arrival.

Also for Tranquilina, the kitchen plays a crucial role in negotiating home. Tranquilina and her mother prepare a stew for their parishioners in their mission/home. Their mission hence

¹¹⁰In her analysis, Kaup focuses on Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (2006 [1984]), but her conclusions can be transferred to other literary works as well.

feeds body and soul, again evoking care and nurture, the realm of the female, as is stressed by the absence of Tranquilina's papá Tomás, who 'is resting' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 45). In contrast, the women are constantly working, 'Making a meal out of nothing, like loaves and fishes' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 47). The creative process of cooking is evoked again one page later when in a flashback the baby in Mamá's womb that will turn out to be Tranquilina moves in the 'boiling liquid of her mother's womb' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 48) like the cocido on the stove. At a first glance, this scene conveys a strong bond between mother and daughter, as the mother again tells the story how she and Papá Tomás escaped serfdom in Mexico and fled to the United States on foot, teaching her that her family stands in the tradition of the Aztec voladores.¹¹¹ But at the same time, due to the miracle of deterred birth, Mamá promises the baby to god, omitting the Aztec affiliation and submitting her to Christian faith. What turns this promise problematic and eliminates the female bonds of the scene is that Tranquilina apparently has lost her faith after she was raped in Cuero, Texas, and God would not protect her.¹¹² Her legacy turns into a burden to her, she is filled by a 'vast empty room of doubt' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 48), fearing that God is extinct to her.¹¹³

When Mamá promises her unborn child to God, she attributes her survival to an external, foreign force instead of trusting her own resources or hers and Papá's indigenous legacy that equally helped them escape. The trust in a distant god cuts Tranquilina off from her own resources. She only rediscovers these in the final scene when she recurs to her Aztec legacy of levitation. In the instance in the kitchen however, faith serves as a tool of male dominance which invades the female space. It hinders the continuity of a female social network and undercuts women's agency.

The other kitchen scene that involves Tranquilina is connected to Ben and Ana. Tranquilina helps Ana to clean up her brother's apartment that is in a state of neglect after another one of his mental breakdowns. The two women are the active part here, the man, Ben, is

¹¹¹Mamá almost gives birth in the desert, only deterred by a medicinal cactus and Papá's ability to fly and find the way out of the desert.

¹¹²This incidence made the family return to known ground, namely East LA which then turns out not to be familiar any more.

¹¹³Shortly after the kitchen episode, papá Tomás dies during service. Mamá does not even seem to notice as she is busy with the conversion of the baglady. Later that day, Mamá leaves the house to preach outside, neglecting her daughter's grief. Belief and lack of belief have brought distance and incomprehension between mother and daughter, Tranquilina has lost her mother to faith. The weather has turned from Pangaea clouds (Viramontes, 2007, p. 202) to an all-encompassing fog, and the chatter and jokes about miracles and legacy have turned into an eerie silence (p. 212). As in *The Miraculous Day*, Christian faith is not supportive in solving the protagonists' problems. But unlike Amalia, Tranquilina does not find her strength in the Virgin or another Christian symbol.

paralysed by his inability to meet societal expectations and the resulting mental and physical illness¹¹⁴. While Ana is cleaning the overflown toilet Tranquilina can be found in the kitchen, 'her fingers a frenzy of action' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 208). Again, motion is used to avoid thoughts, emotions, or interpersonal complications.

The scene is interwoven with Tranquilina's memories of the rape in Cuero, and with her working the mission kitchen after her father's death to keep busy. The kitchen is no female space of nurture here, but a failed attempt at avoiding memory. In contrast to Chavela's memories which work as a resistive tool against dominant perceptions, memory starts to threaten Tranquilina's agency. The repression of trauma hence sabotages memory's resistive aspects, rendering the kitchen a space of loneliness and disconnectedness, letting Tranquilina being overruled by dominant space instead of offering an escape from it which might facilitate arrival.

Heredia argues that whereas Tranquilina loses her faith in organized religion, she starts to believe in the power of individuals to control their destiny (Heredia, 2013, p. 112). Instead of the support of a family network, Tranquilina creates a female bond to Ana (p. 112), similar to Ermila who resorts to her friends for social bonds as family continually fails.¹¹⁵

For Turtle as well, the house and especially the kitchen are not a place of home and belonging, but of oppression and exclusion. In her parents' kitchen, Turtle's aunt Mercie talks about how another woman shaved her head and 'that was the beginning of things going bad' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 167) and her turning into a malflora, a term for a misbehaving female, but also a lesbian, predicting and foreshadowing Turtle's violent ending. On the one hand, the aunt sets Turtle on centre stage by highlighting her devious looks, on the other hand, she renders her invisible by ignoring her presence and excludes her from the female family ties

¹¹⁴The accident that caused his physical problems and migraine originates in Ben's attempt to outrun his father's expectations of self-reliance.

¹¹⁵Ben is lacking such support apart from his sister. To him, home has never existed after his mother left the family. He, too, is deceived by God, 'God's little eyes' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 106) cannot protect him from his violent father, nor can moving out protect him from his own mental illness. After his breakdown, he is taken away by the Psychiatric Emergency Team, they 'took him howling like a scribble off the page of white paper' (p. 120). In the clinic, sharp pencils, his only 'weapons' (p. 120), are forbidden, he is rendered speechless, writing being his means of obtaining a voice or giving a voice to characters (such as the baglady whose story he invents, p. 121). Again, story is the only means of attributing memory and agency to the persons in the barrio. Similarly, unexpected beauty invades the cleaning scene of Ben's home: when opening the curtains, 'a thousand little sailboats' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 210) cascade down a faded, blue ocean of a curtain. Their sails snap like the tarps of the bulldozers and hence the colonizers' ships, but here, it does not seem to indicate continuity of oppression, but rather a setting free, an invasion not by colonizers, but by creativity and imagination in an unexpected instant. The ship metaphor here is inverted to again hint at the possibility of 'superstitions' (Certeau, 1988, p. 106) that can break up dominated space.

(Blanco, 2016, p. 240). This time, the invisibility is involuntary, though, in contrast to Turtle on the streets who needs invisibility for survival. In another scene, the reader learns that cutting her hair was not Turtle's decision: Amá pulls her hair to punish Turtle's male clothing and 'erasure of breasts' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 25). To stop this and to erase the last traces of her femininity, Luis cuts her hair. Turtle hence shifts her allegiance from her family, who is not able to acknowledge her true, gender non-conforming self, to her brother and his gang, a male world where as we will see later, she does not fit in either.

For Turtle, space is always connected to how her body is read: she is excluded from home because her body is read as 'too male', and her street survival depends on a male reading of her body.¹¹⁶ Her scenes are hence scenes where inanimate places become related to bodies: in her gang initiation, the freeway trenches resemble a female body, and her house is equalled to its inhabitants, both providing not nurture and security, but embodying neglect and danger:

Amá was part of the house carelessly repaired with cardboard and duct tape like her cracked windows. Frank was part of the house, a loose, exposed wire ready to electrocute anyone who touched him. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 162)

This house and the garden evoke haunting memories in Turtle. The garden in general is a place of memory that opens up 'vistas of one's memory by engaging in evocations of the past' (Casey, 1987, p. 208). In *Their Dogs*, these memories entail loss, damage, and despair. Turtle remembers a garden party of her childhood where, after some dancing and too much booze, two women begin fighting over Turtle's uncle Angel, a Korean War veteran and ex-convict:

Rosie losing and then Mercy losing, and Turtle felt she watched a mighty building blazing, forks of flames bursting from the windows, the powerful heat forcing the walls to collapse onto itself. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 170)

Here, it is not a city that is being compared to a body, but a person is compared to a building, Mercy's rage being just as consuming to her as the freeways are to the barrio. In another fight scene in Turtle's garden, men are compared not to structures, but to dinosaurs: Turtle's father and uncle Angel 'thumped their cold reptile chests and tangled their arms and stomped on the nopales like two huge dinosaurs destroying a city' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 162). The

¹¹⁶Critics have connected her body with her identity in other ways as well: her nickname suggests that she has a safe shell she can withdraw to, she carries her home on her back rather than having left it behind, referring here to Anzaldúa (Blanco, 2016, p. 242). Cuevas (2014, p. 40) in contrast refers to Moraga's *Loving in the War Years* (2005) who thinks of the turtle as exposing a soft and vulnerable underside, highlighting Turtle's vulnerability as a queer subject.

image of reptiles destroying a city evokes images of Godzilla, conjuring a movie trope that adds another layer of story to the narrative, further complicating the layers of memory that are haunting Turtle. The scene is tied to another scene with its mention of dinosaurs:

...Turtle stared at the incomplete onramp bridge being constructed above the boundary of the Chinese cemetery. It resembled a mangled limb, as if a monster dinosaur had bitten into it, and a mesh of electrical wires hung out of broken cement like arteries dripping mounds of heaved-up rubble. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 169)

Several metaphors hence yet again tie destructive forces, this time of Turtle's home, to freeway construction: the men who rage like dinosaurs are equally detrimental as the bulldozer dinosaurs, the house is as mangled as the incomplete onramp bridge which resembles a limb. Again, external neo-colonial forces are interlaced with internal patriarchal powers of oppression which are themselves remnants of the Spanish conquest, intertwining several layers of (neo-)colonial rule which hinders the barrio dwellers and women in particular from appropriating space. Instead of being a place of nurture, gardens are torn apart by male dinosaurs.

When the men destroy the nopales, they destroy living things, the nopales being 'the only thing that thrived in their small rented house on First Street' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 161). As Turtle thinks that she and the nopales have something in common (p. 171) (both being survivors in a hostile environment), their destruction gains even more metaphorical qualities. Cacti are a recurring image in *Their Dogs*: Tranquilina's mother chews them as medicine to avoid premature birth on their flight to the US (p. 46), Turtle's spiky head resembles a cactus, and Grandfather's moustache brittles like the needles of the opuntia cactus (p. 70). The nopales are hence similar to Amalia's feeble rosebush which withstands the drought. But where *The Miraculous Day's* metaphorical flower of choice is the marianic rose, *Their Dogs* evokes the nopal, a plant autochthonous to the Southwest, so resilient they thrive in the desert like the novels' protagonists, who, autochthonous to LA, survive the concrete jungle.

In general, the garden is imagined as the realm of the female, a place of growing and nourishment opposed to male destruction. In Lorna Dee Cervantes' poem 'Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway' (2005, pp. 116–118), the narrator waters her Grandma's geraniums under the shadow of the freeway, emphasising female heritage against the freeway 'blind worm' (Cervantes, 2005, p. 116). Mexican-American gardens in general are envisaged as small garden Edens (Crawford, 1999, p. 121), evoking Foucault's notion of the garden as 'a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia' (Foucault, 1986, p. 26). This image of the garden

as lush and nurturing in *Their Dogs* is, however, only fulfilled by Chavela's garden, which offers a mythical union of women with the earth which nourishes and renews existence (Riebová, 2016, p. 507).

Again, the garden is tied to memory, as the 'ancient deep-rooted hibiscus shrubs' and lemon tree personify the barrio's memory and the capacity to resist (Riebová, 2016, p. 507). This capacity to resist is to be destroyed by bulldozers soon, though. Hence, Chavela turns to Ermila's memory for persistence. Whereas Chavela's garden is a lush depiction of the ability of the female to grow, and Turtle's garden the example how this growing ability can be destroyed by patriarchal and colonial forces, Grandfather's garden with its orderly toolshed and perfectly mowed, but sterile lawn is an impersonation of the male ordering impetus and dominance, prolonging the city planner's grid onto the front lawn.¹¹⁷

The negotiation of home and garden is also crucial in another scene: the McBride boys do not occupy public space either working or hanging out on the streets, but gather on the porch of Alfonso's home, living down 'some stabbing humiliation' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 304) in a space traditionally coded feminine, symbolizing 'the social emasculation of vato loco's identity' (Galván, 2015, p. 174). Turtle in contrast is female, but lives on the street, a place traditionally coded masculine, once again challenging gender roles. She seems to have more stamina than the other McBride Boys combined.

Turtle's garden is place of yet another key scene in the novel: in another flashback, she wants to camp in the garden in a makeshift tent with Luis, but her brother is too withdrawn with his gang to participate in such childish endeavours. Alone in the garden at night, 'no one' calls 'Turtle ticktock' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 171), evoking Luis' story of the bones ticktocking beneath the freeway. The shadows of the trees resemble 'La Llorona's long fingers', and in the end, Turtle is sucked up by a mysterious force:

The siren was unending and operatic. Turtle felt her bare feet begin to lift like the corners of the tent sheets just a few minutes ago. She held fast to the doorknob, her whole body lifting by the coalescing force of the siren's vacuous mouth. She held on for dear life, not wanting to be drawn in by the shrill, but the ribbon of its wailing was wrapping around her ankles and lifting. The siren's mouth opened wider and Turtle felt her sweaty fingers slipping from their clasp, suctioned at once and forever into the prolonged length of the street's mournful plea. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 172)

¹¹⁷It turns out later that his toolshed is rotten from within, maybe being an allusion that this orderly world is not to be had without its other side.

Whereas Tranquilina's levitation in the end scene is described as a voluntary act of empowerment, Turtle is raised here against her will by an uncanny force. The wailing and the mention of La Llorona just one page earlier let one think that the 'coalescing force' is indeed La Llorona stealing one of her lost children. The city with its sirens sucks Turtle in and does not let go of her. Due to Turtle trying to evade the uncanny voice by going inside but not being able to because Amá locked the door, critics have equalled Amá (and the homeless woman that might be Bens' and Ana's mother) to La Llorona who also has abandoned her children (Galván, 2015, p. 119). The wailing is seen here as a path of active resistance, 'using her voice to shout back at the aggressors' (Galván, 2015, p. 120):

The intertwining of La Llorona's story with the ghost bones under the freeway construction, offers an alternate interpretation of the legend by calling attention to the institutional forces that actively seek to segregate and dispose of communities in the name of progress and modernity. (Galván, 2015, p. 125)

This reinterpretation of the wailing as a shouting back is a common reinterpretation in Chicana feminism¹¹⁸, turning her from a figure of maternal betrayal into a resistant, culturally specific maternal figure (Carbonell, 1999, p. 54). La Llorona is connected to the Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl, an aspect of Coatlicue who, like La Llorona, wanders in a white attire at night, wailing for her lost children (Carbonell, 1999, p. 53). This Cihuacoatl is an ambivalent figure, an earth goddess of both war and birth. The Aztecs and subsequently the Spaniards stripped her of her life-giving powers, associating her with La Llorona and La Malinche (Carbonell, 1999, p. 55). A reading of La Llorona as associated with female agency hence reconnects her to the ambivalences of Coatlicue and Cihuacoatl (Carbonell, 1999, p. 56). Through her connection with La Malinche, she is also a 'mujer andariega' (Rebolledo, 1995, p. 183), a loose-going woman defying gender roles and norms. She is hence connected to the figure of Turtle as a woman who defies gender norms. Her body represents the fragmentation of family relationships, the loss of historical knowledge and alienation of people within urban space (Galván, 2015, p. 87).

In contrast to *The Miraculous Day*, Turtle's garden is no intermediate space between home sphere and public world, but still belongs to the private, female realm of the house and home. It is a transitional and liminal space, but mainly between reality and myth, dissolving the borders between fact and fiction and allowing order-dissolving superstitions to enter dominated space. The emergence of La Llorona in the garden can be interpreted as a sign of persistence, a hint that Mexican-American heritage cannot be erased from LA city space, but

¹¹⁸See e.g. 'Woman Hollering Creek' (1992, pp. 43–56) by Sandra Cisneros.

will continue to haunt people's memories despite Anglo-American planners' and Mexican-American machismo's efforts to divide, conquer, and exploit that space. Mostly, the wailing has been interpreted as a sign of resistance because in these dire living circumstances, even to remain, stay and not calmly disappear are challenging acts. Nonetheless, the novel also makes it clear that voiceful complaint and persistence through story, myth, and metaphor is the only way of agency left to the protagonists. In the general spatial setting of East LA in the 1960s, fictional space is the only realm of proper creative opportunities left, which leaves arrival to be a fiction as well.

6.6 Concha's Beauty Salon, Ray's Friendly Shop, and Chavela's Kitchen: Alternative Homes?

As Ermila feels she is either rejected or constrained at her grandparents' home, she resorts to other places as places of security, calmness, and belonging. In her childhood, one of these places was the home, and again especially the kitchen, of an elderly neighbour, Chavela Ybarra. I have discussed this place in the previous subchapter with a focus on freeways, memory, and erasure, but now I will revisit it with a focus on home. Chavela's small blue house is one of the connective elements in the narrative that ties the trajectories of the four main protagonists together: Ermila and Turtle share fond childhood memories about how Chavela always welcomed them to her house, providing them with home-made lemonade.

Chavela's small blue house can be said to be the only real home depicted in the novel where the protagonists feel welcome, at least as children. It is telling that this only true home will be torn down for freeway construction soon. At the beginning of the novel, the house is dishevelled yet, filled with cardboard boxes and notes that are to remind her about what not to forget before moving (Viramontes, 2007, p. 6). Place is closely connected to memory here, and when the place is erased, the memory is threatened with erasure as well. Freeway construction and the ensuing destruction are hence the death of memory and community:

She looked out at her own house and all the other houses on Grandfather's side of First Street; the houses on the saved side were bright and ornamental like the big Easter eggs on display at the Segunda store counter. Some of the houses had cluttered porches with hanging plants or yards with makeshift gardens; others had parked cars on their front lawns. Some built wrought-iron grate fences, while others had drowsy curtains swaying in wide-open windows. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 12)

This scene reminisces what Villa (2000, p. 8) describes as *barriological* practices, an appropriation of space to one's own needs, but city redevelopment does not care about these attempts of 'heroic bricolage' (Crawford, 1999, p. 117), it just sees a socially problematic area to be improved. At first glance, then, the *barrio*'s inhabitants have nothing to oppose against this social and physical erasure, they and their memories disappear together with the blue house (Viramontes, 2007, p. 15). The novel challenges this erasure by re-telling a different version of East LA's spatial restructuring, allowing for alternative viewpoints apart from the official one and contributing to a multitude of voices from which the reader can mend his/her own view of East LA. This emphasis on story can also be found within the novel, when Ermila meets her friends:

The only things they cherished, their only private property, were the stories they continued to create and re-create in a world which only gave them one to tell. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 62)

The four girls find places for their stories and places from where to tell their stories, an anchor within the changing and shifting geography of the *barrio*. Ermila and her three girlfriends meet to gossip in a fastfood restaurant, escaping the dullness of their homes and exchanging stories (Viramontes, 2007, p. 50). Public places hence serve as substitute homes as the real ones are not providing the private space they need. The restaurant faces Whittier boulevard where they can witness one of the typical *barrio* activities, cruising with customized lowrider cars.

Junkyard parts welded into beloved showboats, dismembered then lovingly remembered part by screw by bolt by piston, into another wholeness, into an art so hot, it ignited fire. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 51)

This is one of few instances in the story where out of something dismembered, a new wholeness is able to appear, even if this may only be true for cars. Cars as well as the girls manage to appropriate place, one of the few instances where *barriological* (Villa, 2000, p. 17) practices seem to be successful in the novel, but the rabies curfew eliminates this successful expression of individuality by leaving Whittier Boulevard deserted (Viramontes, 2007, p. 288). Where the residents have managed to create spaces of arrival within the novel these are immediately closed down again by official entities as symbolized by bulldozers and the QA, showing the pervasiveness of colonial rule.

Apart from Chavela's home and the fastfood restaurant, the semi-public space of Concha's beauty salon is used by the girls as another anchoring space. What makes the place seem 'both strange and disturbing' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 184) though is that Concha only had to

retreat to the beauty salon because she put up her well-going restaurant to bail her unfaithful lover out of jail (p. 185). The restaurant as a community anchor where Chicano/a celebrities once met hence does not exist any more (p. 189).¹¹⁹ For the girls, it is a meeting point of last resort where their parents, who despise Concha due to her love error, will not suspect them. They meet there to solve the problem of Rini's step-father Jan who is after her. As a revenge, they agree to damage Jan's car. With acetone nail polish remover and dishwashing steel pads, they circle the car:

Ermila reveled in becoming one of the winds of the four directions and just for a moment, a fleeting moment at that, she experienced a larger-than-life ability to soar over just about anything. (Viramontes, 2007, pp. 198–199)

They scratch a gang tag into the polish, which will camouflage their authorship and block any attempts at revenge as the opponent is stronger and at the same time not specifiable. Here as with Tranquilina, taking up agency and power leads to a sense of elevation or even physical levitation. As the girls cannot rely on any adults to solve their problems, they take on agency on their own. As there is no family to be relied on, their all-girl quartet is their surrogate family or support network. Friendship and storytelling are hence a substitute for the lack of safe places within the barrio: 'With conviction, they designed escape routes, rehearsed their breakout and hurled their futures over the roadblocks of their marooned existence' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 62). In general, throughout the novel, males are depicted as dominant and non-supportive, and girls or women have to resort to their own resources and each other to encounter their hegemony. The girls resort here to typically female tools, namely beauty and kitchen products, to harm an object typically coveted by males – the customized car. Again, as with Ben's accident, the car is associated with destruction, and here also with (male) dominance, continuing the negative impacts of colonization from the lines self/other to the lines of male/female, making patriarchy one of the detrimental effects of the ongoing traces of colonial rule.

Throughout the novel, there are also other 'place-based interpersonal networks' (Villa, 2000, p. 12) within the barrio, but these are destroyed by freeway construction and other turmoils: Chavela, a peaceful anchor for the children in the neighbourhood, is displaced and her house torn down due to freeway construction. Obdulio, the butcher who always had some spare

¹¹⁹The walls of the restaurant were adorned with photos of famous customers, among them María Felix and Dolores del Río. As in *The Miraculous Day*, these movie stars stand for a nostalgia of a golden past or other reality that is unable to be retrieved. On one photo, Concha herself looks radiant, like a full and strong woman wrestler. Maybe this is why she is despised by the community now, because she made her own choices (even if she failed), inappropriate for a woman.

meat for Tranquilina's mission work, returns home to Mexico because he witnessed Ben's accident and became homesick. Ray, the Japanese-American store owner, offers Turtle a job which she will never start because she gets shot to death shortly before her first shift.¹²⁰ Ray and his store are one of the constants in the neighbourhood, a place that evokes childhood memories and stands for continuity in the face of ongoing alteration and destruction (Viramontes, 2007, p. 254), offering pickled pig's feet no matter if one is eight or eighteen (Viramontes, 2007, p. 18).

Maybe these childhood memories of comfort and food lure Turtle to the shop. This scene shows how crucial stable locations (and the people who keep them stable) can be for a functioning social structure, and if it is only the continuity of a corner store rooted in communal memory. This is what makes the forced destruction of the neighbourhood so catastrophic for its people: with the places, it is also the memory that is torn, blurred, and erased, causing a community without a common memory to which refer to, turning them all from a related community into single jungle survivors that have to fight alone for their own survival. Ray's job offer could be seen as the attempt to tie a link back to these memories, to fight erasure. But his attempt is destroyed by violence, caused by a chain of events: Turtle's lack of ties forces her to stay on the streets during the night, which makes her vulnerable to the coyness of Santos' car. The negative and false loyalty and pride structures of the gang then are her doom. The gang also stands for 'not forgetting', but here in a negative sense of 'not forgiving', and instead of reinforcing supportive ties, the gang only holds liabilities and commitment as important without paying back in forgiveness, the positive kind of forgetting that made Ray keep on going after the humiliation of the war concentration camp. Ray's store may hence be a place to uphold memory but it stands alone in the sliding local and social structures of the torn barrio, too small to link the memories to a productive self-image without the support of other linking places that have been erased by the bulldozers. Instead of creating a liminal sphere of alternative spaces enabling arrival, these potential alternative homes are hence again overruled by colonial forces.

¹²⁰Ray recognizes Turtle's hunger, both for food and recognition, because he was one of the Japanese-Americans to be interned during World War II (another story of subjugation and othering by the White US-American majority).

6.7 A Livable Crypt and Spilled Flowers – the Cemetery Heterotopia

Cemeteries play an important role throughout Turtle's story. Turtle's initiation into her gang starts in the freeway construction trench, but it continues at the Chinese cemetery. During her search for a shelter for the night, Turtle comes across several East LA cemeteries. First, she walks along Calvary cemetery. Then, she crosses the Serbian cemetery

with names like Radulovich, Babich, Bezunar, Mijanovich. In a fenced-up country, the names were exotic, safely protected from the outside of the living, from the spray-painted names like Gallo, Spook, Lencho, Fox, BamBam, Wilo x *Con Safos*. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 219; italics orig.)

Then, she drops into the Chinese cemetery which to her is on the one hand familiar, as she grew up next to it, but on the other hand remains foreign with its crematorium, 'the music, the scent, the mystery' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 219). After trying the Chinese cemetery, Turtle heads for Evergreen Cemetery, one of the oldest cemeteries citywide, with walls which 'kept the neighbourhood from spilling in' (p. 222).¹²¹ The mausoleums at this cemetery host Anglo city celebrities whose names Turtle recognizes from street names, highlighting that LA is imagined as an Anglo city, erasing any trace of Mexican-American presence in its official history and further isolating Turtle. Turtle finds the 'livable' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 236) crypt of Robert E. Ross who was born in Ohio and died in LA, yet another immigrant, but one with the right last name, a White one. She wonders 'what possessed this old white man named Ross to die so far from home' (p. 236). To Turtle, home is tied to the place one grew up in, making her, who was born in East LA, more autochthonous than the famous Angeleno Ross.

The novel hence negotiates issues of otherness and segregation again. On the one hand, the cemeteries, Serbian, Chinese, and Anglo, are ethnically other, 'which reinforces her social and ethnic isolation while reminding her of the traumatic erasure of her home' (Pattison, 2014, p. 125). The cemeteries are fenced up to protect them from barrio intruders, as the barrio is fenced up to protect LA from the otherness of its inhabitants. They mirror the city

¹²¹Due to the restless trajectory Turtle draws through city space in her intents to escape her past, gangs, the police, sleep, and ultimately death, one might think of considering her a flâneuse: her walking seems aimless and she tries to be invisible, one of the features of the flâneur. However, as I have shown in the previous chapter, the flâneur's body is unmarked and hence remains unremarked (Wolff, 1985, p. 42), whereas Turtle's body as ethnic and of unclear gender is marked – she tries to be invisible, but is not. Additionally, her walking is not aimless, not intent on observing for leisure, but for survival. Even if one argues that the postmodern flâneur acquires new meanings out of the city's fragments (Sá, 2011, p. 37), Turtle does not become one: she does not manage to create new meanings out of the fragments, to her, the possible meanings are lost, she did not make the rules.

planners' intents to separate city space into orderly entities that can easily be controlled, disabling the emergence of hybrid structures necessary. With her walking, Turtle might be threatening to disrupt this order, but her acts remain peripheral, not managing to really challenge this ordered and separated space and create fluid arrival spaces.

On the other hand, the cemetery itself is a heterotopia, a place of the other. It is a heterochrony that reminds of the loss of life, and of a quasi-eternity 'in which her permanent lot is dissolution and disappearance' (Foucault, 1986, p. 26). This dissolution and disappearance also affects Turtle. When entering the Chinese cemetery, memories of her gang initiation, but also of her old home, wash over her. The cemetery becomes a 'lieu de mémoire', an ultimate embodiment of a 'memorial consciousness' (Nora, 1989, p. 12) as it situates her within a historical narrative, being a connective place that withstands the erasure of place through the bulldozers. For Turtle, though, these memories overall signify loss: she has lost her brother, her gang, and her home. There are other tenants now who painted the house a 'god-awful baby pink' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 221) and have erased all but one of Amás nopales 'to give Turtle such an aching prick' (p. 221). The only unchanged reference point is the neighbouring Zumaya's house, whose trimmed lawn indicates that 'the hunchback was still alive and kicking' (p. 221). Ironically, an old hunchback is the only being still depicted as alive here.

The chapter is interspersed with quotations from Luis' war instruction manual, letters that introduce lessons and compose the word 'SURVIVAL'. This adds another layer of memory to the chapter, as it stands for the large gap that the loss of her brother left in her life. Additionally, by citing a war manual, one gains the impression that for Turtle, the entire barrio is a war zone, which is reinforced by the invading QA helicopters and police officers.¹²² She is at war with everyone, from her own and rival gangs, to the police and QA and incidental pedestrians that might pose a threat to her (Viramontes, 2007, p. 223). To her, life is a fight she cannot win:

This fight, all fights, muddled her head. Fighting to stay conscious after the last guy was down or fighting to keep enough blood in her to make it to safety. Ya no más – put that in your **US Army Field Manual 21-71** survival book – no more. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 223; bold print orig.)

¹²²This also ties in with the mentioned war victims and veterans who carry the external colonial wars into the barrio.

Here, her thoughts pick up (maybe unconsciously) one of the battle cries of the Chicano Movement – ‘no más’ – that in *The Miraculous Day* is mentioned by a veterano and seems to die away as unheard as the thoughts in Turtle’s head here.

The cemetery as a heterotopic place of intersection and otherness is highlighted in two other instances as well, myth and metaphor again overlay with factual space. During Turtle’s gang initiation, she falls on a grave, from where

someone grabbed her ankle, and from the cemetery night, a full-sized palm slapped her face-down, the metal-cold fingers, the bagman’s hands, and she wasn’t about to let it happen again [...] and then a vato hollered with an angst big enough to drench the thirst of what was to come, screamed, ¡La Llorona! (Viramontes, 2007, p. 232)¹²³

Again, memory intersperses with myth to evoke the image of La Llorona who had haunted Turtle in the garden. Through the connection of the bagman’s memory with La Llorona, it becomes clear that Turtle will never be freed from being haunted by her gendered otherness, the city’s sirens sucking her in like the bagman’s hand emerging from a grave.

The La Llorona figure is countered a few pages later with a subtle allusion to another iconic female figure of Mexican-American iconography: before resting in the crypt, Turtle stuffs her jacket with wilted flowers to gather warmth (Viramontes, 2007, p. 235). Before falling asleep, she unzips her jacket

and let the parchments of flowers tumble to the floor and all around her ankles. Bunches and bushes of old carnations and roses and gardenias and magnolias and baby’s breath, reduced to their brittle bone stems, still carried a trace of transient perfumes. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 236)

The spilling flowers could be an allusion to the Virgin of Guadalupe who spilled roses out of her garment when appearing to the peasant Juan (Franco, 2015, p. 344). The religious iconography loads Turtle’s figure with meaning, but which meaning remains ambiguous. Whereas flowers generally are a sign of life and the cemetery is used as a safe refuge by her, the flowers she uses here smell of rot and earth, foreboding her death. Death is also imminent as she sleeps under an engraving reading ‘**Asleep in Jesus, Blessed Sleep**’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 236; bold print orig.), which anticipates the novel’s closing scene where Tranquilina holds the dying Turtle like mother Mary the dead Jesus, creating a continuity of religious imagery adding layers of meaning to Turtle’s death.

¹²³The bagman might refer to the scene where she was caught shoplifting and searched by a shop employee at a freeway overpass, a memory that haunts her as well.

Cemeteries here are places that disrupt city space, exposing gaps between the living and the dead, different ethnies, and myth and reality. Turtle though is not able to expand, live, or cross these gaps. There are no entries or openings facilitating an arrival, but only fissures that cannot be entered.

6.8 The Levitation Aztec Saviouress – Magic Realism at a Bus Depot

After Turtle's stay at the cemetery, the reader is led to the beach where Ermila waits for Alfonso, enclosed by an 'avalanche of vapor mist' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 238). The beach seems to be a place of escape to her, 'she had begun to plant herself in this beach, this shoreline' (p. 237). Nonetheless, the beach is a treacherous place filled with fog and deceit, it has an otherworldly quality, turning it from a mere border zone between water and land to yet another place where myth and reality blur. Again, memories are haunting, as the bandage on Ermila's hand has caught stains from all the day's experiences. Later, the mysterious fog turns into hail, 'an ambush of climate, surprising and merciless' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 249), another harbinger of the apocalypse to come and continuing the narrative strategy of announcing bad news with bad weather.

The beach is hence the pivotal point from where there is no turning back in the story: Nacho locks Alfonso in a tool shed. The latter swears revenge and instructs Santos to get a gun. On this endeavour, Santos encounters Turtle and enters his car. The two are then chased by a police helicopter and only let off the hook because the helicopter was needed in a car accident (as the reader gets to know later through a police report). To celebrate, they drive to a formerly romantic, but now neglected fountain in Monterey Park (Viramontes, 2007, p. 300). This neglect of public space leaves empty shells to be filled with memories. The beach and the waterfalls are both supposedly peaceful lover's locations, subverted by neglect and violence. There is no safe escape, neither in memory nor in place.

Meanwhile, Ana heads home from work via the highway to pick up Tranquilina to search for Ben. After having declined a ride in Nacho's car, Ermila heads home by bus, a journey that takes several hours and leaves her stuck in the QA roadblock lines. Turtle and Santos head to Alfonso's home, where the gang waits for him and the weapon. After an argument between Alfonso and Lucho (Alfonso's secret lover), Lucho wakes Ermila to warn her of the danger for Nacho who waits at the bus depot for his bus home to Mexico. Ermila starts running.

Latest here, all the different narrative strands of the novel get entangled and are ready to crash violently in the closing scene. Each scene reveals only pieces of information so that readers have to assemble the story and fill gaps with their imagination. In chapter 16, the police report tries to fit the loose ends into a cohesive story, but ultimately fails. The official report is as false or true as the individual viewpoints.

The main protagonists meet in a bloody finale at the Greyhound bus depot. As mentioned previously, buses in LA are a sluggish means of transportation, used mainly by people of colour (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 3).¹²⁴ For Nacho, though, the bus depot means a departure for good: 'he grinned in utter delightfulness because he couldn't believe it. He was going home' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 320). He almost manages to return to the mythic homeland Turtle and her brother were never able to get to. Neither for them nor for Nacho, LA has turned out to be the promised land, but is a place that refuses to be a home.

The bus depot itself is a transit place between staying and going, arriving and leaving, a threshold into another world, like the verge between life and death or reality and myth that the novel constantly plays with. The bus depot is also where Turtle had to say farewell to her brother Luis to when he was drafted to Vietnam, another departure to a possible death (Viramontes, 2007, p. 228). It is thus a non-place as defined by Augé (2008, p. 76), a place without inscriptions of social bonds or history. That is why even if it is a neither here nor there space (Kunow, 2008, p. 159), it does not enable arrival as it lacks the opportunity to truly insert oneself into this place.

The finale is located in a fleeting place, enhancing the feeling that in LA, there is no rooting or formation of a community network possible. Rather, the protagonists are coincidentally clashing with each other in a neutral, anonymous space.¹²⁵ The transient property of the finale's place resembles the shopping mall of Amalia's apparition in *The Miraculous Day*, only that here, the place is not dedicated to consumerism, but to mobility. Both novels hence place magic realist miracles in-between reality and myth at in-between locations.¹²⁶

¹²⁴That predominantly people of colour use the bus system is certainly also an expression of the neglect of their city areas and hence also expresses class difference and colonial continuities (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 5).

¹²⁵In its coincidental interweaving of protagonists' trajectories and violence and freeways as connective elements, *Their Dogs* calls to mind the movie *Crash* (2004), at least structurally, the overall tone and message being different.

¹²⁶Levitation is no new topic in Latino/a literature, but is mostly used in a more playful manner: In Daniel Olivas' *Book of Want* (2011), one protagonist casually starts levitating during meditation. In Miguel Méndez's *Pilgrims in Aztlán* (1992), protagonist Pánfilo after a swig of alcohol is able to turn into a bird with black wings to fly all over the corners of the Chicano lands (this might be considered more flying than levitating, but the general idea of airborne escape is the same).

The gang members kill Nacho, Turtle delivering the final blow with her screwdriver. Through the ‘torrential rains’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 322), Tranquilina witnesses the scene and runs towards Nacho with her ‘superman’s cape’. When Turtle gets shot by police sharpshooters, she cradles her like the *mater dolorosa*, evoking Catholic iconography: ‘Someone cradled her, held her as tight and strong as her brother, held all of her together until sleep came to her fully welcomed’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 324). Blanco (2016) claims that Turtle holds too much memory, ‘and the narrative relieves her of this burden by killing her at the narrative closure, relinquishing the responsibility of her memory to the readers’ (p. 253). Cuevas reads Turtle’s death similarly, as a ‘radical opening’ that turns her into a ghost that haunts the reader who is burdened with the task of never forgetting (Cuevas, 2014, p. 38). Wyse agrees that the novel addresses the reader and demands a ‘communal response to overcome such external and internalized oppression’ (Wyse, 2013, p. 51). Blanco, Cuevas and Wyse hence agree that the novel wants to cause a reaction from the reader, claiming that the barrio alone will not be able to overcome the mechanisms of colonization. Seliger (2012) even argues that the novel challenges readers ‘to take the next step and participate in coalitions that seek alternative solutions to complexities that are the inevitable result of power structures based on force rather than consent’ (p. 276).

In the reality of the barrio space though, Turtle has no chance to alter her fate. LA city space does not provide the roots necessary to escape violence, nor the binary oppressions of female constraint and male honour codes her fluid gender imbues her with. There is no arrival for Turtle, no home to retreat to, no safe space nor in-between locations that she could successfully appropriate. That is why the narrative or storytelling level moves into focus again. The novel states that the ongoing colonization of city space is insurmountable for the individual, it can only be surpassed by the readership whose collective memory will be changed through the alternative narrative of *Their Dogs*.¹²⁷

This transferral of the creation of alternative spaces into the extratextual level also takes place with Tranquilina’s story. Her fate is more ambiguous and open than Turtle’s inescapable death sentence.¹²⁸ Tranquilina challenges the shooters and roars ‘*We’rrre not doggggs!*’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 324; italics orig.), the dog metaphor again evoking the

¹²⁷Viramontes refers to the myth ‘The People Could Fly’ (1985) as an inspiration for the levitation in the final scene. In this short story, words have the power to set people free from slavery and discover their hidden strength. Viramontes herself hence stresses the importance of story as a subversive act (Mermann-Jozwiak and Viramontes, 2009, p. 85).

¹²⁸Viramontes herself acknowledges this ambiguity and hands the responsibility of deciding on Tranquilina’s fate to the reader (Mermann-Jozwiak and Viramontes, 2009, p. 86).

entire history of colonization. She becomes an advocate for her people, she ‘couldn’t delineate herself from the murdered souls because these tears and blood and rain and bullet wounds belonged to her as well’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 325). Finally, she withstands the police bullets and begins to levitate:

Two inches, four, six, eight, riding the currents of the wilding wind. Riding it beyond the borders, past the cesarean scars of the earth, out to limitless space where everything was possible if she believed. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 325)

Tranquilina’s defiant levitation can be read in at least two ways: her levitation is no divine ascension to heaven, but a flying with the earthly winds of her ‘ancestral spirits’, the heritage of her father’s Aztec voladores (Viramontes, 2007, p. 325). Assuming that levitation does not spare her from the bullets, it might also be interpreted as a sacrifice in the Aztec tradition: being captured in war was a dishonour to the Aztec warrior. This dishonour could be redeemed by being sacrificed to the gods. The sacrifice was seen as an act of heroic ‘self-empowerment that ensured survival and growth for the community’ (Arias, 2003, p. 175).¹²⁹ Tranquilina is hence pictured as a warrior, challenging spatial oppression and 500 years of internal and external colonization.

On the other hand, the scene is also rich with Christian iconography: she is not only depicted as a *mater dolorosa*, but also as a Christ-like saviour. The novel prepares this image in various instances: ‘Tranquilina approached their darkness with an aura of light behind her and to Ana, she became someone else, *something* else altogether, a stenciled gray dazzling figure’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 280; emphasis orig.). Ana hopes that Ben would recognize her ‘mythic figure’ (p. 283), she becomes his ‘savior’ (p. 283). Earlier in the novel, Tranquilina’s mother tries to ‘make her comprehend that they did not belong to this world’ (p. 203). When lifting off the ground, she holds her arms by her side like Christ at the cross, forming the T of Tranquilina that ‘reinforced the cross they had to bear’ (p. 88). Like Christ, she sacrifices herself for her people. Her levitation can hence be read as a syncretistic act of defiance, a crossing of borders between religions and identities that defies the binary spatial set-up of dominant LA city space. She appropriates space in a multi-layered set of dimensions.

This levitation has not only various religious connotations, it also alters the storytelling mode into that of magic realism. As mentioned in the previous chapter, magic realism is a disputed

¹²⁹ Arias mentions these practices in analyzing Tobar’s *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998), but the general Aztec practice is independent from this analytical frame. Of course, the sacrifice was only to be carried out by warriors, which means men who consequently regained their masculinity, even if only post mortem. Transferring this practice to a female 20th century barrio dweller might seem far fetched, but it is precisely this reading of Tranquilina as a warrior that strengthens the empowerment argument.

category whose interpretation here needs of further elaboration.¹³⁰ Critics have argued that to assume that Latinos/as have a different world view where the magic naturally inhabits the real is a means of othering and exoticism used to ultimately dominate the othered subject (Gewecke, 2013a, p. 452). Others in contrast claim that exactly this seamless blurring is a means of challenging the binary order of inclusion/exclusion, self/other used by colonialism to enforce its power. In this view, magic realism is used to challenge the existing order (Aldama, 2003, p. 31): ‘ignoring the rifles aimed at her while contesting the performative directives to halt, Tranquilina occupies a third space of “utopian possibility” and advances forward’ (Seliger, 2012, p. 276).

On a first view, the rather incongruous ending of Helena Viramontes’ novel could evoke the assumption that the narrator was looking for an all-too-easy escape, a simplistic transcendence of borders to convey hope and resistance. Hsu (2011) sees Tranquilina’s ambiguous attempt at flight as a direct challenge of the state, as her role as ‘volador’, and hence intermediary between humans and the gods of nature, exposes that for East LA residents ‘the mobility and environmental integrity embodied by the *volador* could be achieved only through a direct confrontation with state violence’ (Hsu, 2011, p. 163; italics orig.) which is responsible for the fatal environments which ultimately triggered the violent ending. This is basically what several critics see in the novel’s ending, a transgression or sign of empowerment:

In offering an ambiguous ending, Viramontes suggests the leap of faith necessary to escape the colonized imagination [...]. In other words, the levitation is an act of decolonization. In moving outside of the social-realist frame that dominates the text, Viramontes suggests that escaping such forms of domination may require alternative ways of imagining the social order. (Wald, 2013, pp. 82–83)

Kevane in contrast sees this ‘leap of faith’ as the origin of resistance, and not magic realism (Kevane, 2008, p. 36). Franco (2015, p. 345) also connects the scene not to magic realism, but to miracles, the latter being a rupture that remains unabsorbed in contrast to magic realism which assimilates the supernatural into reality. Galván (2015) argues that Tranquilina’s hollering connects her with the La Llorona myth and imbues it with a new meaning of female strength, rather than victimization. She recasts La Llorona ‘with Cihuacóatl the Aztec goddess who appears at night under the rain crying for dead children’ (Galván, 2015, p. 144). Muñoz sees Tranquilina’s vertical movement as an act of

¹³⁰Viramontes herself sees the term ‘magic realism’ critically and attributes it a geopolitical bias (Kevane and Viramontes, 2006, p. 6).

transgression with which ‘she overwrites the physically carved and metaphorically scarred community’ (Muñoz, 2013, p. 36).

To me, this interpretation is too simple, the novel is composed too carefully and the ending conveys too many layers of meaning as to simply read it as an act of resistance per se. Pattison accordingly argues that the ending confuses the reader and leaves questions as to whether this often praised resistance is really to be found in the grim circumstances of the bloody finale:

The only seemingly viable solution – unrealistic to the point of absurdity – is to magically fly away and escape urban spaces that deny the production of memory. Juxtaposed with the novel’s overwhelmingly realist impulses prior to this point, this miraculous conclusion can only be read ironically, with Tranquilina serving as a mythical figure in a world, the reader well knows, experienced only through the realities of urban life. (Pattison, 2014, p. 127)

An ironical or at least cautious ambiguous reading offers itself here for a variety of reasons. As Aldama argues, the magic realist¹³¹ storytelling mode can assume a playful quality. By mimicking other dominant modes of storytelling, magic realism assumes a ‘mimesis-as-play’ attitude that challenges the self/other binaries of dominant colonial view and can ‘playfully re-invent the reader’s perception of his or her world’ (Aldama, 2003, p. 40).

Acknowledging the incongruity and ambivalence of the ending might lead to more fruitful interpretations than that of overly simplistic resistance narratives. Through the overlapping of Christian and Aztec religious images, Viramontes certainly blurs and challenges colonial binaries and the act of levitation clearly is a challenge to death itself, not acknowledging its rigid boundaries, but simply ignoring them, at least for an instant. Again, myth or superstitions break up the novel’s spatial reality and refer to the reader’s imagination to continue to create a thirdspace (Soja, 2000, p. 12) of alternative meanings¹³². Again, the reader is charged with the responsibility to continue these thirdspaces, or ‘miraculous ruptures’, that can make metaphors happen and enable a ‘reconfiguration of possibility’ (Franco, 2015, p. 357).

In any case, though, the transgression is not possible within the laws of nature of our world, it needs the supernatural aspect of levitation to overcome the limits that 500 years of colonization have set within the East LA barrio. Additionally, the challenge of the existing order does not come from within, from the normal people that could have circled the QA

¹³¹Aldama actually prefers the term magiccorealist to evade the binary set up by the bisect term, but for the sake of clarity, I will still refer to the term ‘magic realist’

¹³²See also Wald’s (2013, p. 83) ‘alternative ways of imagining the social order’.

like a snake in Ermila's imagination, but it comes from Tranquilina who does not belong to this world and is depicted as an otherworldly saviour. The community itself does not have the strength to oppose the encrusted patterns of domination, only a mythic figure would be able to do so. But as Rechy in *The Miraculous Day* has pointed out: 'we have too many fables' (Rechy, 2006 [1991], p. 177). If controlling one's own fate is only possible in the realm of myth, it is probably not possible at all.

6.9 Concluding Remarks

Their Dogs is a complex novel, its fragmentation mirroring the fragmented city space and resulting shattered identities of its main protagonists. The novel constructs a barrio space that appears disrupted and isolated through freeway construction, Quarantine Authority road blocks, and the consequences of internal and external processes of colonization. To overcome the binaries of this dominated city space, the novel uses myth, metaphor and memory.

This chapter has shown that the novel depicts 1960s freeway construction not as an advancement of mobility and progress, but rather as images of ongoing colonization: in this context, construction bulldozers bite into the barrio like the dogs of the conquista 500 years earlier (Kevane, 2008, p. 25), the city turns into a mutilated but still resistive female body, and Aztec deities, levitation, and Christian iconography merge the boundaries of self and other. At first glance, it seems as if these structures of colonization as symbolized by the freeways could be overcome by retreating into the private and female realm of the home, but it soon becomes clear that patriarchal structures and construction work invade also this seemingly safe space (Riebová, 2016, p. 506). The novel's protagonists hence seek and find alternative home spaces, such as friendship, Chavela's home, or a corner store. They indicate that the barrio inhabitants continuously intend to open up arrival spaces for them and struggle for their right to city space, even if due to bulldozers and other colonizing forces, their attempts ultimately are not able to last. The cemetery as a barrio-external heterotopia seems to be the last safe space left for Turtle, but flower miracles cannot conceal the impending death that overwrites the scene. The ending at the bus depot finally lets the different mythical and metaphorical narrative strands clash and overlap to re-write and counteract the city's dominant history of progress and mobility with an alternative barrio history of loss and failed arrival.

In *The Miraculous Day*, city stereotypes overwrite the protagonist's agency and hinder an equal access to city space that would lead to a possibility of arrival. In *Their Dogs* in contrast, myth and metaphor do not overwrite a generally accessible city space, but they are the only means of opening up an otherwise completely closed and hostile city space (Muñoz, 2013, p. 36), using de Certeau's superstitions to create a third space through irony, contradiction, and multiplicity of the lived space (Riebová, 2016, p. 511). Several scholars (Wald, 2013, p. 70; Kevane, 2008, p. 29) have found hope and resistance within the novel's mythical ending. I argue in line with Hamilton (2011, p. 3) this focus on resistance falls short in discovering the binary-dissolving aspects of the novel. I contend however that LA city space remains too contested and dominated by colonial rule to allow for stable emplacements or arrival to emerge. The protagonists continuously attempt to insert themselves into city space and thus not only resist dominant rule, but create own spaces outside of this rule, even if in the end their attempts have to remain futile due to power imbalances.

Nonetheless, the novel opens up 'espacios en blanco' such as dogs symbolizing oppressor and oppressed at the same time that are a challenge and invitation to the imagination of the reader (Riebová, 2016, p. 514), attributing the narrative structure of the novel itself with a resistive force. Viramontes creates a palimpsest of memories, erasures, and metaphors that denounces the destruction of the East LA barrio community while at the same time showing the internal fault lines that also have been troubling the community before due to ongoing marginalisation and colonisation processes. The disheveled structure of the novel and the multifaceted mode of storytelling mix up the seemingly irreconcilable dichotomies, creating a textual territory that is open to more than mere binaries. It writes formerly invisible people into the urban landscape (Cuevas, 2014, p. 33).

Whereas city space within the story itself is not able to provide creative in-between spaces between the spatial impositions of city authorities and patriarchal rule on the one hand and the manoeuvrings of barrio dwellers on the other, the narrative modes leave room for 'things extra and other' (Certeau, 1988, p. 107) to insert themselves into the existing framework. The narrative challenges these binaries not only by time lapses, shifts of focus and fractured storytelling, but also through a blurring of the boundaries between reality and myth. Viramontes's play with Chicano/a myths such as La Llorona and magic realist elements such as levitation are a challenge to the dominating forces that keep colonizing the barrio throughout the novel as they overlay or insert themselves into the rational space or urban planners (Certeau, 1988, p. 106). The novel defies these orderly, colonizing forces and

creates exits, ways of going out and coming back in and thus habitable spaces (Certeau, 1988, p. 106) and places for arrival, even if they are fleeting ones.

In contrast to dominated city space, stories are a ‘private property’ (Huehls, 2012, p. 158) and can be re-created in contrast to a world ‘which only gave them one to tell’ (Viramontes, 2007, p. 62). Official stories have to be countered by individual narrative, as they are at least as unreliable as fleeting individual memory:

... Ray knew the man would miss the important words, skip them and blame the ink. [...] The man in the funeral suit would take Ray’s statement and crumple it up like a snowball; toss it under **TRASH** or maybe file it under **WHO CARES?**’ (Viramontes, 2007, pp. 262–263; bold print orig.)

Readers have to decipher the dog metaphors, Aztec levitation myths, and ticktocking memories and connect the ‘the isolated plots into a larger narrative commons’ (Huehls, 2012, p. 170). They have to ‘interpret the story’s language within a performance genre that not only transcends race, nation, and culture, but also encourages productive participation, i.e., a compassionate political response’ (Seliger, 2012, p. 263). The act of reading hence connects the community to itself again and reconciles the disrupted story with itself by keeping track of connecting elements within the story (Huehls, 2012, pp. 171–172).

At a first glance, this reader’s effort may seem doomed for failure: in *Their Dogs*, East LA is a place dominated by colonial dichotomies that appear insurmountable, and the novel highlights the binaries by depicting the barrio as a beleaguered enclave that is dominated externally by city planners and Quarantine Authority and internally by a Latino patriarchy created through the Spanish conquest. Maybe this metaphoric hyperbole is necessary to unequivocally erase the dominant myths that hinder arrival for the barrio dwellers. Whereas Grandjeat (2013) finds a sense of emplacement within the ‘shifting, transient, territory’ (p. 116) of the novel, I argue with Martinez (2002) that celebrating the in-betweenness of the borderlands leaves the migrant in a constant state of mobility that hinders him/her to arrive. They cannot create an ‘imagined space where the migrant can live freely while establishing not only a *sense* of stability, but an actual *place* of stability’ (Martinez, 2002, p. 54; emphasis orig.).

By relentlessly depicting the binaries of LA city space, *Their Dogs* makes it clear that in-betweenness is not an option but the only way forward for barrio dwellers who wish to arrive at a stable place which they are denied by the city’s colonizing forces:

He [Ben] refused to be clearly defined as a Chicano, and for that, he refused to belong to a fluid movement, joining her, joining them, joining other

Chicanos to become a part, to become a whole and not just stay forever in between. (Viramontes, 2007, p. 118)

Similar to Turtle, Ben does not fit the binaries demanded by dominant society and barrio dwellers alike. However, without the possibility of story and myth to open up these binaries, the protagonists cannot dwell creatively in a third space. Instead, they are constantly forced to choose sides. The novel pinpoints this lack of arrival by critiquing the progress myth and claiming that in the current narrative of progress and mobility, arrival, and the dwelling in a creative third space are not possible for Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles.

By using myth and metaphor to create a more critical counter-history of Los Angeles, it shows that the city needs new stories to facilitate a potential arrival of a substantial part of its citizens. The ‘superstitions’ (Certeau, 1988, p. 106) or non-rational stories of bulldozers as dogs of conquest, Aztec rain goddesses and ‘voladores’ overlay the technical rationalities of progress and control that are but a rationalization of the mobility myth and show that arrival can be possible if focusing more on the continuities of Mexican-American dwelling in LA than on the narrative of the Mexican-American as a late-arrived profiteer of American ‘progress’.

7 American Homes and a Roadmovie Ending – Arriving at the American Dream in *The Barbarian Nurseries*

In the previously examined novels, Los Angeles city space was used, appropriated, and controlled in different terms. Where in *The Miraculous Day*, Amalia was free to manoeuvre the city to her liking, she was nonetheless limited by invisible racial barriers and a maze of externally and internally created city stereotypes. In *Their Dogs*, these boundaries were spelled out explicitly: roadblocks and freeways police Mexican-American movements to keep them within their own barrio and contain contagion.

The Barbarian Nurseries by Héctor Tobar not only adds a new kind of place, the suburb, to the range of urban settings¹³³, but also discusses city space from yet another angle: location in and manoeuvring of space is depicted as an indicator of fulfilment of the American Dream: living in the right city area and especially home ownership are seen as indicators of belonging to the American middle class, a prerequisite to having ‘made’ it, to have achieved individual freedom of choice and economic success.

Orange County home owners Scott and Maureen Torres-Thompson¹³⁴ literally live the American Dream in their gated community home, complete with swimming pool, picture window, and live-in maid Araceli. However, the novel makes clear soon that maintaining this iconic lifestyle puts an unbearable strain on the family. After a fight over finances, Scott and Maureen (with baby Samantha) separately leave the house and their two boys in the care of Araceli. Having been unable to contact the parents after several days on her own, she decides to trace down the boys’ grandfather in Los Angeles.

This is the beginning of a journey into the different suburbs and stages of American Dream achievement in Los Angeles. The bus and train ride to Los Angeles is a fantasy novel trip where especially the children see LA as a fictional space because its realities (such as homeless people) seem to be too unlikely to be real. I will expand upon how this game of contradictions and clichés (Poblete, 2018, p. 125) challenges monocultural conceptions of US city space and enables thirdspaces of the imagination to emerge which could facilitate arrival.

¹³³I will discuss later whether the suburb can actually be seen as being a part of the city.

¹³⁴Scott Torres is of Mexican-American descent.

Araceli's search for the grandfather in South Central is unsuccessful, forcing them to stay there overnight. They hope to get help from an acquaintance in Huntington Park where the economically more successful immigrants are to be found. By taking part in the Fourth of July party there, they get to know the failed aspirations of the local inhabitants. When Maureen and Scott discover that the boys are missing, Araceli is accused of child abduction, starting a media circus that reveals the divide in the perception of immigrants in California.¹³⁵ She is arrested twice and released by the police, seeking refuge first in the cosy Santa Ana home of her friend Marisela, and finally driving into the sunset in the Southwest with her love interest.

Through different LA locations, suburbs, and barrios, the novel negotiates how perceptions of the American Dream shape access to city space and arrival possibilities for Mexican Americans. As mentioned in chapter 3.2, the American Dream is a narrative that serves the construction of a nation through creation of an in-group that is entitled to that Dream and an out-group, here namely illegal immigrants, who is not and from whom one needs to distance oneself (Rosenbaum, 2014, p. 138). I will focus on how the novel highlights and criticizes these binaries and suggests more hybrid ways to imagine the American Dream in Los Angeles city space. The novel highlights how this creation of an other is also effectuated through the creation of racial practices. Kinnally (2016, p. 85) argues that the novel highlights and criticizes the erasure of the race narrative within public perception. In my analysis, I will elaborate on how this erasure also influences the protagonists' access to LA city space and their ability to arrive at it.

First, I will elaborate on how race and class shape the use of space in Scott's and Maureen's home. Scholarly work has so far focused on how the novel highlights the continuation of colonial practices in White suburbia, against which Araceli as an artist employs strategies of creativity (Walker, 2014, p. 180). In my analysis, I will expand this work by not only focusing on how these colonial continuities do not only influence Araceli's access to space and ability to arrive at the suburb, but all the involved protagonists, especially Mexican-American Scott.

The subchapter will also pick up on the sense of invasion that pervades the novel and serves as a metaphor for problematic immigration narratives that hinder immigrants in their arrival.

¹³⁵This unjustified accusation of child abduction by a Mexican maid is also present in the film *Babel* (2006), possibly revealing the underlying US-American fear of 'criminal' Mexicans president Trump so aptly plays with (Kilani, 2019, n.p.).

The next subchapter will show how *Nurseries* negotiates American topics such as home-ownership, economic success, but also isolation, emasculation and female restriction in suburbia. Subsequently, the focus will lie on the garden of the Torres-Thompsons which with its reformation from rain forest to desert serves as a metaphor for the negotiations of California Dream space in the novel. Then, the chapter will follow Araceli and her charges through the LA transportation system, a literary odyssey that again picks up on the typical LA topics of myth and mediatedness, turning LA into a fantasy novel. Next, the chapter will follow Araceli on her trajectory through different homes in neighbourhoods of LA that illustrate different stages on the way to the American Dream.

The ending bifurcates into the metaphysical and the materialistic achievements of the American Dream (Kimmage, 2011, p. 27) for the main protagonists. The novel's ending is seemingly a happy one: Araceli finds freedom in leaving Los Angeles by car, and the Torres-Thompsons move away from the suburb to downsize. After the previous social critique present in the novel, these endings appear slightly ironic, and I will analyse whether they allow for an arrival at the American Dream.

7.1 'The Tribe of Chemical Cleansers, of Brooms, of Machetes and Shovels': Race and Class as Spatial Markers in Suburbia

In *Nurseries*, race and class are issues that clearly shape the perception of city space. The novel is very explicit in its critique of the injustices connected to race and class. When Araceli cleans the boys' 'Room of a Thousand Wonders'¹³⁶ (Tobar, 2012, p. 42), she becomes aware 'of the absences and inequalities that were the core injustice of her existence' (p. 43), marvelling at the divisions between rich and poor that determine their chances.

Araceli wonders how her fate would have been different when provided with more financial means by her family, as at least intellectually, she sees herself as equal to her employers: she had to drop out of her art education in Mexico City due to financial reasons.¹³⁷ With this background, she represents the average female Mexican immigrant quite well: most single

¹³⁶The Child Protective Services worker later affiliates the room's excessive cleanliness and abundance of toys (which is why it received its nickname) with distance and parents who substitute objects for intimacy (Tobar, 2012, p. 252), further adding to the image of the suburban home as an isolated, disconnected entity.

¹³⁷Tobar himself states that he 'wanted to take the whole notion of the domestic servant and immigrant as a passive and uneducated person ... and subvert it' (Hood, 2011, n.p.). He describes Araceli as his alter ego, an intellectual trapped in the body of someone who does not look like one due to her Latina appearance.

female Mexican migrants come from one of the larger cities and migrate to urban areas, often landing in domestic service (Anderson, 1997, p. 130). With her remittances home, she supports her family, placing her individual ambitions aside (Tobar, 2012, p. 76), as is generally expected from female migrants (Arguelles, 2005, p. 303). Her dream of home does not entail an American suburbia home, but she daydreams about a middle-class home in Mexico City, including children with ‘chic Aztec names’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 4), dismissing the classic immigrant narrative of progress, economic success and assimilation or Americanization (Mata, 2014, p. 5).¹³⁸ All this makes the status difference between her employers and herself hard to bear at times. As this difference is determined more by chance than by skill, as Araceli has noticed, it has to be maintained through other means, for example through the construction of difference through race.

As outlined in chapter 3, race is a construct, based not on clear visual or other markers that define race, but based on actions that do race. Race is used to justify the maldistribution of material resources (Moya, Paula M. L., 2016, p. 32), which connects it closely to questions of class, serving as a justification for social difference. In *Nurseries*, this construction of race becomes clear when considering the different social strata, looks and appearances of Latinos/as within the novel.

On the one hand, race is still used to mark class difference, skin tone is used as a marker to distinguish social classes: Scott with his thin, ‘oatmeal-colored’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 5) arms does not manage to wield the lawnmower as expertly as muscle-packed, darker gardener Pepe (p. 7) and the garden workers who reshape the rain forest into a desert garden are not only grouped by skill, but also by complexion: while the roustabouts wear ‘droopy moustaches’ (p. 92) and soon look like ‘the poorest of the poor castes of Mexico City’ (p. 92), the planters are led by an ‘American woman of light complexion’ (p. 93) and are described as ‘mestizo-skinned’ (p. 93). In this scene, race merges with a hierarchy of permanence in the US: untrained, recently arrived day labourers tear down the rain forest, and skilled ‘high-end Mexicans’ plant the cacti (p. 94). Social distinction does not work solely along the lines of race any more, but also along the lines of a combination of

¹³⁸ As examples for this challenging of the classic immigrant narrative in representations of immigrant workers, Mata mentions Lucha Corpi’s novel *Cactus Blood* (1995), the novel *América’s Dream* by Esmeralda Santiago (1997), or the documentary *Maid in America* (Prado, 2005). One might argue that with the TV series *Devious Maids* (2013), a more nuanced depiction of domestic services experiences has also reached mainstream media.

citizenship and economic wealth. This explains why in Scott's and Maureen's social class, race does not seem to play a role any more:

With their mixed Asian, African, and European features, their epicanthic folds and proud Armenian noses, their Chinese cheekbones and Irish foreheads that were turning deep saffron in the sun, they resembled a group of children Marco Polo might have encountered on the steppes of the Silk Road, at a crossroads where spices and incense and brass pots were traded at the edge of a river. (Tobar, 2012, p. 36)

Within this sphere, success and profession are not bound to race any more, it seems: to Maureen, Scott's surname only conveys something exotic, 'announcing her arrival at a remote, exotic village' (Tobar, 2012, p. 84), resonating with the faux Spanish house they now inhabit. Araceli's lawyer has a background in the Philippines, Latina girls can go to an Ivy League university (p. 215) and the Mexican-American Child Protective Services worker has the potential power to separate Maureen from her children (p. 251).

On the other hand, race and class still determine spatial usage within the Laguna Rancho Estates. In this domestic environment without spatial separation between work space and private leisure space, race and class serve as markers to distinguish employers from employees, creating a Trojan horse (Poblete, 2018, p. 118) through which a paranoid fear of the social other can enter the artificial suburban paradise.

Accordingly, the suburbs have established a system of social distance that has been internalized by home owners and service workers and is taken for granted as a set of daily practices (Hill Maher, 2005, p. 302). The only persons using public transportation at the Laguna Rancho Estates are the maids and construction workers, which seems to render a sidewalk obsolete (Tobar, 2012, p. 73)¹³⁹. When women gather with their charges at the local public playground, their dark skin and Spanish language makes clear that they must be the nannies, and not parents, of the children (p. 62). Domestic labour thus supports White claims to place (Walker, 2014, p. 177).

Gated communities in general strictly aim at distancing themselves from working-class or non-White environments, e.g. by prohibiting to hang laundry outdoors to dry or to park business pick-up trucks on the streets (Hill Maher, 2005, p. 295). Having the means to employ a live-in maid such as Araceli also adds to the status of Maureen and Scott. At a garden party, her 'subservient Latin American presence provoked feelings of envy and

¹³⁹The novel does not mention the race or nationality of these maids and construction workers at this point, but whenever they are described in other contexts in the novel, they are Latinos/as. This episode mirrors Ermila's reflections of commuting domestic workers in *Their Dogs* earlier.

inadequacy' (Tobar, 2012, p. 28), stressing that the Torres-Thompsons have long left the middle-class realm that is center-piece of the American identity.¹⁴⁰ 'Middle class' is not meant as a fixed class dependent on income-levels or professions here, but rather a self-denomination that demonstrates affiliation to an American identity, based on values such as discipline, determination, and a fierce work ethic (Rosenbaum, 2014, p. 131). Rosenbaum (2014) elaborates that 'classifying oneself as middle-class thus serves less as predictor of income level than as indicator of being a full and respected member of society' (p. 131).

As openly distinguishing oneself from their domestic employee hence threatens their American identity, the distance between employer and employee is established more subtly: in general, domestic employers in Los Angeles insist that their employees are not American, but vaguely 'foreign', visibly 'other', as they are Latinos/as (Rosenbaum, 2014, p. 130). Race hence displaces the class narrative, locking Latinos/as unchangeably in the 'other' category, making the American Dream unattainable to them (Rosenbaum, 2014, p. 138).

This ambiguous depiction of race reveals the problematic connected to it in contemporary US perception. While race establishes a class difference, it is at the same time erased in public narrative which has moved 'beyond race'. In an effort to stress people's equality, race is dismissed as an irrelevant or secondary category (Nerad, 2014, p. 3). *Nurseries* picks up this narrative: in Scott's and Maureen's liberal suburb world, open comments on race are undesirable. The mention of LA's ethnic divisions leads to an awkward silence at a party and even the word 'Mexican' sounds harsh and reminds them of the social difference to Araceli (Tobar, 2012, p. 32). A comment by Grandpa Torres about the lighter complexion of Keenan has led to his exclusion from the family (Tobar, 2012, p. 177).¹⁴¹

Moving 'beyond race' is paradoxically only possible when emphasizing race. Colour-blindness does not mean equality of races, but implies being blind to 'continued systemic racial disparity' (Nerad, 2014, p. 4) as race has real social and economic consequences. (Nerad, 2014, p. 5). This is noted in *Nurseries* as well, there the mayor (himself of Mexican descent) fears 'ethnic earthquakes' when he considers which reaction to take in Araceli's case, as 'Los Angeles and the Laguna Rancho Estates rested atop the same shifting tectonic

¹⁴⁰In 2016, for California the middle class household income range was \$45,390 – \$135,480 per year (Loudenback and Gould, 2017, n.p.). Scott with his one million dollar income would exceed this significantly.

¹⁴¹Araceli notices the paradoxes of racial construction when she marvels at an old photograph of his, taken in a desert area that clearly highlights Scott's Mexican heritage, seeming out of place 'in the home of a wealthy California family' (Tobar, 2012, p. 43). Maybe subconsciously, the grandfather was not evicted due to his racial utterances, but precisely due to being this involuntary reminder of an undesirable past that is otherwise silenced.

plates' (Tobar, 2012, p. 343). Race can hence gain the vehemence of a natural catastrophe if not handled properly, making understandable why race is silenced among the garden party guests.

The economic consequences of race are also clear to grandpa Torres: he saw erasing his Mexican identity and Spanish-speaking past as the only way to escape a world of 'short hoes and lettuce fields' (Tobar, 2012, p. 85), making the appreciation of his grandsons' lighter skin tone at least understandable. Without the right citizenship and economic background, race re-gains importance as a social marker: a seemingly all-American college girl is a Mexican illegal without US citizenship who has to fear deportation (p. 250). Her non-Whiteness exposes her otherness and hence raises danger of detection. She may act as if the city belonged to her (p. 250), but still has to leave when the police approaches. She may claim public space, but the real right to it is denied to her. Araceli feels the social distance as well:

I am a member of the tribe of chemical cleansers, of brooms, of machetes and shovels, and they are the people whose skin bakes in the sun, while they labor and live in fluorescent shadows... (Tobar, 2012, p. 183; italics orig.)¹⁴²

This social hierarchy of the different ethnies also becomes clear at a linguistic level: 'Laguna Rancho Estates', as well as the street name 'Paseo Linda Bonita' ('Beautiful Pretty Street') are Spanish words, but at a closer look are devoid of meaning, just chosen for their sound which resonates with the fake mission-style architecture (Tobar, 2012, p. 72). They constitute a meaningless and exotic Mock Spanish that serves to construct a White public space (Kinnally, 2016, p. 82). The vague mission-style cosmopolitan randomness is mirrored in the interior design with its 'multi-colored Bolivian tapestry' and hardwood decoration (Tobar, 2012, p. 29). The actual Spanish of native speakers in turn is demonized and serves as a marker of lower class status. Araceli instinctively knows this: 'Araceli would speak her story in Spanish and la señora Maureen would tell hers in English: it was obvious to her that the two languages did not carry equal weight.' (Tobar, 2012, p. 250).

Not acknowledging these tacit racial differences prevalent in US society leads to a fragmentation and incomprehensibility of one's own history and identity (Kinnally, 2016, p. 77). The novel hence criticizes this erasure of race, it points at the continuities of racial

¹⁴²This separation takes on fantastic elements. The mention of tribes resonates on the one hand with the colonization of American and its tribes, and on the other hand with Brandon's fiction novels about 'Fire Swallowers' who hunt and extinguish other tribes as well, blurring the lines between fiction and reality even further.

difference (Kinnally, 2016, p. 83). *Nurseries* makes it very clear that race still determines social class and with it the occupation of public space. As it prescribes people's position in city space, it hinders an individual approach to space creation and appropriation and thus defers arrival.

Maureen and Scott also come to notice these negative effects of race and class erasure: within the gated community, public space is tightly ruled and monitored to keep the racial and social distance to the outside world. Possibly, Maureen strives for perfection in her domestic environment to openly state her belonging to this upper-class community in spite of their working-class background¹⁴³ and Scott's Mexican-American heritage. Maureen is hence very preoccupied with keeping up the façade of a perfect American family that serves as an invisible border between her family and their former lower class status. When her party guests notice that the rain forest garden looks dry, Maureen panics about this 'telling flaw in their home' (Tobar, 2012, p. 38).¹⁴⁴ Whereas the practice of social or racial 'passing' is seen by some scholars as a 'social practice of transgression' (Nerad, 2014, p. 9), reinscribing an anti-essentialist position, Scott and Maureen seem to only be able to use it as a means of social ascent, neglecting the creative usages where the multi-ethnic passer could open up racial either-or-dichotomies and challenge the divisions of White hegemonic power (Nerad, 2014, p. 19). Instead, with their striving for perfection, they seem to support this system that ultimately also oppresses them even if they pass for members of the White middle class. Even a small crack in the perfect image can lead to catastrophe when the formerly erased class and race differences are in danger to be re-exposed through this crack.

How this setting of borders can easily be transferred to US borders and immigration policies is made explicit within the novel itself: Scott's job at his software firm 'Elysian Systems'¹⁴⁵ consists of watching the border and fences of US state institutions to program a software that relegates the surveillance of these zones to normal citizens through gamification (Tobar, 2012, p. 59), a virtual extension of the real border patrols along the US-Mexican border.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³Maureen comes from a 'very ordinary Missouri street' (Tobar, 2012, p. 11), and Scott grew up in the Latino/a barrio of South Whittier (p. 12) where being Mexican-American like his father meant poverty (p. 13).

¹⁴⁴At the same time, she notes: 'It's all tumbling around me, but do I even care?' (Tobar, 2012, p. 38), maybe acknowledging that she is no longer able and willing to invest her energy into this border-drawing.

¹⁴⁵The telling name ironically hints at Scott's not so entirely paradisaical life and work circumstances

¹⁴⁶To ensure that the 'citizen sentries' actually monitor the system instead of shopping for shoes, Scott programs digital intruders such as 'turban man' who should cause the vigilantes to hit the alert button (Tobar, 2012, p. 61). The actor of 'turban man' is his developer Jeremy Zaragoza, which indicates an intricate interplay of the politics of self and other. Zaragoza most probably is a well-situated American citizen, but due to his Spanish surname and assumed darker looks he was chosen to play 'turban man' and becomes implicitly labelled as other.

Scott's enterprise can be seen as an ironic parable on US border and immigration policies, where the state tries to draw clear lines of belonging and not-belonging although these lines have for a long time become blurred.

This sense of invasion pervades the entire novel. Not only do desert plants invade the suburban garden, but several other border transgressions and intrusions are sprinkled throughout the entire narrative. The first home to be invaded ironically is not some 'White' space, but Araceli's garden guest house, which Scott and Maureen enter after they return from their domestic leave and find the house empty. For the first time they discover something of Araceli's private identity, which she had always concealed behind her professional attire, complete with work uniform and princess Leia hairstyle (Tobar, 2012, p. 27). The reader gets to know her private identity early, establishing a certain complicity. When Araceli takes off her uniform after finishing work, she purges 'herself of her servant identity', transforming herself back into her full self, into the Chilanga she originally is (p. 45).¹⁴⁷ This strict separation of domestic work and creative private sphere contributes to 'Los Angeles' geographic elision of intimacy' (2014, p. 182) and the gendered and racialized distancing of exploitative domestic labour.

In this instance, the reader gets to know that Araceli is still doing creative work after quitting art school in Mexico City and has turned her guest house into an atelier. To Maureen, Araceli's *Fénix de la Basura*, a flying dinosaur made of discarded plastic forks, is not an artwork or a commentary on her situation in the US, as it is for Araceli. To Maureen, this and other 'monstrosities' (Tobar, 2012, p. 227) are signs of a tormented soul that she inadvertently hosted in her home for several years and which in retrospect has invaded her home. This becomes all the more haunting to Maureen now that the boys are apparently missing and under tutelage of this woman 'with a suppressed desire toward destruction' (p. 227).

Araceli's usage of salvaged domestic objects represent a breach of the strict separation between her domestic and creative work, which gives 'physical form to the disguised aggression of maintaining white wealth and property' (Walker, 2014, p. 195). Ultimately, it

¹⁴⁷This explains why she uses a uniform at all. In Californian suburbia in general, uniforms are unusual because the service worker's race serves as their distinction (Hill Maher, 2005, p. 302). Consequently, Araceli copied its use from upper-class Mexican homes. Araceli hence uses the uniform to distinguish her private from her servant's persona that strips her of her individuality: '...she felt like a stiff pink box and not like a human being' (Tobar, 2012, p. 58).

is not only Araceli's makeshift home that has been invaded, but also Maureen's, revealing a further loss of control that contributes to her fears.

This invasion is continued when, after reporting Brandon and Keenan missing, the police and media invade her home with questions. Assistant state attorney Goller wants to convince the Torres-Thompsons to sue Araceli for child abduction, and to this end describes California as a lost Eden¹⁴⁸ invaded by immigrants (Tobar, 2012, p. 304).¹⁴⁹ Goller himself in another scene is described as radiating the 'unrealness of an actor who'd wandered off the soundstage of a Technicolor spy flick' (p. 301), which gives him an air of uncanniness and invasion himself.¹⁵⁰ However, Maureen rather sees the 'disorderly and insistent clan' (Tobar, 2012, p. 305) of LA reporters as the real intruders. They remind Maureen of her first days in LA proper, a dangerous and chaotic place she escaped in favour of her '*purser version of California*' (p. 306; italics orig.). Again, it becomes clear that Maureen is at least as much a haunted person as Araceli, the latter by the INS, the former by her dark memories, hindering her from really shedding her fears and settling down or finding a sense of arrival.

Goller's tale of foreign invasion resonates with that of Jane Bryson, an impoverished White woman who finds solace in an online anti-immigrant community and publicly protests against Araceli's release. To her, the recent arrivals are like the untamed parrots that flutter noisily around her home and in her view do not belong to California, either (Tobar, 2012, p. 290).¹⁵¹ To her, there is a hierarchy of otherness. In her view, earlier Mexican arrivals have been naturalized and integrated due to their level of linguistic ability in English (p. 291). Poblete (2018) highlights how the novel hence shows the production of fear. Latinos have been pre-existent within the US, but are imagined as a wave of recently arrived which threaten to radically change the social, racial and cultural nature of the country (p. 122). This virtual threat is modulated and mobilized to produce political effects (p. 122). I argue that one of these political effects of fear leads to a creation of artificial borders that continuously influence identity-formation throughout the novel. Goller and Bryson set up a narrative of a golden past, creating dichotomies of past vs. decayed present, pristine nature vs. the invasion

¹⁴⁸The garden Eden image is a typical California trope (Möllers, 1999, p. 73).

¹⁴⁹Goller possibly picks up on a political discourse where immigration restrictionists unite with mainstream environmentalists who are concerned with 'population control' due to strained natural resources by overpopulation (Chang, 2000, p. 32).

¹⁵⁰The unrealness is repeated when in another scene they discover that he has a surfboard on his car, transforming him into another persona, 'like Batman or something' (Tobar, 2012, p. 307).

¹⁵¹She literally compares the parrots to the new Mexican immigrants, who move in groups like the parrots, and who seem to be equally lacking in manners (based on one short unfortunate encounter) (Tobar, 2012, p. 291).

of man/the immigrant, urban vs. rural environment.¹⁵² Maureen with her fear of Los Angeles proper contributes to this dichotomy.

The metaphor of animal invasion is used at yet another instant in the novel. When Maureen and Scott have to fend for themselves after Araceli is being accused of child abduction, Maureen notices that ants have started to invade her home and conquer ‘new territories’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 393) every day. The boundaries between inside and outside world that Maureen so desperately tries to uphold are being dissipated by the ants. On the one hand, the ants are the unwelcome flip side of all the coveted nature Maureen had tried to flee to. As soon as they are not held at bay by Araceli’s chemical chalk borders any more, they resemble the flood of immigrants certain protagonists in the novel are so afraid of. On the other hand, they markedly proclaim that without her Mexican help, Maureen is unable to keep the desired order.¹⁵³ The ants reveal that Maureen’s dominion over her home was incomplete at best, as she only now discovers the crop-circle-like chalk lines that remain as mysterious to her as Araceli’s habit of putting basil on the kitchen counter.¹⁵⁴

The question of who belongs and who does not seems to be shifting throughout the novel. When being asked by his grandsons whether being less Mexican is better, Torres senior answers: ‘Don’t know. Some people think it is. These days, though, I ain’t so sure.’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 355). In the end, there seems to be a greater openness and room for uncertainties and that blur racial demarcation lines. There is no need to belong to a place, there is a certain openness to choose. Ultimately, though, race still defines and determines the characters’ usage of space and hinders them in these free choices. For Maureen and Scott, the need to suppress their racially and class-wise different pasts hinders them to claim the stable communal space necessary for arrival. For Araceli with her immigrant status, arrival is something actively discouraged anyway, as she is perceived as an identity-less servant persona and not as an individual with a longing to arrive at a place.

¹⁵²With this, they continue the tendency to think of LA in dichotomies of either the Promised Land or an apocalyptic dystopia (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 3).

¹⁵³This somewhat reminds of the film *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004), in which the entire Californian economy collapses after all people of Latino/a descent suddenly disappear.

¹⁵⁴ Whereas the chalk works by chemistry, the basil is a superstitious remedy against upset husbands.

7.2 Living in an ‘Impeccable Prologue’: Suburbia Dreams and Nightmares in Orange County

The Barbarian Nurseries begins with family father and home owner Scott Torres mowing his lawn, a suburban American middle-class dad doing his typical share of the household chores. This image starts to crumble when Scott is not able to start the mower. It turns out that previously, mowing the lawn was the job of the Mexican gardener who had been fired due to financial constraints in the Torres-Thompson household. Since their expansion in postwar America, the suburbs have been one of the manifestations of the American Dream, a ‘symbolical minefield, the mirror (or, perhaps better put, the picture window) through which middle-class American culture casts its reflective gaze on itself’ (Beuka, 2004, p. 4).

Suburban settlements experienced a boom in the period after World War II when the demand for affordable housing outside of the expensive city centres and a nostalgia for small town life away from the problems of industrialization (Blakely and Snyder, 1997, p. 144) led to mass-manufactured settlements, a new kind of urbanism coined as ‘perhaps the first purely American cityspace’ (Soja, 2000, p. 123). In Los Angeles, this urban outmigration led to an increasing segregation, meaning that suburbs are overwhelmingly White, and increasingly gated. One-third of all new homes in the US built in the 1990s were gated developments (Low, 2003, pp. 388–389), fuelled by a ‘security-driven logic of urban enclavization’ (Davis, 2006, p. 244).

This tension between all-American small-town community and overwhelming social control, segregation and exclusion also determines much of suburbia’s fictional representations. In his study of the suburbs in 20th century fiction and film, Beuka (2004, p. 4) argues that they have always been as much an idea as a reality, evoking an image of the American Dream come true. With its swimming pool in the backyard, the lush garden and the picture window, Scott’s and Maureen’s home fits perfectly into this image:

The guests passed through the impeccable prologue of the living room, thence through an open sliding glass door to the backyard, a semicircle of grass the size of a basketball court framed by the restrained jungle of la petite rain forest... (Tobar, 2012, p. 29)

However, this dream also has a flip side. Suburbs have been depicted as homogenized, soulless, plastic landscapes and alienating noplaces (Beuka, 2004, p. 4). *Nurseries* aptly picks up on these dichotomies, ascribing a ‘sense of impending darkness and loss [...], an absence, that could, from one moment to the next, grow permanent’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 12) to

the place. This dichotomy between the suburb as a utopian model of community and as a dystopian landscape of dispiriting homogeneity (Beuka, 2004, p. 7) has often been reproduced in fiction.¹⁵⁵ The suburb has been described as a space of narrowly defined gender identities, an intensely visual environment of social control, and as a heavily commodified space (Beuka, 2004, p. 237).

This control and artificial perfection can also be found in *Nurseries*: Maureen has handcrafted the Roman-themed decoration (Tobar, 2012, p. 17) for her son's birthday party, the maid has prepared the hors d'oeuvres, and it is enviously noted by the guests that Maureen has managed to shape a perfect after-baby body (p. 29). Not only the birthday party is an 'elaborately staged celebration' (p. 17). The entire home seems to be a stage set up to maintain the image of the perfect family 'self-consciously fashioned to reflect a veneer of affluence' (Beuka, 2004, p. 237), an image that starts to crumble when the labour-intensive rain forest starts to look dry and wilted due to the gardener's absence (Tobar, 2012, p. 29).

There is an unreal quality to the home, '...as if she were standing not in a real neighborhood, but rather on a stage set crafted to represent vacant American suburbia' (Tobar, 2012, p. 133). It is 'a landscape vacant of the meanings and shadings of time' (Tobar, 2012, p. 7). Orange County is a simulacrum (Dear and Flusty, 1997, p. 156), a simulation of what a city should be, an exact copy of an original that never existed. The artificiality of the surrounding space makes it impossible to grasp place, turning the suburb into an ahistorical non-place (Augé, 2008, p. 63) without the sense of emplacement (Moslund, 2011, p. 30) necessary to arrive. The ambivalence between the 'real-and-imagined' (Soja, 2000, p. 11), which is so typical for Los Angeles does not offer alternative liminal spaces here, but rather limits the protagonists to the simulacrum. This also leads to an all-encompassing sense of isolation:

So now there was only Araceli, alone with el señor Scott, la señora Maureen, and their three children, in this house on a hill high above the ocean, on a cul-de-sac absent of pedestrians, absent of the banter of vendors and policemen. It was a street of long silences. (Tobar, 2012, p. 6)

This loneliness is a common problem of live-in maids; they often feel locked in (**Arguelles, 2005, p. 307**). Isolation does not only affect Araceli, though, it also concerns Maureen.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵Examples include TV series such as *Mad Men* (2010), *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), movies such as *American Beauty* (1999) or *Revolutionary Road* (2008) (the adaptation of the 1961 novel of the same name (Yates, 2008 [1961])), and the Argentinian novel *Las viudas de los jueves* (Piñeiro, 2010).

¹⁵⁶In her unwillingness to blend in with the suburban scenery, Maureen and Scott resemble the main protagonists in *Revolutionary Road* (Yates, 2008 [1961]) who end up in the suburbs only because it is what is expected as the next step when having children and settling down, stumbling into suburbia similar to Scott and Maureen.

She is put off by her neighbours' 'undeniable superficiality' (Tobar, 2012, p. 50) who often have undergone plastic surgery. Her direct neighbours and their children are either on 'pills that come in pretty pastel colors' (p. 49), or their children are on the other side of an unbridgeable 'boy-girl divide' (p. 49).

Whereas Araceli shakes off her servant's persona every other weekend during visits to a friend in Santa Ana (Tobar, 2012, p. 71), and Scott has a daily retreat from home at his work at the software development firm in Irvine, Maureen suffers the most from this all-encompassing isolation. The family as well as their employee are castaways on an 'island surrounded by vast stretches of salt water' (p. 143). Araceli concludes that Maureen and Scott are runaways like her. During the novel, it becomes clear that Araceli had to leave Mexico City and her art studies due to financial problems and a lack of future possibilities. She moves to Los Angeles not only to find work, but also to put some distance between her and her demanding mother. It remains much more unclear what exactly Scott and Maureen have fled. Whereas Scott seems to have forgotten his working class and Mexican-American during his adventures in the dotcom bubble, Maureen has left behind an equally ordinary childhood in a 'very ordinary Missouri street' (Tobar, 2012, p. 11) and also a childhood of domestic violence. Maureen and Araceli hence unconsciously share a story of fleeing constraining family structures and being new arrivals to Los Angeles. Additionally, both have fled Los Angeles downtown, a place that raised fear in Maureen and that was too chaotic for Araceli.

They are literally living at the borders of a desert, '*on the fringes of the Sonoran and the Mojave*' (Tobar, 2012, p. 52; italics orig.). On the one hand, this resonates with the American frontier myth, leaving Scott and Maureen as pioneers of upper class living within their working class families. On the other hand, it stresses their liminal status as lonely dwellers in a desert of limited social contact, an 'exclusionary enclave' (Low, 2003, p. 390) at the 'blurry fringes' of the postmetropolis (Soja, 2000, p. 151).¹⁵⁷ Their suburban house does not provide a home to arrive at, it resembles more a temporary refuge where Scott and Maureen are caught in a frozen movement (Holert and Terkessidis, 2006, p. 247), fleeing their past.

¹⁵⁷This sense of detachment goes so far that Araceli feels like living within the 'convoluted narratives of a telenovela' (Tobar, 2012, p. 143). This comparison of suburban life with a TV show has its antecedents in movies like *The Truman Show* (1998) and *Pleasantville* (1998); the telenovela brings a fitting Latino/a flavour to it, but the overall critique of 'white, middle-class, family-centered American life' (Beuka, 2004, p. 12) as unachievable and exclusive stays the same. As with *The Miraculous Day*, telenovelas are used as a reference for the unattainability of dreams. Here, they are not used as a means of escape, though, but as a reminder of the artificiality of the suburban lifestyle.

This isolation is complemented by rigid social norms that become visible in the depiction of gender roles and the segregation of female and male spaces throughout the novel. Not only children are separated by a gender divide, but adult spaces are equally gendered. The house in general is labelled as a female realm¹⁵⁸, from which the boys are evicted after a fight and submitted to the ‘punishment of open space’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 56). Ironically, Maureen later notices that the hermetically closed spaces of her home have locked her in, which for her is hard to bear as she is a ‘*woman of open spaces*’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 145; italics orig.).

Maureen is ruling the house ‘like the disciplined midlevel corporate executive she had once been’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 9), always vigilant for scattered toys and other traces of loss of control. She puts all her energy to ‘bring goodness and beauty to the life of her family’ (p. 50). With this, she fulfils society’s expectations of the nurturing and self-sacrificing mother:

Middle-class women were to model good motherhood and monitor the conditions and practices of motherhood among immigrants, racial minorities, and the poor in order to ensure the reproduction of capitalist workers and democratic citizens. (Anderson, 1997, pp. 12–13)

Maureen sees ‘an element of performance to being a good mom, but no one gave you executive bonuses for getting through the day’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 86). Again, even her main occupation of being a mother bears something artificial and staged of which she is completely conscious. She is not following her or her family’s needs, but society’s expectations, displaying the behaviour of a good (or good-enough) mother rather than being one. Maureen herself is aware that her sense of control is a fiction that she needs to uphold:

This home, even when you thought of it in the most abstract sense, as a place of security, order, and happiness, depended on the Mexican woman as much as it did on Maureen. Allowing Araceli to leave for two days was, Maureen realized, a way of claiming it as her own. (Tobar, 2012, p. 85)

This pressure on Maureen is heightened by the fact that her husband and herself have a working-class background and Scott additionally has a Mexican-American background, needing her to prove even more desperately that she can fulfil the rule ascribed to her by society. This strain represents another feature of suburban gender depiction, namely the limitation and plight that the suburban housewife has to suffer (Beuka, 2004, p. 18). Scott in

¹⁵⁸This is of course not an exclusive feature of suburban homes, as has been shown in the analysis of the other two novels.

contrast is at times depicted as an adult child who has an entire ‘masculine’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 87) video game room to his own to satisfy his need as a man ‘to play’ (p. 84).¹⁵⁹

The rest of the house has a more ‘feminine pulse’ that is sullied daily with Scott’s ‘discarded clothing, the stacks of memos and the electronic toys masquerading as office tools’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 41), placing him at the same level as his sons.¹⁶⁰ This is enhanced by the fact that the children also have an entire room dedicated to play which Araceli has nicknamed ‘*El Cuarto de las Mil Maravillas*’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 42; italics orig.), as it flows over with toys. It comes to symbolize the materialistic focus on well-being practised in the suburbs which conceals the lack of human interaction present in the home. Maureen feels overwhelmed by the male influence in the house and flees with her baby daughter to a spa (Tobar, 2012, p. 124)¹⁶¹, not willing to admit that she needs the time without the boys at least as desperately as Samantha does (p. 144). This spatial gender separation and lack of human interaction turn their home into a dominated, abstract space that is unable to provide for the more fluid lives spaces necessary for arrival.

Although Scott considers fatherhood a ‘medal’ and occasionally feels like a ‘king, provider, and executive rolled into one’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 99), his self-assessment as ‘bumbling provider and protector’ of his ‘American family’ (p. 286) may be more honest. He seems to notice that he is barely able to fulfil the roles he has set up for himself. This is also noted by Araceli who wonders how such an ‘awkward and poorly groomed man had found himself paired with an ambitious North American wife’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 7) and came to be the ‘unlikely lord of this tidy and affluent mansion’ (p. 9). The suburban home is hence depicted as an imperilment to masculinity (Beuka, 2004, p. 17), resonating with Big Al’s front porch in

¹⁵⁹Ehrenreich (2004) even links computer games and domestic service: ‘To be cleaned up after is to achieve a certain magical weightlessness and immateriality. Almost everyone complains about violent video games, but paid housecleaning has the same consequence-abolishing effect: you blast the villain into a mist of blood droplets and move right along; you drop the socks knowing they will eventually levitate, laundered and folded, back to their normal dwelling place. The result is a kind of virtual existence, in which the trail of litter that follows you seems to evaporate all by itself’ (p. 102). Scott’s videogaming is hence only an additional aspect of his virtual existence as a pampered man in a home maintained and turned into a stage of perfection by women.

¹⁶⁰Maybe seen under this light, the seemingly random Shakespeare citation of ‘The Big Man’ at the party makes sense: ‘Woe to the land that’s ruled by a child’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 35) might not refer to Scott’s powerlessness against the stakeholders of his new company, but also to his childlike ‘rule’ (or lack of rule) in his home that has led to financial despair and domestic disturbance.

¹⁶¹One might consider it irony to call a stay with a one-year old at a spa that offers childcare a ‘girls’ vacation’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 124), but it seems that this irony is visible only to the reader, not to Maureen.

Their Dogs that threatens to emasculate the gang members due to being a female place (2015, p. 174).¹⁶²

At first glance, Araceli has at least one room of the house which could be deemed her realm, namely the kitchen: she is 'in charge of the bathrooms and kitchen, the vacuum cleaners and dishrags, the laundry and the living room' (Tobar, 2012, p. 7). At a closer look, though, Maureen micromanages this realm as well, prescribing even how to wash the dishes.¹⁶³ The kitchen is a recurring place of the female (Rebolledo, 1995, p. 202) in the examined novels. However, whereas in *The Miraculous Day* and *Their Dogs*, they are zones of (albeit dysfunctional) family interaction, the kitchen in *Nurseries* is a highly functional workplace, nothing less and nothing more. Female bonding (or familial dispute) is impossible because there are no female members left with whom to interact after Guadalupe is gone. The gap between the roles of employer and employee (and perhaps Araceli's awareness of this role) is too pronounced for Araceli and Maureen to be bridged even in the supposedly female space of the kitchen. Maureen may see some mutual appreciation of their shared sense of order and cleanliness in Araceli's stern looks, but human interaction is as artificial and isolated as the spatial setting they find themselves in.

Overall, suburban space remains a non-place for Araceli as well as for Scott and Maureen. The latter may have intended to create a true home, but are only perpetuating common American suburbia dreams and nightmares. Within such an artificial and narrowly controlled landscape, there is no possibility for hybrid spaces to emerge. Neither Scott nor Araceli have truly arrived at this kind of non-home, they are stuck within their roles of suburban employer and Mexicana employee as there are no real personal interactions to be found.

7.3 'tis an unweeded garden that grows to seed': Images between Rain Forest and Desert Plants

As we have seen above, the novel's protagonists are trapped within the typical binaries of suburban life: the beautiful surface of economic wealth and order hides an abyss of social

¹⁶²This duality of emasculation and feminine restraint is a very common feature of suburbia fiction, as is visible even in the title of the TV series *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), and is one of the main topics of the novel *Revolutionary Road* (Yates, 2008 [1961]), and at least a side issue in *Mad Men* (2010). It seems to assert Beuka's (2004, p. 10) notion that most of recent suburban fiction draws its inspiration from a today's reception of the 1950s and its gender roles, making this era a mirror to consider modern gender relationships.

¹⁶³She insists on using the dishwasher instead of washing by hand for increased hygiene (Tobar, 2012, p. 39).

control, isolation, artificiality, and gender divisions. Beuka argues that this binary can be overcome by applying Foucault's concept of heterotopia to the suburbs. The suburb is seen as a

heterotopic 'mirror' to mainstream American culture in its invocation of a utopian dream of middle-class community and security and its constant reminder of the social realities undercutting such a fantasy vision. (Beuka, 2004, p. 235)

The mirror metaphor can also be found in *Nurseries* when 'Night had fallen and the kitchen window had become a mirror once again' (Tobar, 2012, p. 39), leaving Araceli alone with her (literal and figurative) reflections. Scott's and Maureen's garden could be seen as another heterotopia: maybe it is not the counter-site most commonly associated with Foucault's heterotopia, but it is a kind of microcosm, a reflection of the world that contains the world (Foucault, 1986, p. 26). In the following, through this microcosm, I will try to locate breaks in the suburban binaries set up in *Nurseries* that might lead to a more nuanced view on suburban space and its dreams.

The garden of the Torres-Thompson family serves as a prolongation and outer display of their American Dream suburbia home. Whereas in *The Miraculous Day*, the garden serves as a bridge between home and outside world, and in *Their Dogs* as a nourishing realm of the female always threatened by extinction through the male, in *Nurseries*, the garden is yet another façade and asset to be taken care of. Of course, the garden contains a swimming pool, 'the quintessential symbol of a materialistic suburban landscape' (Beuka, 2004, p. 238).¹⁶⁴ More prominently, though, the garden features 'la petite rain forest', a lush tropical garden that camouflages the drab wall at the end of the estate. In this function of pretend, the garden comes to be a symbol of the whole American Dream gone awry that the Torres-Thompson home represents: After having dismissed the gardener, the rain forest starts to dry out like Scott's finances, threatening to dismantle the Orange County façade carefully set up by Maureen. It hence prolongs the theme of artificiality and identity-making into a semi-public outer sphere, carried out in detail at Keenan's birthday party.

¹⁶⁴Beuka describes the swimming pool as a symbol of alienation, disconnection, spiritual and physical death, seeing it as a metaphoric critique of suburban materialism (Beuka, 2004, p. 238). In *Nurseries*, the pool does not experience such drastic attributions, but in the Argentinian novel *Las viudas de los jueves* (Piñeiro, 2010), the symbol of death is taken literally when three corpses are found floating in the community's pool.

Maureen has gone great lengths to make this birthday the perfect social event, a reunion of all the former work colleagues that founded Scott's software firm.¹⁶⁵ This party is hence very distinct from the slightly out-of-control family affair in *Their Dogs*, and also from the casual formality depicted later in the novel in the Latino/a barrio of Huntington Park. This perfection is not only spoiled by the 'unkempt' (Tobar, 2012, p. 26), casual attire of the guests, but ultimately by the only flaw that Maureen has not been able to camouflage: the dry rain forest. Scott's former co-business owner Sasha 'the Big Man' Avakian, increasingly drunk, recites a Shakespeare quote from *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, 2003 [1603]) that leaves Maureen utterly offended: '... 'tis an unweeded garden that grows to seed, and things rank and gross in nature possess it merely' (Tobar, 2012, p. 36).¹⁶⁶ This quote, which is taken out of a play about decay, hence sets off another drama.

Embarrassed by this public display of loss of control, Maureen decides to replace the rain forest with an easier to handle, but costly desert garden without telling Scott that she overcharged the credit card. When he later tries to pay a work lunch, the card denies him payment in front of his co-workers. This leads to a domestic fight where Scott pushes Maureen into a coffee table (Tobar, 2012, p. 114). After this, Maureen heads with baby daughter Samantha to a spa retreat, and Scott to a video game session with a co-worker. This leaves Araceli in charge of the boys, and when the parents do not return after four days, she sets out into another Greek drama, an odyssey to find the boys' grandfather in Los Angeles. The theatre play quote again highlights the stagedness and exposure of Scott's and Maureen's social life. The garden serves hence as a parable. This suburban American Dream is not about personal happiness or content, nor about economical success per se, it is being able to showcase economical success to not lose face and prove middle-class affiliation. Scott and Maureen are not able to shape space according to their needs, but only according to other's expectations, which hinders the creation of a place of one's own necessary for arrival.

The garden gains metaphorical quality also in another sense. It is not planted with nourishing nopales or lemonade-yielding limoneros like in *Their Dogs*, nor do rosebushes start to bud

¹⁶⁵This firm has been taken over by some anonymous investors during the tumultuous days of the dot-com bubble, scattering its former co-workers in all directions. The party is used partly to reminisce in these glorious old days (Tobar, 2012, p. 34). This adds to a sense of nostalgia pervading the entire novel I will analyse in more detail later on.

¹⁶⁶The *Hamlet* trope is picked up later when the reporters who are supposed to follow Araceli's court hearing are distracted by more recent news, watching their smartphones 'as Hamlet had the skull of his poor friend Yorick' (Tobar, 2012, p. 404), creating yet another drama. Media attention is described as being as fickle as Hamlet's fate was destined by bad luck.

there like in *The Miraculous Day*. It consists of entirely useless, hard to maintain, but decorative plants that could be associated with the Amazonian rain forest: it creates the illusion ‘that these banana trees and tropical flowers were the beginning of a jungle plain where savage tribes lived and vines swallowed the metal shells of downed airplanes’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 20). In 19th century travel memoirs, the Amazonian rain forest has been described as a garden Eden, evoking a state in which the universe is envisioned as perfectly ordered and harmonious and divested from natural and human history (erasing the Amerindian history before colonization with this narrative) (Ortiz Rodriguez, 2011, p. 68).

This garden Eden is then replaced by easier to maintain, autochthonous desert plants.¹⁶⁷ The chapter’s title ‘The Succulent Garden’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 1) plays with this opposition of lushness and austerity: succulents on one hand are desert plants that can store water in their leaves, but on the other hand, the word also means ‘juicy’ (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018), evoking lushness and abundance. Additionally, the paradise trope ties in with California’s settlement history, where it was one of the marketing tricks that lured many settlers to California, resonating with the notion that California is ‘a paradise waiting only for the shaping hand of white men’ (Hise, 2004, p. 546).

In contrast to the rain forest, the desert is seen as an uninhabited wilderness, a moral condition of being under God’s curse (Ortiz Rodriguez, 2011, p. 69). One might hence argue that by demolishing the rain forest and establishing a desert in her garden, Maureen has turned against the harmonious order of things and has invited a curse into her home due to trying to pretend to having achieved the American Dream home.¹⁶⁸

Scholars have argued that replanting the garden is an attempt of Maureen to regain financial independence (Poblete, 2018, p. 123) or ownership and control (Walker, 2014, pp. 185–186), not only of the home, but also of California’s past and present. Setting up a version of an unspoiled desert evokes an image of California as a place of leisure prior to Anglo agriculture that erases active Native management of ecological resources due to its pretend ‘natural’ state (p. 186). In contrast, I argue that this attempt at ownership and control has to fail

¹⁶⁷As mentioned earlier, the loss of garden Eden is also conjured by assistant state attorney Ian Goller imagines California as a ‘paradise of open land and sea breezes, the sliver of Eden between the desert and the sea’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 304). In his view, this paradise is crushed by an overpopulation caused by uncontrolled immigration, or invasion, from the South (p. 305), a view which totally blurs the succession of ‘invaders’ that settled California and turned the semi-desert into domesticated farm land.

¹⁶⁸The prominence of the garden, together with the setting of a rich (White) couple in suburbia, reminds a bit of *The Tortilla Curtain* (Boyle, 1996), where the wilderness finally invades the garden and washes away the entire property, together with the equally intruding Mexican immigrants.

because it is not based on her own strength, but on a borrowed image of perfection. This borrowed perfection hinders arrival as it creates a rigid space shaped by the expectations of others instead of allowing for a fluid space which can be shaped according to one's own needs.

'La petite rain forest' is an intruder into the arid desert climate of Paseo Linda Bonita, maybe as foreign to the entire landscape as his owners Scott and Maureen. Its high maintenance status and staged character again lend the scene a pervasive sense of artificiality, underlining the sense that this stagedness and not-belonging are one of the main problems of the Torres-Thompson's dwelling in suburbia. Its replacement by easier to handle, but more adversely-looking cacti could be seen as an act of adaptation to the local original environment on the one hand and a distancing from the gated community perfection on the other. Among the new plants is a huge ocotillo or 'burning bush' that 'looks like something from the Ten Commandments' (Tobar, 2012, p. 96). Their tree is a 'transplant' (p. 96) from the Palm Springs area, from land that was to be cleared for housing construction (p. 96). This tree could hence be considered a refugee from the all-encompassing development further destroying the 'garden Eden', another native Californian that has to seek shelter, this time ironically in one of the subdivisions that destroyed his habitat. The cacti may belong to the desert climate in the area, but they look foreign in the undulated gated community environment. They are at the same time native¹⁶⁹, but look like an invasion into the peaceful domestic sphere with their spines and needles. This ambiguity hence mirrors Scott's and Maureen's status. They do not really belong into this environment of plastic surgery aficionados and new richness; the suburb is no place they could arrive at no matter how hard they try.

Maybe the artificial suburb itself is the intruder that does not belong: it turns out that grandpa Torres is from Yuma, Arizona (Tobar, 2012, p. 354). He was born in Chihuahua, but his parents soon moved to the US. The desert garden makes him feel nostalgic about his youth in the desert. This makes Scott an autochthonous desert dweller, additionally to the Angeleno that he is anyway. This firmly roots him within the Southwestern Chicano homeland of Aztlán, reinstating his right to be there that is denied to him by the White artificiality of suburbia. Nonetheless, as the garden is ultimately the cause leading to the eviction of their private Eden, it cannot stand as a symbol of spatial appropriation, but highlights the

¹⁶⁹In fact, they are a mixture of Sonoran and African succulents (Tobar, 2012, p. 94), further complicating the dialectics of belonging and otherness at play here.

problematic of constructed binaries that dominate suburban space and exclude more ambiguous, non-binary forms of dwelling and arrival.

7.4 A Time Travel to Union Station: an Odyssey Through a Fictitious LA

I argue that *The Barbarian Nurseries* claims that the American Dream is deeply flawed as it highlights in how far striving for its fulfilment through materialistic means leads to an increasing artificiality and stagedness of life and its spatial settings. The novel does not limit itself to a critique of the suburban materialistic American Dream, though, but sends its protagonists on a quest through the entire range of Los Angeles areas to paint a varied picture of different people's spatial realizations or aspirations of the Dream. This journey starts with a range of possibilities of public transportations.

After Araceli has been left alone with the boys for four days, she decides to look for the only relative known to her and within reach: grandpa Torres, the shunned father of Scott. Her only clue of his whereabouts is an address on a 50 years old photograph: '*West 39th Street, LA, Julio 1954*' (Tobar, 2012, p. 151; italics orig.). Maybe Araceli is attracted to this photo because the young man on it shows the same 'just-arrived feeling' (p. 151) that she encountered on her first days in Los Angeles, connecting Scott's and his father's history of immigration to hers.

Before following Araceli and her charges to the bus stop, the novel accompanies Scott on a detour to his former home in South Whittier, 'the inelegant, weed-happy patch of suburban sprawl where Scott the adolescent and teenager had been introduced to the joys of FORTRAN and masturbation' (Tobar, 2012, p. 159). In this scene, Scott perceives of Los Angeles as a city without memory that makes it possible to reinvent oneself constantly, but also suffers a certain rootlessness: '*South Whittier does not want you to remember it; it wants to pass unnoticed*' (Tobar, 2012, p. 159; italics orig.). He notices that the present tenants do not try to assimilate themselves as Scott's father did, but openly display their 'strange' (p. 160) Mexicanness with Virgin Mary shrines and address Scott in Spanish (p. 160). The trope of invasion is picked up again, neglecting that all the arrivals to California in their time had to have stood out for their 'otherness' to the previous inhabitants:

These people had taken his old neighborhood, once connected to the rest of modern America by AM radio and VHF television signals broadcast from zinc

towers, back into history, to a rural age, a time of angels and miracles. (Tobar, 2012, p. 160)

This connection of Mexicanness with backwardness and its implicit opposite of US-American modernity recreates underlying colonial binaries resonating with the history of the White conquest of the West: in this narrative, Los Angeles was associated with modernity, whereas the preceding Mexican settlers symbolized an old order of adobe, dust, and dirt that had to be overcome (Hise, 2004, p. 547). LA was imagined to be built on a blank slate, either leaving only contempt for its Spanish-Mexican past, or erasing it completely (Hise, 2004, pp. 548–549). With Scott's perception of his past as more modern than the Mexican-tinged neighbourhood's present, he not only erases the place's own Mexican past, but also his own, completely neglecting that his Mexican ancestry might be very similar to the place's present. The neat linear progression of time present in this narrative of progress erases the non-linearities present in the place's spatial built-up. Readers can excavate these in-congruencies due to their knowledge of Scott's past and the irony used in the descriptive style of the novel, a usage of place memory similar to that in *Their Dogs*.

After this episode, the narrative returns to Araceli and her charges, who have now arrived at the Laguna Niguel train station. The elder son Brandon, an avid reader, is disappointed of its functional architecture.¹⁷⁰ Brandon's expectations of a real train station are fulfilled once they arrive at Union Station (p. 168), whose iconic interior is well known through its usage as a film setting, as even Keenan recognizes (p. 169).¹⁷¹ This fictionality is heightened by the description of 'baroque spacecraft' chandeliers and arches high enough 'for the tallest troll or giant' (p. 169). This intertwining of reality with fictitious points of reference is typical for the entire further journey, but it loses its marvellous innocence to reveal a more noir image of the city.

When the train advances more and more into Los Angeles, the buildings look ever more dilapidated and begin to age, creating the impression that the train is a time machine that transports them into an 'archaic era of brick' (Tobar, 2012, p. 164). The surroundings are covered with litter and graffiti. One might think that after having left behind the unreal perfect world of the suburb, Los Angeles city would leave the impression of a more 'real' place, but the sense of unreality and placelessness does not leave the protagonists: 'There

¹⁷⁰He had expected a more dramatic, 19th century setup that would match the images created by his novels, where train stations serve as 'theatrical stages where people acted out momentous shifts in their lives' (Tobar, 2012, p. 161).

¹⁷¹The station has been used as a set for various Noir movies (moviemaps.org, 2018) and other films, such as *Catch Me if You Can* (2002), and, of course, *Blade Runner* (2007 [1982]).

was a spare beauty to all this decay, it was the empty and harsh landscape of an unsettling dream; these were the spaces you were not meant to see...' (Tobar, 2012, p. 164). When they continue along the concrete valley of the Los Angeles river, the boys have their first encounter with homeless people, a sight so unbelievable to them that Brandon assumes that they have to be refugees from one of his fantasy books (Tobar, 2012, p. 166). To the boys, Los Angeles is a place at least as far away and exotic like Europe, in ruins just like the Roman colosseum (p. 299).¹⁷²

Los Angeles is not only the setting of various science fiction dystopias (such as the notorious *Blade Runner*, *Blade Runner*, 2007 [1982]), but increasingly becomes one itself. The chaotic homeless camp stands in stark contrast to the 'repetitive conformity of his neighborhood, with its association-approved paint schemes and standard-sized driveways' (Tobar, 2012, p. 167). This binary exposes the fictionality of the American Dream: its realization is only possible at the cost of exclusion of a number of people, who normally remain invisible within the canyon of the LA river. To render them visible again, the naive view of a child is needed who is not yet used to have a selective gaze.

The novel excavates Los Angeles' history to highlight the erasure of several racial pasts: a volunteer at the train station remembers that today's 'black and brown ghetto' (Tobar, 2012, p. 170) of South Central LA once belonged to Whites only (even if these in themselves were not homogeneous, but Greek, Jewish, Italian, or Polish)¹⁷³ and a mural at the train station reminds of Chinatown which had to make way for the station. In LA, history is displaced, it is geography that is remembered somewhere else. The layering and mixing of LA history with Brandon's fictional allusions create a new 'transportation palimpsest' (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 4) that counter-acts this erasure of memory through the creation of new associations.

As Araceli notices later, time 'worked more aggressively in the heart of an American city than in a Mexican city, where colonial structures breezed through the centuries without much difficulty' (Tobar, 2012, p. 177). The neglect of its colonial history turns Los Angeles into an unstable place, forced to continually reinvent itself in order to maintain this erasure and

¹⁷²They come to this conclusion when after their return home they compare their adventures with the Europe holidays of a befriended family (Tobar, 2012, p. 299).

¹⁷³His thoughts are again used for considerations about immigration, again of the rejective kind, where he wonders when Americans have forgotten to work themselves and started to delegate everything, even childcare, to some Mexicans (Tobar, 2012, p. 170). On the one hand, this shows the pervasiveness of the immigrant narrative in the current Californian debate, but on the other hand, it feels like the narrator does not trust his readers with developing thoughts about this topic on his/her own, but needs a constant reminder of the different opinions afloat, complicated by the fact that the volunteer himself has a Greek surname, making him everything but 'native'.

hinder the undesired past from emerging again. There is no tension between its present and past, but between a local present and a past carried from another place (Fine, 2003, p. 399), revealing the layers of places that turn LA space into a processual palimpsest of arrivals. As with *Their Dogs*, this history-less upheaval of city space hinders an appropriation of space, it just gains a fictional quality that makes it impossible to really engage with space and arrive at it.

7.5 ‘Unabashedly Mexican’ Neighbourhoods – The Barrio and the American Dream

In the next leg of their journey, Araceli and the boys take a ‘battle-worn version’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 172) of the first bus they took from the Laguna Rancho Estates. This mirrors the social strata that determine the hierarchy of mobility in LA Keenan and Brandon previously knew LA only ‘from the high perch of a car speeding along elevated freeways’ (p. 172), stressing the fact that class is defined fundamentally by one’s capacity to move faster than others and people of colour’s mobility is channelled through their confinement to public transportation (Thies, 2009, p. 219)¹⁷⁴. For the first time, the ‘needy, hungry’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 173) people of his mother’s educational rants become a reality for Keenan in the faces of the bus passengers who clutch their belongings contained in a plastic grocery bag (p. 173).

This descent through the hierarchies of LA’s public transportation ends with the lowest ranking means of movement: walking down South Central’s streets in the ‘machine-baked air’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 173) that reminds Araceli of her home-town. Again, as in *The Miraculous Day*, heat and smog emerge as a LA narrative, further enhancing the social descent that accompanies their physical descent from the hills to downtown¹⁷⁵: ‘Araceli took in the yellow-gray heat and the low sun screaming through the soiled screen of the center-city atmosphere’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 173). As in *The Miraculous Day*, the city air is ‘heavy and opaque with the gray haze’ (p. 266) of a bush fire.¹⁷⁶ In contrast to Amalia in *The Miraculous Day*, who manoeuvres the city’s buses and sidewalks expertly, Araceli and her charges are

¹⁷⁴Thies refers to the movie *Crash* (2004) here in his analysis, but the overall statement can certainly be transferred to other LA narratives of race and class as well.

¹⁷⁵As Hise (2004, p. 550) notices, LA’s entire topography is based on this axis of top and down, connecting it with the social hierarchy of flatlanders vs hill dwellers.

¹⁷⁶The latter is a scene from Araceli’s arrest later in the novel, so that her personal catastrophe is linked to the natural catastrophe that pervades LA and is one of its common tropes.

lost in the shifting, timeless architecture of downtown LA, where an old photograph does not bear any resemblance with today's places any more.¹⁷⁷ When they finally reach the supposed home of Scott's father, the house is still the same, but the difference between the photo and reality reveals Araceli's 'chronological illiteracy' (Tobar, 2012, p. 178).

South Central LA is described as a place that 'screamed poverty and Latin America' (Tobar, 2012, p. 178) and is unpredictable like Araceli's home town:

Then again, you never knew in Los Angeles what you could find around the next corner. You could be in the quiet, sunny, and gritty desolation of a block like this at one moment, and find yourself on a tree-lined, shady, and glimmering block of apartments the next. Mexico City was like that, too. (Tobar, 2012, p. 174)

Through the memories of an elderly neighbour, the reader also gets to know the dynamics of the area:¹⁷⁸ the old photograph of Torres senior evokes memories of an era when the 'shine of those freshly waxed V8 cruisers that rolled along Central Avenue at a parade pace' (p. 181) gave Los Angeles a certain glimmer. But he also remembers how the family moved away to Huntington Park that was 'all the rage' (p. 182) at that time. His memories make clear that South Central was an area that one left as soon as one had the means to.

In the mind of Isabel's foster child Tomás, South Central becomes a 'television of constantly switching channels' (Tobar, 2012, p. 195) or 'book-story' (p. 195). The neighbourhood is described as a transit place of people moving in and out, street vendors, but also gang gatherings and police cruisers. In contrast to *The Miraculous Day*, though, this scenario does not evoke fear, but reveals a certain appeal: 'Some secret force drew people to this place. How else to explain all the comings and goings of travelers, warriors, and traders' (Tobar, 2012, p. 197).

According to Saunders, exactly this transitory quality is a feature of a functioning Arrival City, ensuring upward mobility after having provided a place to establish a network within the City (Saunders, 2010, p. 82). This explains why apparently all inhabitants of South

¹⁷⁷In contrast to *The Miraculous Day*, the location given here is very precise: Araceli was looking for 232, West 39th Street, and has found it. The confusion the protagonist and the reader feel here is not due to imprecise location on the place-scale, but on the time-scale, adding a fourth dimension, similar to *Their Dogs*, where the construction work cuts the connections between the two different time frames. In *Nurseries*, there is not even construction work needed to interrupt these linkages through time, the normal unsteadiness of Los Angeles and its inhabitants is sufficient to confuse Araceli's sense of place and time.

¹⁷⁸Memory in LA is not linked to the quickly changing places, but rather to people who are still able to remember the state before the last transformation, making memory limited by live-range, but also personalizing it. Similar to *Their Dogs*, the place itself does not tell a story, but the memory of the place's past evokes stories in people who can fill place with individualized meaning.

Central originate somewhere else. Brandon himself recognizes South Central as a 'crossroads, an outpost, an oasis of some kind' (Tobar, 2012, p. 197). The mixed and slightly seedy set-up of South Central describes what Soja (2000, xvi) calls a 'Fractal City', a fragmented and polarized place that at the same time is the scene of creative hybridities and a 'cultural politics aimed not just at reducing inequalities but also preserving difference and fostering flexible 'transversal' identities' (Soja, 2000, p. 155). LA becomes a 'First-Second-Third World city wrapped into one' (Soja, 2000, p. 153).

When Araceli and her charges find shelter in the home of Isabel Aguilar and her two children and foster son, reality and fiction intermingle even more. Isabel is a refugee of the Salvadoran civil war. Brandon notices that this home is permeated by memories of warfare and conquest: a votive candle shows 'Saint James the vanquisher of the Moors, a sword-wielding man on horseback trampling people underfoot' (Tobar, 2012, p. 187). The colonial history of Spain becomes mixed up with recent postcolonial wars in Central America, carried into Los Angeles by its refugees.

Another layer of history, myth and fiction is added when the kids begin to watch a fantasy movie that intersperses London during World War II with a magical world (Tobar, 2012, p. 188). In the childrens' minds, this story overlaps with the other boys' grandfather's war account in Chalatenango, El Salvador, 'a place that might as well have been a place from a fantasy novel' (p. 189). South Central hence becomes a place where several personal histories of newcomers create a new spatial history. The novel does not leave any doubt that Los Angeles itself is a place of unclear real boundaries:

The train had brought them to this place called Los Angeles, where the magical and the real, the world of fantasy books and history, seemed to coexist on the same extended stage of streets, rivers, and railroad tracks. (Tobar, 2012, p. 190)

LA is 'a place where the real and the imagined are persistently commingled in ways we have only begun to understand' (2000, p. 147). One might argue that these US-born and raised children have created their own version of Latin American magic realism, turning the exoticizing literary technique into something domestic that strips it of its exotic qualities. The children possibly manage what the adults cannot, namely turn the imagined quality of Los Angeles into a productive means of spatial appropriation that could serve them as a means of arrival, creating the entries and openings necessary for it. Later, when watching the news coverage of their case, Scott realizes this as well. To him, the footage of Araceli looks like that of Bigfoot, 'halfway between the real and the simulated, like those shots of

turban man and binocular lady Elysian Systems sold to the government’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 282). The media city renders their entire being into a simulacrum where appearance is more important than being.

In this hybrid place between memory, myth, and reality, it is not important where one is coming from or if one is successful at rooting at the new place, but how one manages to integrate one life’s story with the realities of this new place. The children with their lust of stories seem to have understood that. South Central is maybe not the place to achieve the materialistic American Dream – to achieve that, one should move away there as soon as possible. But it is the place where one can leave one’s old history and stories behind and start to integrate them into a new story, picking up the very American idea of a ‘fresh start’, the American Dream of equal opportunity to create one’s own story anew. This control over the own story could be seen as an important aspect of arrival as the latter requires self-determination and agency (Martinez, 2002, p. 57). However, the spatial stability to truly arrive at a place is not only created through story, for this it would need real opportunities to dwell in city space, and the dilapidated surroundings of South Central do not suggest to be a place of dwelling.

The next morning, Araceli and the boys take another bus that takes them to Huntington Park, where she hopes to find out about the whereabouts of Torres senior. The journey takes place on a very American day, the 4th of July (which is also the title of the second chapter). On this American day, their journey takes them to a very old and at the same time new very American place: ‘They had entered a landscape of very old American dreams’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 207). Huntington Park was founded by White settlers from Oklahoma and Iowa who then made place for newer arrivals from ‘places filled with Spanish-surnamed people’ (p. 207).¹⁷⁹

Araceli analyses the neighbourhood and finds it ‘unabashedly Mexican’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 209) despite the occasional US flag. In a later episode, she walks past ‘aging front-yard cacti and blooming rosebushes’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 257), dangling electricity wires and pickup trucks with painted gold wings. The area thus features all the working-class accessories a gated

¹⁷⁹This more multiethnic setup is reflected by some persons that Araceli asks for the way: a Korean shop owner, an American with a Spanish surname and a son is in the Afghanistan war, and a fourth-generation Mexican-American with a son in Iraq who complains about his Pakistani neighbours. Their daughter notices that her family had tried to evade the tribes in Pakistan, but has landed in a land of Mexican, Chinese, Korean and Muslim clans that make coexistence ‘as messy as anything on the subcontinent’ (p. 208). Again, LA is a (Third) World City, and this summing up of the different layers of recently arrived people makes it clear that a simple separation of residents and newcomers is just a fiction betrayed by the various sources and directions of mobility that make up LA’s inhabitants’ background.

community like the Laguna Rancho Estates banned from their estates. The rosebushes and cacti are markers of the barrio, similar to the neighbourhoods in *The Miraculous Day* and *Their Dogs*. Huntington Park seems to live up to the expectation of the ‘shopping and festive center of Mexican immigrant life in Los Angeles County’ (Davis, 2000, p. 55). According to Araceli’s trail of thought, the inhabitants were housekeepers and labourers just a decade ago, displaying the success promised by the materialistic American Dream.

Finally, the trio arrives at the home of Salomón Luján, an aspiring working-class patriarch and City Council member. As it is a holiday, he cannot help Araceli find the boys’ grandfather, but invites them to his 4th of July party. This neighbourhood gathering, despite its Mexican-American attendants, looks much more like a ‘real’ American garden party than the Torres-Thompson’s birthday party had: there is a real barbecue instead of Mexican finger food, complete with a pig buried in the ground for barbecue¹⁸⁰, and the guests are notably better dressed, in ‘newly purchased jeans or stiff dresses whose wide linen cones resembled the style worn in US movies during the Eisenhower era’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 218). This Eisenhower chic contrasts nicely with the patriarch’s taste for ‘Zacatecas Soap Opera Chic’, as his daughter coins it.¹⁸¹

In a way, in their pursuit of the American Dream, the Mexican-American guests mimic the nostalgic suburban lifestyle as depicted on TV. Their ideal of the American Dream is not based on fact, but on an unachievable fiction. This new hybrid between carnitas (Tobar, 2012, p. 213) and Eisenhower era garden parties is their way to accommodate this fictionalized American Dream within their life stories and lifestyle that oscillate between vaquero-style brass belt buckles (p. 218) and getting their children an all-American Princeton college education (p. 215): Luján’s daughter Lucía is the only Huntington Parker who has been able to leave this Mexican-American small-town world for ‘a nine-month waking dream of calcified eastern tradition and unadorned American ambition’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 215), leaving

¹⁸⁰This plunges Brandon into more fantasy novel material of burning underworlds, keeping up the thread of overlapping fiction and reality (Tobar, 2012, p. 214). Later on, this will confuse the child service workers who listen to his account of their excursion with Araceli and shortly think the child had been left in a dangerous world. In Brandon’s view, there was imminent danger, as the adults let the children play unsupervised with firecrackers (p. 223).

¹⁸¹This includes a painting of Don Quijote, which on the one hand hints at the ‘place of nobility and history’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 213) the Lujáns attribute their descendence to. The Spanish embellishes their heritage in the same way that the Mock Spanish intends to create a sense of history for the Laguna Rancho Estates. On the other hand, the confused Spanish knight might remind the reader of Araceli’s own ultimately useless perambulations in search for the boy’s grandfather, and allude to the quixotic qualities of the novel (Kinnally, 2016, p. 76) that lustfully plays with the deceptions and follies people fall prey to due to their prefixed mindsets. Araceli herself acknowledges the ‘carnavalesque qualities’ of her journey, planning to turn them into a Picasso-like painting (p. 311).

her in an uncomfortable limbo between different social spaces and values.¹⁸² The non-availability of the Dream for the Huntington Park dwellers becomes also clear when Araceli reveals Brandon's and Keenan's private school tuition fees: her audience is upset at her for 'revealing just how small their achievements were relative to true American success and affluence' (p. 222). The economic gap also carries with itself other social disadvantages: when parents complain about insufficient schools and teachers, Lucía advises them to complain, but is dismissed with the assertion that the parents are not being taken seriously due to their working-class background (p. 222).

One could see this mixture of an imagined America and Mexican pride as a new hybrid way to reconcile these lifestyles into a new American Dream, but due to economic disparities it is not attainable for everyone. As elaborated above, the American Dream is hence a decidedly middle-class (per self-definition) Dream that is not supposed to be achieved by everyone; invisible class lines keep people in place. One might argue that sufficient financial means consequently make the Dream available, but as I have shown earlier, at least the suburban Dream has been turned into a nightmare in the novel, this time due to rigid race and gender expectations.

Once she has revealed the boys' whereabouts to the police, she has to flee the Luján's home for fear of deportation. She becomes a hunted illegal, prosecuted by a chop-chopping helicopter and a police car 'zooming past with exaggerated masculine purpose' (Tobar, 2012, p. 257). There is no way for Araceli to walk the streets 'as if the city belonged' (Tobar, 2012, p. 250) to her because her role in the California immigration play has been ascribed to her yet. There is no individual freedom of opportunity or possibility to carve out individual places of arrival for her. This demonstration of power and the sense of the invading helicopter strongly resonates with scenes in *Their Dogs* and the ever-present police sirens in *The Miraculous Day*. Later, the police and TV helicopters are described as 'an aerial hyena prowl' (Tobar, 2012, p. 265), animals even more intimidating than the dogs in Viramontes' novel. This traces a continuity of prosecution and powerlessness throughout literature about Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles.

¹⁸²This unattainability is also clear to a friend of Lucía, Griselda, who dreams of Mexico City, the very place Araceli had left for lack of future, as a kind of Paris where she could escape her 'fraught American existence' (Tobar, 2012, p. 219). Later, it is revealed that Griselda will probably never be able to visit Mexico as she is an 'indocumentada' who would be unable to re-enter the US (p. 248). Her legal status reveals the absurdity of a system that erects rigid borders that do not reflect people's much more flexible conceptions of borders and citizenship and keeps them within a frozen movement (Holert and Terkessidis, 2006, p. 247) of eternal illegality that hinders them from truly developing their potentials.

Nurseries again adds its own layer of artificiality and constructedness to the scene: Araceli tries to escape the ‘Greek chorus of television watchers’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 258), turning the scene into a screenplay drama, assuming a predetermination of her fate and at the same time highlighting the artificiality of national borders that limit Araceli’s freedom. In her flight, Araceli follows the ‘steel monsters’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 202) of an overhead power line which creates a gash of wasteland covered with sickly rosebushes and nopal cactus. This dire environment symbolizes her equally dire fate, but also alludes to typical barrio plants such as the rosebushes and nopales, creating a connection between this ‘back closet of California gardens’ (p. 259) where apparently illegal immigrants land sooner or later before being arrested and between the more homely Mexican-American barrio she was just forced to leave. The mediatedness and surreality of the scene is enhanced almost to the brink of persiflage when Araceli’s flight is filmed accidentally by a crew shooting an independent film (Tobar, 2012, p. 259), using her for their story of failed self-search. Her real life turns into a fiction.

After having been released by the police, Araceli seeks shelter in the Santa Ana home of another Mexican-American patriarch, Octavio Covarrubias. The reader is acquainted with the home because Araceli spent her biweekly free weekends there. The ‘cluttered and improvised’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 75) Santa Ana barrio is a contrast to the sterile suburb she has just left. The narrator describes numerous barriological practices (Villa, 2000, p. 17) here that enliven the streets and render the neighbourhood much more communicative and prone to exchange than the sterile Laguna Rancho Estates: people sit on couches on their front porches, the houses are brightly painted (Tobar, 2012, p. 75), food trucks sell tacos (p. 311), and the plants are not showy rainforests or austere desert plants, but nourishing olive and avodaco trees (p. 75).

The novel makes it very clear that one’s social status depends on where exactly in LA one lives: South Central is poor, an ‘Arrival City’ in the original sense with people moving through. Huntington Park is working class with aspirations; Santa Ana is divided into White and Latino. The living area defines one’s being which can only be escaped by movement, implying a very literal meaning of social mobility. *Nurseries* hence depicts Los Angeles as an Arrival City where moving through different city areas means a way of settling down within the social network (Saunders, 2010, p. 82).

In contrast to Torres senior and junior, the Covarrubias’s do not try to hide their Mexican and working-class background. Covarrubias’ couch is described by a TV producer as ‘an evocative symbol of Mexican working-class humility and bad taste’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 375),

resonating with the ‘Zacatecas Soap Opera Chic’ of the Luján home (p. 213). Octavio Covarrubias apparently does not strive for economic wealth, but for education. In his home, high and low culture peacefully coexist, making him ‘one of the thousands of proletarian, Spanish-speaking autodidact intellectuals scattered across the Southern California metropolis’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 75).¹⁸³ Similar to Salomón Luján, he is the local community patriarch (p. 322), a real self-made man. In this sense, he is more American than all-American-suburb Scott Torres, who feels not self-determined, but ruled by his wife’s need for representation and interest rates. With this, the novel breaks the cliché of the unskilled Mexican worker and breaks up the class separation that has ruled the other spaces described in the novel so far. The Santa Ana barrio is able to reconcile the contradictions that Scott’s family is almost breaking apart on because the latter tries to hide rather than to display them. One might argue that the Covarrubias home in contrast to the Laguna Rancho Estates is able to provide a space of arrival for the different identities.

Covarrubias serves Araceli a home-cooked breakfast after her release from detention (Tobar, 2012, p. 309). This home-cooked meal stand in stark contrast to the cupboard-sourced hotdogs Araceli got served in South Central, but also to the overly controlled meals of Maureen’s kitchen, where even the water had to come from a plastic bottle instead from the tap (p. 188). The home-grown ingredients and the ‘unshaven family patriarch’ (p. 309) convey a sense of homeliness and rootedness that the other homes depicted in the novel so far decidedly lacked. For the first time in the novel, the kitchen resembles the recreational private spaces typically associated with Latino/a kitchens, places of family contact and exchange (Rebolledo, 1995, p. 202). In contrast to *Their Dogs* and Maureen’s kitchen, though, the Santa Ana home is not a female space any more. His wife complains that Octavio does not prepare breakfast regularly, but he seems to be at ease in this place, proud to provide shelter to a persecuted fellow Mexicana (Tobar, 2012, p. 310).

Araceli cannot enjoy this cosy chaos for long though. She is arrested again, this time for child abuse and drawn from a familiar space into the abstract space of the US legal system, destroying any sense of security, community and being at home that she may have had. Even more than in Huntington Park, the arrival of the police puts sets the community in commotion due to fear of ‘la migra’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 321), again highlighting the underlying sense of fear pervading the Latino/a community, a feeling persistent in all three examined novels,

¹⁸³This quote also shows that although Santa Ana may technically not be part of Los Angeles, it is seen as a part of the sprawling postmetropolis, similar to the Orange County suburb.

whether they play in the 1960s, 1990s, or in the new millennium. Apparently, US immigration politics and race issues have not changed in the course of almost half a century. Whereas in Huntington Park, cameras filmed her arrest rather accidentally, in Santa Ana the media in the form of a Latina reporter and a photographer (Tobar, 2012, p. 319) arrive even before the police. Fictionalisation arrives even before real life occurrences, again subverting reality and ironically highlighting the fictionalisation of LA city space and the immigration debate. Araceli's persona is used as a stand-in figure for the projections of different interest groups, she is caught in a 'Circus Californianus' (p. 263) (the title of the last chapter. Later, an immigrant rights group bails her out of jail and expects her to give a speech at a gathering, a task she fails at (p. 363), showing that the media machinery is unable to appropriate her for their different causes.¹⁸⁴

Araceli is tired of the administrative hickhack and greets the police officer with a decided '*¡No les tengo miedo!*' (Tobar, 2012, p. 320; italics orig.), a display of courage and empowerment similar to Amalia's 'No más' and Tranquilina's '*We'rrrrre not doggggs!*'. The scene resembles a 'standoff' (Tobar, 2012, p. 322), emphasizing at the same time Araceli's resistance and the mediatization constantly experienced throughout the novel, as the setting resembles a Western film duel. Where on the one hand she is able to resist her appropriation by media and turns a capture into a standoff, she is not able to determine her spatial whereabouts. Twice, she is arrested by the police, turning the 'carceral archipelago' Los Angeles (Soja, 2000, p. 299) into a literal prison for her. Araceli hence cannot choose to move through Los Angeles on her own terms, but is predetermined by external forces, making a creation of entries and openings or arrival impossible.

Araceli's spatial and temporal quest through LA city space resembles a veritable odyssey, as critics have remarked (Cordsen, 2012, n.p., Rayner, 2011, n.p.). Similar to Odysseus, Araceli is unable to find a stable home for her or the boys, but needs to be continually on the move. Both journeys are no linear movement, but a continuous obstacle course. According to Terkessidis (2014, p. 106), Odysseus experiences that the quest for a home reveals a civility

¹⁸⁴ One of the meeting attendants, a Mexican-American perennial student, sees a symbol of Mexican hipsterhood in her, again projecting exotic sophistication into Mexico City, presenting her as an antidote to those sad stories of workplace raids and deportations, oscillating between victim and rebel (Tobar, 2012, p. 363). Araceli herself pictures herself as a 'Mexican superhero wrestler' (p. 351) with pink hiking boots. This oscillation between self-ascription and external ascription is carried on throughout the novel, ironically highlighting the blurriness and constructedness of categories such as 'undocumented', 'immigrant', or 'Mexican'. Later on, Araceli also gives an interview to a famous Mexican TV newsman, which is carefully edited to make her seem as sympathetic as possible (p. 377), endlessly playing with the topic of appearance and reality.

against which the alleged being at home seems barbarian, as Odysseus has to re-establish order at his home through brutal violence. In *Nurseries*, this barbarity is reflected in the title, where the *Barbarian Nurseries* could allude to either the brute desert garden which originates in a plant nursery, or to the lack of manners Scott and Maureen reveal to their employee, or to Brandon's and Keenan's pampered upbringing. In any case, the Laguna Rancho Estates are no real home, but a pretend non-place that forces the protagonists (Araceli as well as Scott and Maureen) to set out on a search for a more adequate place to arrive at. This permanent approximation or search for a home enables acts of civility (Terkessidis, 2014, p. 106). In the novel, these can be found in the persons of Araceli's South Central hostess, the Covarrubias, the Lujáns, or her committed lawyer. Her venturing out of the suburban home is an act of freedom, and freedom is only to be found in movement, which is inevitably connected to the search for home and a prerequisite for subjectivity (2014, p. 107).

Her arrests hinder this freedom of movement, turning her odyssey into a frozen movement (Holert and Terkessidis, 2006, p. 247) of being caught in-between legal skirmishes. Her illegality denies her the right to a place and the right to shape this place (Holert and Terkessidis, 2006, p. 265). As the police officers deny her respect in small acts of 'condescension' (Tobar, 2012, p. 323), they deny her the respect and stable communal space (Martinez, 2002, p. 62) needed for arrival.

7.6 The Materialistic and the Metaphysical American Dream: Craftsman Homes and Road Movie Endings

The novel stresses that Araceli has not come to the US to pursue the American Dream of economic wealth: her family expects her to send revenues back to Mexico to support them, which is typical for female migrants (Arguelles, 2005, p. 303). Keeping money for their own is a practice that Mexican daughters increasingly pursue, but which is still regarded as a taboo as it is seen as selfish (Tobar, 2012, p. 76). Araceli has gradually liberated herself from these expectations. At her detention, it is very clear to her that there is no manifest destiny guaranteeing her success in the US, but that 'fate' (p. 329) will send her back to Mexico, marking the inevitability of the US immigration system.

Much more appealing to Araceli seems to be the metaphysical American Dream of equal opportunity: she may complain about the undecidedness of the state authorities who arrest her and set her free seemingly at their own discretion, but this impression of arbitrariness is eclipsed by Araceli's fascination for the incorruptibility of the US legal system. She likes that she has the right to remain silent at interrogation (Tobar, 2012, p. 267) and is impressed that at her release, the sheriff hands her belongings back without demanding any bribe. This display of honesty and '*transparencia*' (p. 288; italics orig.) to her symbolize the equality of opportunity deeply engrained within the US-American system. The novel makes clear that this system is flawed when confronted with the topic of immigration, though. The American Dream is only for members of the in-group (Rosenbaum, 2014, p. 131), and Araceli as an undocumented immigrant does not belong to it. State attorney Goller tries to push for Araceli's conviction because in his eyes, basic 'fairness to the people of California' (Tobar, 2012, p. 334) dictates such a result. Upkeeping the imaginary border between self and other is hence seen to be more important than the American values of fairness and equality.

Araceli is offered a bargain¹⁸⁵, which offends Araceli's sense of order. She feels that the metropolis is unraveling and out of order, too (Tobar, 2012, p. 350): 'California was like a home that had fallen into a state of obsolence and neglect' (p. 350), a state Araceli urgently wants to fix with freshly starched clothes and a general tidying up (p. 350). This inversion of the usual order – the rightless Mexican needs to clean up confused White Californians who are unsure about their familial roles (p. 350) – bears a certain irony. The same is true for the fact that at a closer look, Los Angeles and its laws begin to resemble more and more the disorganisation of Mexico City which Araceli had so desperately wanted to leave behind. Once again, the carefully constructed borders and segregations between self and other are

¹⁸⁵In explaining the injustices of the legal system to Araceli, her lawyer Ruthy Bacalán uses the comparison of plumbing: when there are too many cases to be dealt with, lawyers use tricks to accelerate the cases, leading to bargains instead of fair trials (Tobar, 2012, p. 349). There is a very similar scene in *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1988), where Black defendants are urged to accept bargains in order to avoid time-consuming trials. *Nurseries* lacks the cynicism and focus on the decline of the White man so typical for Tom Wolfe's writing, though, and focuses more on ethnic and female characters and describes them with more humanity. Even if Scott's fall from Dotcom Bubble heaven (the 2000s equivalent of the 1980s Wall Street investment bankers) might remind of Tom Wolfe's novel again, he is not a secure 'master of the universe', but a rather postmodern character constantly on the search for his own identity, not stemming from White New York aristocracy, but still struggling to reconcile his working class ethics with his new suburban lifestyle.

not more than constructions. The immigration laws cause more problems than they solve, sully the very American ideals they pretend to protect.¹⁸⁶

The binary of the courthouse world is also enhanced in another way. The Laguna Niguel courthouse is a hybrid between ‘faux-Mission architecture’ that resembles ‘a resort where lawyers came to unwind’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 383) on the outside and the obligatory dark wood paneling on the inside (p. 396). This sums up all the ironies and contradictions of US identity formation in the Southwest: the court room is a symbol for American law and order, but looks like a Spanish/Mexican/Mediterranean ‘lawyer spa’. The heritage is taken up without getting the meaning of it. Besides, the architectural style echoes the faux mission style of Paseo Linda Bonita. In both instances, the appearance is devoid of meaning, showing not a creative hybrid culture, but an empty appropriation of visual props erasing the history of California.

This in-between-state is enhanced by Araceli’s impression of a place ‘where the damned were released temporarily from their dungeons to intermingle with the undamned’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 396). This description mirrors the entire attitude of US society vis-à-vis undocumented immigrants who are from the outset ‘damned’ and destined to be kept separately, a function the legal system is entitled and obliged to ensure. This separation also becomes visible at Araceli’s arrival at the courthouse. To the right of the stairs, there are the anti-immigrant protesters, whereas to the left, there are the pro-immigrant counter-protesters (p. 381). Araceli is instrumentalised for their cause by both groups, but is kept separately from both. She seems to be the only independent individual in a group of anonymous faces. She is the only one able to navigate the borderlands the others seem to fear so much.

The groups seem to be separated by a secret force, similar to the chalk lines Araceli used to keep the ants away from Paseo Linda Bonita (Tobar, 2012, p. 382). This invisible border could be said to symbolize the deep chasm that separates US society over the immigration question. However, it also runs danger to recreate the colonial binary of progressive US vs backward Mexico: to Araceli, the Mexican flag with its eagle and serpent appears ‘awfully medieval’, whereas the US flag with its many stripes and stars seems overly crowded,

¹⁸⁶Araceli’s spirits are lifted through one little detail, namely the lawyer’s girly-pink hiking boots which unite practicability with a feminine style, something Araceli had never encountered in Mexico. For her, these shoes make her to want to stay in the US, ‘because Los Estados Unidos de América is a country where women can wear boots like that’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 348). This humorous episode makes clear that for Araceli, justice and equality are not abstract ideals, but bear very personal implications that determine her decisions more than abstract immigration laws and debates.

‘written in English’ (p. 382; italics orig.), maybe as (over)crowded as California in the eyes of the immigration opponents.

This scene is immediately juxtaposed with the Torres-Thompson family pursuing their version of freedom: they are looking for a new home, this time in a place ‘with a public school district that’s halfway decent’ (Tobar, 2012, p. 367) and in a size they can maintain without domestic help (p. 366). To Maureen, this downsizing is a surrender, a removal from her private Eden, but also a fair punishment, and ultimately a means to gain back the control over her life she had lost by relying on foreign help (p. 389). They find their new dream home in a South Pasadena Craftsman home, ‘authentically old and American’ (p. 409). It has a ‘somehow midwestern’ (p. 410) feels and embraces ‘early twentieth century American values of openness and restraint’ (p. 410). It conveys an almost exaggeratedly all-American feel (p. 410), complete with a neighbour growing organic heirloom tomatoes, evoking a ‘proximity to nature’ (412) Maureen’s desert garden was not able to convey.¹⁸⁷ South Pasadena has often been picked as a set for movies due to its ‘Anywhere in America feel’ (Compass Inc., 2017, n.p.) which hence turns it into another highly mediated space. Ironically, to find their new identity as an all-American family instead of the ‘Orange County family’ they were perceived as by the media, they have to recur again to a highly mediated space that may not be as artificial from the outset as their Orange County faux-mission style home, but that in its overly displayed Americanness and property as a film setting conveys its own sense of suburban veneer, a property the family seems not capable to escape from. The discrepancy is hinted at when Scott repeatedly mentions the possible plumbing problems and the elevated price that betrays their wish to save.

At first sight, the American Dream of material success has failed for Scott and Maureen: they have to downsize, not only on an economic level, but also on a standard-of-living level as they now have to cope without hired help. Ironically, precisely this loss of privilege re-approaches them more to the American middle-class perception of the Dream: the new home conveys ‘restraint’, part of the fundamental qualities of Americanness: discipline, determination, and a fierce work ethic (Rosenbaum, 2014, p. 131). Hence, although their income level has not dropped significantly and the real estate value is almost the same as in Orange County, their new home fits the American Dream value of equality of opportunity

¹⁸⁷The term ‘heirloom’ alone conveys a sense of rootedness, heritage and nativeness that the desert plants with their spikes and odd forms were not able to create although they were probably much more native to California than the cultivated tomato varieties.

much better. This again highlights the constructedness of the Dream, and still erases the questions of race and class so pervasive in the novel. In my opinion, although the novel ironically highlights the incongruences and artificiality of Scott's and Maureen's version of the Dream, in the end it does not manage to carry its critique on this erasure until the ending. To the reader, it might seem as if Scott and Maureen had finally arrived at their true American selves, an achievement not possible in the pretend suburban world of Orange County. That this pretend is only carried on at another level in the all-American South Pasadena home is only hinted at in the novel.

All in all, the novel seems to criticize the promises of the materialistic American Dream, but still adheres to its metaphysical ideal of equality of opportunity. This also becomes evident in Araceli's part of the novel's ending. Her lawyer recommends her not to return to Santa Ana as she fears prosecution by immigration services. A 'deus ex machina' in the form of a Mexican diplomat hands her money and passport (Tobar, 2012, p. 414), and off she goes with her Mexican-American love interest and his working-class pick-up truck into the desert. To leave Los Angeles and the ICE behind, they hit the freeway in direction to Phoenix, Arizona. They join the freeway current of 'people of all the American colors' (p. 419), where '*the roads belong to them*' (p. 419; italics orig.). They pass the very ocotillo trees and saguaros Araceli had left behind at Paseo Linda Bonita (p. 419), now in their natural habitat. She hence returns to the desert she has crossed to come into the US, coming almost full circle, but under very different circumstances. Before reaching Phoenix, they get into a cleansing thunderstorm of 'cathedral-like majesty' (p. 421) that comes from 'the tropical heart of the earth' (p. 421). Again, the weather is used to enhance the human drama, and also to convey a sense of exoticism that magnifies the distance between Araceli and Los Angeles, stressing that they have reached a kind of new land and new beginning. In a way, she is heading home to the imagined homeland of Aztlán in the Southwest. To find this imagined home, she had to leave her native country Mexico, but also Los Angeles and is able to choose from a place in-between.

The novel has an open ending, leaving Araceli to choose whether to stay in the US or leave for Mexico:

'Which way are we going? To Flagstaff if we stay in the United States. To Tucson if we go to Mexico.' [...]
'*Para allá*', she shouted above the roar of wind and engines, and then she said it in English, too, just because she could.
'That way.' (Tobar, 2012, p. 422)

In a way, after the intense social critique found throughout the novel, this very optimistic ending appears slightly ironic. One might argue that Araceli's departure from Los Angeles is a sign that this city space is inaccessible to Mexican Americans. They may dare to dream the American Dream, but are still denied its actualization (Márquez, 1983, p. 15).¹⁸⁸

In another vein, the ending seems to have a more serious message. Similar to *Their Dogs* and *The Miraculous Day*, the novel ends with the female protagonists' empowerment. Poblete (2018) argues that the decision to leave the gated community with the boys is Araceli's very own version of a declaration of independence, especially as it takes place in the chapter titled 'Fourth of July' (Poblete, 2018, p. 123). With this move, she takes her fate into her own hands and ultimately leaves California to shape her own destiny, showing the self-determination necessary for arrival. Similar to *The Miraculous Day* and *Their Dogs* though, this empowerment does not take place within LA city space. It is either relegated to the magic realist realm in the first two novels, or in Araceli's case, to a fictitious road movie ending that still has to fulfil the self-determination it promises.

Araceli never had the intention to fulfil the material American Dream and achieve economical success in the US, as she only came to support her family. The appeal of the US clearly lay in its promise of unlimited possibilities, the metaphysical Dream. Oddly, this promise has been fulfilled for Araceli despite the many obstacles pictured throughout the novel. She is free to go wherever she wants in a car on a freeway. This road movie ending could be said to be the mobile version of the all-American South Pasadena home. Although she imagines a biography of 'crossings, arrivals, money, and disappointments' (Tobar, 2012, p. 420) for Felipe, she fully embraces the idea of the US as a land of endless opportunities. This is in spite of her experience with the ICE.

Walker (2014) argues that these displacements have enabled her to find ways 'to reconfigure the constellation of intimacy, creativity, and mobility that makes a home, and thereby make new homes for herself' (p. 198). In *Nurseries*, it may be impossible to find a home or fully appropriate city space for a person of Mexican-American descent. But this is not the most relevant point, as a mental arrival within the US is fulfilled as soon as one buys into the idea of the unlimited possibilities of equal opportunity only slightly tainted by restrictive immigration laws. Ultimately, the wishes and imaginations of the people will overcome this

¹⁸⁸ Paredes (1981, p. 71) argues that Mexican Americans have been excluded from this Dream all along, but at least in *Nurseries*, protagonists definitely feel entitled to long for it.

small obstacle, the American Dream is stronger than the petty fears of a backward legal system.

7.7 Concluding Remarks

The Barbarian Nurseries takes its reader on a journey through different versions of the American Dream in Los Angeles. It sends its protagonists Araceli on a veritable Odyssey to reveal the various difficulties that Mexican Americans in Los Angeles face when they intend to arrive at their version of the Dream. On her first station in the Laguna Rancho Estate suburb, it is made clear that race and class still determine the spatial occupation of space between home owners and their – mostly Latino/a – domestic servants. At the same time, race is erased to maintain the progressive image of having moved ‘beyond race’.

The novel does not only criticize this erasure of race, as Kinnally (2016, p. 83) argues, but also highlights how this erasure puts domestic workers and home owners alike under tight spatial control. Maureen and Scott feel that they have to follow the unofficial rules of spatial segregation in the suburb if they want to keep the right to belong to their class of home owners who have managed to achieve the American Dream, at least in materialistic terms. They thus do not have the possibility to shape their home according to their needs, but adhere to society’s expectations. Due to this, the suburban American Dream home becomes a nightmare of tight social control, restrictive gender roles, and fear of social failure and descent. They lack the self-determination needed to perceive home as a place of arrival and instead only strive to arrive at a certain economic status.

This racial and class disparity is also present throughout the novel in a narrative of invasion. Like the Torres-Thompson home which is invaded by ants, media, and the police, California is perceived by some protagonists as being invaded by Latino/a immigrants from the South, spoiling an imagined Eden they believe to have a right to. Latinos/as are compared to intrusive species. I argue that *Nurseries* not only explores the internalized frontier zones of daily life in the US (Poblete, 2018, p. 114), but that it also highlights how these inner inner frontier zones limit Mexican-American’s access to LA city space. Instead of being seen as denizens with a right to insert themselves into and arrive at LA city space, they are turned into a feared other that has to be contained.

The garden heterotopia continues these negotiations of self-imagining and distancing from a past as social other. When Maureen replants the rain forest with desert plants, the novel reveals a dense interplay of narratives that stage the self against the other: the desert plants are at the same time foreign to the manicured suburb as they are autochthonous to its surroundings in the Sonoran desert. They reveal that Maureen and Scott, similar to the plants, do not belong to this space of superficial perfection, being in a constant in-between limbo between belonging and distance that does not create the entries and openings necessary for arrival, but a sense of alienation.

Nurseries continues this sense of artificiality throughout Araceli's journey towards the core of Los Angeles. On her way with public transportation, she encounters homeless people that are imagined as war refugees by Brandon, burning pigs buried in the ground, and reality that intermingle with children's books stories. Poblete sees this intermingling of fiction and reality within LA city space as a challenge of monocultural conceptions that enables thirdspaces of the imagination to emerge (Poblete, 2018, p. 125). In my view however, these imaginative spaces do not enable a spatial appropriation, but the several layers of fiction which overwrite place here hinder a true approximation towards city space that could enable arrival processes to occur.

The novel does not only negotiate the American Dream in Orange County suburbia, but also offers a range of different homes to consider the stages of the Dream. Whereas South Central is depicted as an Arrival City one only lives at to establish a network and then move on to other parts of Los Angeles, Huntington Park is depicted as an ethnic barrio where people dare to dream of having achieved the materialistic Dream. They are harshly reminded though that this Dream is enabled especially through a financial independence they are still far away from. The Covarrubias home in Santa Ana is depicted as an antithesis to this materialistic Dream, insinuating that education offers a possibility to drop the materialistic Dream and instead at least partly participate in the Dream of equality of opportunity. However, the novel highlights that this Dream is only achievable for American citizens, denouncing the injustices of the American immigration system that hinders the true arrival of Mexican Americans even if they are living in the US since their childhood. This leaves them in an eternal limbo that denies them the stability needed for arrival.

In the end of the novel, the materialistic and the metaphysical American Dream are outweighed against each other. Scott and Maureen seem to have failed economically and have to downsize to a more modest home. This new home, though, could be seen as the

epitome of the middle-class American Dream, as it represents an all-American dream craftsman home. With this shift, Maureen and Scott distance themselves from the pretend upper class world of Orange County suburbia and find back to their true, sober American middle-class ethics. This shift could be seen as slightly ironic, but in its sympathetic tone, the novel seems to grant everybody his/her dreams even though it dismantled part of it in earlier chapters.

Araceli's journey to the American Southwest seems to celebrate more the metaphysical American Dream of equality of opportunity. Although she has been a pawn for the media and the American judicial system, she finally recovers her agency and sets out to drive East, whether to Mexico or to some part of the US remains open. According to Walker (2014), she manages to 'make new homes for herself' (p. 198) through creativity and mobility. In my opinion, heading towards the Southwest does not represent home-making, but could be seen as a symbolic return to the Mexican-American homeland of Aztlán from where she might be able to develop an individual fate not dictated by Mexican family ties or Anglo employers. There may be no arrival in the all-American home wherever in LA that may be, but she possibly manages to dwell in the borderlands between materialistic dream and individual freedom and could hence create a new hybrid arrival space that is not bound to a specific location.

Seen in another light though, the optimistic ending counteracts the novel's previous criticism of the structural problems which the protagonists encounter, such as the constant erasure of race and class, the superficial media society and the increasingly bigot US border and immigration policies. The Los Angeles of *Nurseries* may be much more permissible and open than the policed space of *Their Dogs* or the stereotype maze of *The Miraculous Day*, but it is still a place of structural social differences that very often hinder the creation of creative third spaces. Los Angeles is depicted as a highly mediated and fictionalized space that is hard to grasp with its numerous layers of meaning and interpretation which complicate navigation. One cannot arrive at a place that is only mediated, shaped by one's own and foreign perceptions and expectations.

Nurseries at the one hand criticizes this fictionalized and occupied LA space, but on the other hand it also claims that by regaining agency, Mexican Americans can still overcome its spatial restrictions. They are entitled to the American Dream as long as they believe in this agency, no matter what the judicial and racial hindrances may be.

8 Conclusion

This thesis has examined arrival processes within three contemporary novels with Mexican-American protagonists set in Los Angeles, namely *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* by John Rechy, *Their Dogs Came with Them* by Helena María Viramontes, and *The Barbarian Nurseries* by Héctor Tobar. The novels all depict Los Angeles as a space that is shaped by colonial and neo-colonial power structures and hence hard to navigate and appropriate for the Mexican-American protagonists.

When analyzing these (neo-)colonial power structures, scholars have especially highlighted how the supernatural endings of *The Miraculous Day* and *Their Dogs* can be read as narratives of resistance (Giles, 2000, p. 128; Kevane, 2008, p. 36; Wald, 2013, p. 70; Muñoz, 2013, p. 36) and how in *Nurseries*, Araceli's drive into the Southwest represents a newfound sense of agency (Walker, 2014, p. 198). My research especially focuses on how these reactions to colonial continuities shape the protagonists' relationship to LA city space. To this end, I have inquired how the novels have depicted LA city space and whether the protagonists have been able to influence, form and appropriate it. A main question was whether the protagonists are able to arrive in Los Angeles and insert themselves into city space, in short whether Los Angeles can be an Arrival City for the novels' protagonists.

The thesis first establishes a working definition of arrival. In a sociological sense, an Arrival City is a city area where people moving to the city can find a first anchor to find employment, housing, and create a social network. They do not dwell in these spaces, but move through them to start their way towards success within the city (Saunders, 2010, p. 20). I transfer this concept and embed it within a theoretical framework to enable a literary analysis. Arrival creates entries and openings in space that challenge and deconstruct the binaries of self and other and create new spaces (Kunow, 2008, p. 158). It is a process that dwells on the margins or borders, it opens up liminal spaces (Aguirre, Quance and Sutton, 2000, p. 9) or contact zones (Pratt, 1992, p. 4). These borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2012 [1987], p. 25) create a space where Mexican Americans can fully live their in-between status. Arrival thus expands notions of hybridity (García Canclini, 2005, xxv) or third space (Bhabha, 1990, p. 211) which still carry the binary they attempt to overcome (Young, 1995, p. 27) and offers a more fluid and open understanding of spatial appropriation. Martinez (2002, p. 54) nonetheless

recalls that this dwelling in the third space should not lead to a constant mobility, but also convey a sense of rootedness and stability to really allow for arrival processes to occur.

To function as an Arrival City, Los Angeles would hence need to offer a self-determined usage of space to its Mexican-American inhabitants. At first sight, its history suggests that it fails at being such an open Arrival City: Mexican Americans in Los Angeles are still mostly perceived as other or newcomers whose right to be in the city has to be negotiated every time anew (Villa, 2000, p. 3). Their treatment is determined by colonial continuities, based on the Mexican history of colonial conquest as well as the history of US colonization of California (Martinez, 2009, p. 758). These inequalities lead to a segregation of city space that disadvantages LA's Mexican-American community (López-Calvo, 2011, p. 18). Mexican Americans counter these restrictive 'barrioizing' (Villa, 2000, p. 8) forces within their living areas through the creation of 'barriological' practices, such as murals, street vendors, front porches, car parades, and other appropriations of public city space. The barrio as a Latino/a space, although segregated, can thus allow for social networks, support, and social control if the denizens manage to circumvent dominant spatial structures (Saunders, 2010, p. 320). Although Los Angeles hence offers gaps and openings, city space remains highly contested for its Mexican-American inhabitants.

This is also reflected in the examined novels. LA city space within the novels is depicted as difficult to approach and appropriate. In *The Miraculous Day*, Amalia perambulates through a maze of city stereotypes, such as gang and police violence, Hollywood, earthquakes, and freeways that erect patterns of closure (Giles, 2000, p. 115). *Their Dogs* uses 1960s freeway construction and roadblocks due to a rabies outbreak to trace colonial continuities (Heredia, 2013, p. 99). As the Spanish conquered America with their dogs, the city planners' bulldozers conquer the Mexican-American barrio of East LA.

Nurseries depicts how racial and class inequalities still shape Mexican American's access to city space and the American Dream of economic success and equality of opportunity: maid Araceli as well as her employers are limited in her movements in suburbia due to race and class segregation (Walker, 2014, p. 180), and LA city space is fictionalized so that space is overwritten in such a manner that it cannot be approached nor appropriated any more. Stereotypes, the Hollywood Dream, metaphors of conquest, and the fictional qualities of LA thus hinder an appropriation of city space. The novels also agree that especially for the female protagonists, home cannot serve as an alternative place of arrival when appropriation

of public city space fails, as it fails to offer a safe space and highlights how the city's segregation manages to perturb possible interpersonal networks (Kunow, 2003, p. 195)

The protagonists intend to overcome the segregation, violence, and unreal qualities of LA city space by acts of transgression. The supernatural endings of *Their Dogs* and *The Miraculous Day* convey hope and a sense of resistance (Muñoz, 2013, p. 36; Kevane, 2008, p. 36), and *Nurseries*' road movie ending promises the fulfilment of the American Dream to Araceli. Similarly, through movement such as walking (Amalia), levitation (Tranquilina), or traveling from suburbia to LA coreland and later beyond LA to the Southwest (Araceli), the protagonists attempt to develop an agency and appropriate the topographical system (Certeau, 1988, p. 97).

Scholars have found contact zones and spaces that are opening gaps (Heide, 2004, pp. 285–286; Muñoz, 2013, p. 36) or third spaces (Riebová, 2016, p. 514) which create a sense of emplacement (Grandjeat, 2013, p. 111) and convey space with meaning (Kunow, 2003, p. 182), especially in *The Miraculous Day* and *Their Dogs*. In *Nurseries*, critics have found new homes that are created out of the protagonist's displacement (Walker, 2014, p. 198) and a highlighting of inner frontier zones (Poblete, 2018, p. 125). Overall, I agree that the novels highlight the protagonists' attempt to appropriate city space and engage in arrival processes based on the creation of these third spaces. Nonetheless, the novels also convey the sense that these attempts at place-making continuously fail due to neocolonial continuities that dominate city space. In *The Miraculous Day* and *Their Dogs*, the protagonists only escape this dominated space by entering a miraculous realm of apparitions and levitation, and Araceli in *Nurseries* escapes into the fictionality of a road movie ending. A sense of arrival may emerge temporarily in instances, but ultimately remains a fiction.

In the following, I will elaborate in detail how the individual novels create this oscillation between spatial rejection and arrival.

In *The Miraculous Day*, Amalia gets lost in a maze of Los Angeles city stereotypes. The city space is dominated by gang and police violence, and nature threatens with earthquakes and hot winds. At the same time the asphalt is embellished with flowers, walls display empowering murals and gang graffiti, and the Hollywood dream is constantly evoked. Amalia's movements are limited by these dominant city images, but as they are clashed against each other, they are finally deconstructed. My analysis focuses on the different spaces in the novel to investigate how and if Amalia manages to open up spaces of arrival within this stereotype maze.

Her home in a dilapidated Hollywood stucco bungalow does not serve as a reassuring realm of the female (Anderson, 1997, p. 132), but as a place of restrictions and domestic confrontations which mirror her desolate family situation. She does not have a supportive social network, but has to deal with her problems alone. Her home mirrors the desolate familiar circumstances: it has earthquake cracks in the wall which are provisionally covered by artificial flowers. Cockroaches and earthquake traces invade her home like the police; overall there is a sense of pervasive violence. On the one hand, Amalia tries to live the American Dream of homeownership, additionally dreaming of Hollywood; on the other she wants to transmit Mexican-American traditions such as devotion to the virgin and family values, but does not manage to reconcile the ideals of American consumerism and Latino/a femininity. Her home is no private refuge, but shaped by the public sphere which is male and Anglo-dominated and hence intrudes into her private space (Hamilton, 2011, p. 53) without allowing for the emergence of third spaces that would make an arrival at a home space possible. She remains stuck in imaginations of home that have nothing to do with her reality and hence cannot interact with her surroundings and engage with place. Arrival as an act of emplacement hence has to remain unsuccessful.

Amalia's garden is perceived as an in-between space between the inside world of her home and the outside world. The feeble rosebush there manages to bud one tiny flower, nourishing her hopes for a religious miracle. Whereas Latino/a gardens are often depicted as *barriological* places of spatial appropriation (Crawford, 1999, p. 121), Amalia's garden is rather a sign of neglect, embodying the struggle between cement and flowers typical for Los Angeles. With its persistence of flowers, it manages to open up a tiny crack in dominant space though, a sign for the miraculous ending to come.

When Amalia ventures into the *barrios* of Los Angeles, the novel recreates a binary of *barriological* and *barrioizing* (Villa, 2000, p. 8) forces: on the one hand, there are car parades, mariachi, and murals, on the other, the *barrio* is plagued by gang and police violence, emanating a sense of menace. Los Angeles is depicted as a segregated and fragmented space that conveys a sense of closure counteracting any attempts of creating entries and openings (Kunow, 2008, p. 159) necessary for arrival. Amalia tries to flee violence by moving to Hollywood and by dreaming of Hollywood. Her dream of Hollywood disconnects her from city space, though, she is caught in a simulacrum (Priewe, 2006, p. 51) which gives her movements a fleeting quality, lacking the stability needed for arrival. Through admonitions of earthquakes, hot winds, bush fires, poisonous flowers and other natural catastrophes, Los

Angeles verges on the edge of apocalypse, conveying it with the unreal quality of a disaster movie. Her escapism into Hollywood is hence sabotaged by Hollywood's own movie image.

Amalia attempts to escape these overwhelming images by walking the city. Scholars have described her as an 'ethnic' (Priewe, 2007, p. 133) or 'ethnosocial' urban flâneuse (Kunow, 2003, p. 197) who attempts to escape LA's 'imperialist' space (Saldívar, 1997, p. 119). Contrary to the male 19th century flâneur, though, she walks with a purpose to have breakfast in a diner, visit a friend, garage sales etc. Flânerie has been described as a subversive act that through meandering walking breaks the order of dominant space (Certeau, 1988, p. 107). In *The Miraculous Day*, though, Amalia's walking is interrupted and restricted constantly by the pervasive violence of the city space she encounters. Rather than creating holes in city spaces, dominant space imposes itself on her route through drive-by shootings, born-again, advertisements, and earthquake signs. Amalia attempts to flee her problems through movement, but these constantly catch up with her, detaining her in a mobility without progress, resembling the critique points on the arrival process as expressed by Martinez (Martinez, 2002, p. 54) who claims that without stability, there can be no successful sense of arrival.

The virgin Mary's apparition to Amalia in a shopping mall is the miraculous ending various religious signs in the novel have prepared the ground for. The shopping mall as site of a miracle is an ironic choice as it hints at consumerism as a kind of religion and the mall as its temple (León, 1999, p. 218). Additionally, the mall is seen as a heterotopia, a place that excludes the other and is an inversion of the outside world, as violence is abundant there but not within the mall (Hamilton, 2011, pp. 58–59). The ending challenges this inversion though when violence intrudes in the form of a shoplifter who takes Amalia as a hostage and is shot by the police. An apparition of the virgin Mary empowers her to push the assailant aside. Critics have ascribed this ending a magic realist dimension with liberating power (Giles, 2000, p. 114). Magic realism as a concept has received criticism as being an exoticist tool of othering Latino/a literature (Gewecke, 2013a, p. 452), but also as a postcolonial means to open up gaps, absences and silences through which the neglected other can enter the text (Slemon, 1995, p. 409).

I argue in contrast that the apparition does not manage to continually open up these other spaces. It remains short and does not change Amalia's circumstances. It may convey hope, but hope does not ultimately solve her problems. The miracle resembles a movie-wonder, again highlighting the imagined qualities of Los Angeles city space that make it hard to

appropriate it. When Amalia ascribes her empowerment to the virgin rather than to her own strength, she weakens the perception of her own resources. All in all, Amalia remains stuck between binary cultural perceptions of US-American consumerism and Latina femininity images. City space is a tangle of stereotypes and Hollywood myths that elude a real occupation with it. The novel critically highlights power imbalances and rigid cultural constructs as well on Anglo as on the Latino/a side, but it does not offer a third space for Amalia to dwell in. She is not able to appropriate city space and find gaps from which to develop an own attitude towards these cultural constructs, but remains stuck in an eternal movement without ever arriving.

Their Dogs focuses on myth, memory, and metaphor as tools to counter the loss and erasure created by freeway construction and quarantine road blocks, measures to control the Mexican-American inhabitants of the East LA barrio and continuations of the colonial structure of the Spanish conquest. The novel uses the metaphor of dogs to draw this line of continuity. The construction bulldozers have muzzles like the dogs of the Spanish conquerors 500 years earlier. The freeways hence serve as a symbol of conquest, dominance, and subjugation (Kevane, 2008, p. 25). For the Mexican-American community, they are no symbol of American progress, but a tool of exclusion and othering. The erasure of barrio space through freeway construction brings with itself an erasure of memories, as these are space-bound. The barrio dwellers counter this erasure with stories that they invent and carry on to remember the *other* stories (Huehls, 2012, p. 169) and insert an other or third space into dominant thinking. I contend that whereas these myths and stories manage to establish a counter-narrative, they are not able to enable the protagonists' re-appropriation of city space into a liminal sphere of arrival.

Dogs are also used as a metaphor to symbolize control through the Quarantine Authority who shoots rabid dogs which are hence not only associated with the colonizer, but also with the colonized (Ahuja, 2009, p. 558). The quarantine associates the Mexican-American barrio with disease and contagion, a typical colonial notion of othering (Brady, 2013, p. 183). Whereas city planners fear the invasion of this disease, the barrio itself in turn is invaded by the QA and thus colonized. Hence, the novel highlights colonial continuities, but the inhabitants do not manage to break up the colonial binaries and remain stuck in a dominated space which does not allow for entries and opening of arrival to emerge.

Movement is also restricted due to the palimpsestuous (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 4) qualities of public transportation in East LA. One is 'fucked' (Viramontes, 2007, p. 176) if not owning

a car, the destitute bus system especially disadvantaging people of colour such as Latinos/as. No matter which transportation system the protagonists use though, bus, car, or walking, they remain stuck within the barrio and are caught in a maze of freeway walls and downtown streets. Additionally, the car is depicted as a symbol of male power, ultimately bringing doom for the female protagonists, especially Turtle. This renders the restrictive forces within barrio space inescapable, leaving them stuck in abstract space. Another metaphor used to evoke the limitations of city space is that of the city as body. Freeways amputate streets, and the bulldozers rip the belly of the earth apart. The barrio is not only an infectious space to be removed by city planners, but turns into a healthy body mutilated by them. The protagonists' female bodies are associated with this mangled city space which lets narratives of external colonizing forces and internal forces of patriarchal control overlap. The connection of freeways with death challenges the progress narrative, but does not break their power, hindering a sense of emplacement and stability necessary to arrive.

The loss of barrio space is mirrored by a lack of homes for the protagonists. As Ermila's parents have disappeared in war, she lives with her grandparents, but does not feel welcome there as her grandfather projects the pain about the loss of his daughter on her. As with *The Miraculous Day*, the home is not a safe space, but rather a prison or claustrophobic place. Nurturing aspects of female social networks (Iglesias, 1998, p. 509) are destroyed by patriarchal rule, internal dominant forces thus mirroring the external destruction of the barrio. For Tranquilina, the kitchen should be a place where over the story of her birth she can bond with her mother and connect to her faith, but faith only serves as a tool of male dominance here which invades female space. Turtle has long lost her home which had always been a place of ignorance and male dominance for her anyway. Her home resembles the desolate state of her family, her father being as dangerous as its loose wires. Her garden is tied similarly to violence, a fight scene evoking fighting reptiles that destroy nurturing garden plants that are associated with female nurture. The garden is also the place where Turtle is sucked up by the wailing of a siren that resembles La Llorona's wailing, connecting this myth with a resistant shouting back (Galván, 2015, p. 120). The protagonists' homes thus do not establish a safe place from which to challenge dominated space, but are in itself ruled by dominant patriarchal forces. Through story, myth, and metaphor, the girls can create a sense of agency, but this is limited to fictional space.

The novel depicts the protagonists' efforts to establish alternative homes outside of this ruled domestic realm, such as restaurants, a beauty salon, Ray's corner store, or the house of

elderly neighbour Chavela. However, there are too few of these connective places left in the barrio to counter the freeway's destruction, they cannot offer liminal spheres of arrival as the protagonists are being swept away from them by ongoing violence.

This violence and death is foreboded by Turtle's visit of cemeteries, in one of which she spends her last night. The Serbian, Chinese, and Anglo cemetery are all ethnically other to her, reinforcing her isolation and separating and segregating city space. Cemeteries are heterotopias, heterochronies (Foucault, 1986, p. 26) that remind the loss of life and haunt Turtle with memories of her gang initiation. Whereas they disrupt city space and expose gaps between the living and the dead, Turtle is not able to enter or cross these gaps. There are no entries or openings facilitating an arrival, but only fissures that cannot be expanded and entered to create arrival spaces.

The bloody finale and Tranquilina's levitation take place near a bus depot, another fleeting, transient space or non-place (Augé, 2008, p. 76). Turtle's death is interpreted as a radical opening that challenges the reader to never forget (Cuevas, 2014, p. 38) and participate in the barrio's resistance (Seliger, 2012, p. 276). Whereas her levitation has been interpreted on the one hand as an act of heroic self-empowerment (Arias, 2003, p. 175), it has on the other hand been argued that the exaggerated magic realist ending confuses the reader and could be read ironically (Pattison, 2014, p. 127). I contend that the overlapping of Christian and Aztec iconography blurs colonial binaries, and death and levitation are ignoring ultimate boundaries of life and natural laws. Myth or superstitions break up the novel's spatial reality and refer to the reader's imagination to continue to create a third space of alternative meanings. Again, the reader is charged with the responsibility to continue these ruptures or third spaces. Nonetheless, the opening up of these spaces remains within a mythical realm or is even transferred to an extradiegetic reader level, pointing at the fact that an arrival in this tightly ruled city space is not possible in the intradiegetic reality.

The Barbarian Nurseries takes the reader on a journey through different LA suburbs, bus and train stations, and barrios. The novel negotiates how perceptions of the American Dream shape access to city space and arrival possibilities for Mexican Americans. It criticizes how race and class still shape access to city space. On the one hand, working class Latinos/as such as Araceli within the novel are distinguished through the construction of race precisely as working class. Race serves to establish social and class distance within the gated community (Hill Maher, 2005, p. 302). As having a domestic aid is a sign for not belonging to the fiction of all-American middle class any more and hence threatens American identity,

race serves to justify the difference between employer and employee, locating Latinos/as firmly in the realm of the other.

On the other hand, race does not seem to play a role any more, as Maureen's and Scott's friends have mixed racial features. Race is erased in public opinion and dismissed as irrelevant. The novel criticizes this notion as it implies ignoring existing racial disparities with its social and economic consequences (Kinnally, 2016, p. 85). This racial difference not only limits Araceli's agency as she is perceived as other, but also butts Maureen and Scott under strain. As Scott is of Mexican American and working class origin himself, they have to strive to adapt to the rich suburban setting, even a small crack in the perfect image could challenge their acquired social status. This hence leads to an establishment of borders and a fear of invasion that permeates the entire novel (Poblete, 2018, p. 118). Such as Maureen's home is invaded by police, the media, and ants, California is perceived as being threatened by illegal immigrants who are equalled to invasive bird species that threaten to destroy a pristine Eden. I argue that the novel not only criticizes pervasive notions of race, class, and its erasure in public perception, but that these topics also serve as narratives that keep borders closed and liminal spaces of arrival out of reach.

Maureen's and Scott's suburban home continues this creation of borders. At first sight, suburbia is the incarnation of the American Dream of home-ownership. It has always been as much an idea as a reality, creating a fictional image people strive to fulfil (Beuka, 2004, p. 4). On the downside, suburb creation leads to an increasing segregation, social control, and exclusion, turning the Dream into a nightmare for all those who are excluded from it. *Nurseries* stresses this artificiality of the Laguna Rancho Estates which evokes a sense of detachment and loneliness in Maureen and Araceli, highlighting that especially females suffer from restrictive gender roles in suburbs (Beuka, 2004, p. 18). In my perception, the artificiality of the surrounding space makes it impossible to grasp place, turning the suburb into a historyless non-place (Augé, 2008, p. 63) without the sense of emplacement (Moslund, 2011, p. 30) necessary to arrive.

Maureen's and Scott's garden serves as a prolonged image of this suburbia fictional sphere. At first, it is a perfect suburban American Dream with its swimming pool and lush rain forest. After discovering their personal financial crisis, Maureen decides to replant the garden with less work-intensive desert plants to be able to keep control of her realm. Whereas the rain forest resonates with the idea of California as a settler's garden Eden (Möllers, 1999, p. 73), the cacti symbolize uninhabited wilderness, an intrusion into civilized suburbia. The desert

plants could also be seen as the real autochthonous inhabitants of this suburb at the edge of the Sonoran desert, though. It mirrors Scott's and Maureen's status as outsiders to suburban artificiality. Besides, it could be argued that like the cacti, Scott as an Angeleno and descendant of a Southwesterner (his father stems from Arizona), like the desert plants, he is the real native and the suburb an intrusion. Nonetheless, as the garden is the cause for their eviction from this suburban Eden, it cannot stand as a symbol of spatial appropriation, but highlights the problematic of constructed binaries that exclude more ambiguous, non-binary forms of dwelling within suburbia.

On her search for the boys' grandfather after Scott and Maureen have left the house, Araceli and her charges embark on a veritable odyssey through LA city spaces. They encounter sober train stations, and the more impressive Central Station, and travel with battle-worn buses through areas of urban blight where the homeless look like war refugees in a fantasy novel. The whole journey takes on fictional qualities, highlighting the real-and-imagined quality of LA city space and the fictionality of the American Dream whose realization is only possible at the cost of the exclusion of the other from it, here the homeless. They also travel through Los Angeles' history, encountering memories of a black ghetto and China Town at the place of today's Central Station and recalling South Central LA's past as a White quarter. LA's history is hence displaced, its upheaval creating a new 'transportation palimpsest' (Hutchinson, 2003, p. 4) that counter-acts the erasure of memory through the creation of new associations. The city is continually forced to reinvent itself in order to hinder the undesired past to emerge. This continuous denial of its colonial past hinders a spatial appropriation, attributing space with a fictional quality that makes it impossible to really engage with space and arrive at it.

When Araceli notices that the grandfather is not to be found in South Central LA, they find shelter in the home of a Guatemalan single mother. South Central is depicted as an Arrival City in Saunders' (2010, p. 20) sense. Third and First World intermingle and merge into a crossroads or outpost where lost travellers can regain their composure before moving on. At the Guatemalan home, the boys exchange stories with the local children. These stories blur fiction from movies and novels with war stories from Guatemala, again turning the city into a simulacrum (Murphet, 2004, p. 118), a place where one does not dwell, but hunts these fictions. The next morning, the three leave for Huntington Park, a Latino/a working class barrio teeming with street practice of barriological appropriation such as street vendors, blooming front gardens, and customized cars. At first sight, the inhabitants there have

managed to live a working-class version of the American Dream with their small homes, but it soon becomes clear that they still feel the social and economic distance that separates them from suburban dwellers such as Maureen and Scott. Additionally, some of them have been unable to attain citizenship due to restrictive immigration laws and are thus kept eternally in limbo between their American aspirations and Latino/a appearance which marks them as other, making arrival impossible. Nonetheless, Araceli begins to feel at home in the barrios of Huntington Park and Santa Ana, but both times is forcefully removed from there by police arrests. These hinder her freedom of movement. Her illegality denies her a right to a stable communal space needed for arrival.

The novel's twofold ending addresses the two major aspects of the American Dream. The Torres-Thompsons pursue their version of freedom: they downsize and move from the artificial suburb into an all-American craftsman home in Pasadena which resonates much more with middle-class American identity. They hence dismiss the purely materialistic American Dream and pursue American values such as restraint, discipline, and a fierce work ethic. Araceli in turn in spite of her ambivalent experiences with the American legal system still believes in the metaphysical Dream of equality of opportunity and heads off to the Southwest with her love interest to experience this freedom of choices promised by the Dream. The novel thus criticizes the promises of the materialistic American Dream, but still adheres to its metaphysical ideal of equality of opportunity.

Araceli's road movie ending has been read as an empowerment or her very own declaration of independence (Poblete, 2018, p. 123). Whereas an arrival in Los Angeles city space is thus constantly deferred to Mexican Americans due to erasures of race and class, the novel seems to claim that they can still arrive at the metaphysical American Dream, a promise big enough to bridge the deceptions of the materialistic Dream and enable an arrival at a specific American mindset in spite of the repellent properties of public space.

As the present thesis has shown, contemporary novels still depict Los Angeles as a space that remains deeply contested for its Mexican-American inhabitants. Repeatedly, they are hindered to appropriate city space due to its fictional qualities, the real-and-imagined (Soja, 2000, p. 147) properties of Los Angeles. Amalia in *The Miraculous Day* is lost in a maze of stereotypes, the protagonists of *Their Dogs* struggle to create their own version of barrio lackin in history through memory, myth, and metaphor, and Araceli in *Nurseries* has to navigate a space that with its richness of fictional fantasy narratives makes it hard to choose an own narrative of successful space navigation.

Nonetheless, the protagonists have shown that they are able to challenge the colonial continuities still at work in present Los Angeles by utilizing precisely this fictionality to their own advantage. Amalia's apparition merges Hollywood movie images and Chicano/a Christian iconography into a symbol of strength for her which empowers her to find agency again. Tranquilina's levitation is a syncretistic challenge of colonial binaries that entices the reader to imagine ways out of the historic erasure of Mexican-American voicelessness. Araceli is able to withstand the turmoils of the American legal system and story-twisting by the media and invents her own future by escaping in a movie-like ending into a future she still has to draw for herself, using all the opportunities the metaphysical American Dream promises to her.

Overall, the depictions of city space within the novels remain caught in colonial continuities, though. Whereas the protagonists are able to challenge these continuities through fictional meta-levels of storytelling, they are not able to permanently break up city space to find places to dwell within the liminal spheres of third border spaces where they could arrive at their more hybrid versions of American identity. It remains to be seen if future novels and narrative works will be able to depict more open and creative versions of Los Angeles city space, as said space is slowly shifting, with Latinos/as having outnumbered Anglos in LA county (Davis, 2000, p. 2), or if with the ongoing immigration debates, Trump's rhetorics of building a wall (Kilani, 2019, n.p.), and overall anti-Latino/a sentiment in the current heated political climate of the US, the construction of binaries will proliferate unhindered and literature will have to hold up a mirror to it.

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