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## Para Las Duras and Other Ephemeral Bodies: Queer Chicax Social Spaces (<http://terremoto.mx/article/para-las-duras-and-other-ephemeral-bodies/>)

By *Carribbean Fragoza*

Reflecting on the importance of safe spaces for resistance and dissent, Carribbean Fragoza writes about the lesbian Chicax queer community in Los Angeles.



Four young women from the party crew Mind Crime Hookers standing on the historic site, 6th street bridge in 1993 which was demolished in 2016. Image courtesy of Guadalupe Rosales.

Queer Chicax social spaces are enactments of utopia. Though fleeting and ephemeral, they are real territories nonetheless. They are containers of culture, class, race, and gender, but most importantly desire. Leisure and recreation, the pleasures of the body, inevitably go hand in hand with sexuality. They are the dynamics of a free body when no one is looking or when a body gives no fucks. Amorphous, porous, elusive, the sexual body evades the death grip of hegemony by slipping into the cracks, the wormholes hidden in built environments.



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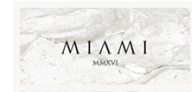


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Chicanx lesbian spaces of leisure are most often left out of larger hetero-normative narratives, and even queer ones that tend to privilege male and white voices. Finding these spaces and understanding them require a different kind of looking. Queer Chicanx artists, writers, and scholars have been charting out these ephemeral territories of inter-space while new generations continue to expand the Chicanx borderlands using increasingly sophisticated vocabularies and cultural attitudes.



Laura Aguilar, Plush Pony #15, 1992, Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. Artwork © Laura Aguilar.

### Las Duras at Plush Pony

It's as if photographer Laura Aguilar knew that the Plush Pony wouldn't last forever. She may have foreseen the waves of displacement and gentrification that would wash over LA's Eastside, pushing out the homegrown families and businesses from this historically Latino and Chicano section of the city. But most queer Chicanxs can tell you that it's only a matter of time before spaces like the Plush Pony dwindle away. Maybe that's why *rucas* partied there as hard as they did while they could.

Aguilar's photo essay on the Plush Pony captures a scene that was vital to the lives of Eastside Chicanx lesbians though it remained largely invisible. Her photographs capture the crafted poses and candid personalities of queer Chicanxs in the early 90s. "My idea came out of coming to this place from time to time knowing that there are women for whom this is the only place of community. These women stay on the Eastside and don't leave it," Aguilar wrote in her notes that accompanied the photo series.

In her photographs, Chicanx butches and bulldaggers, baby dykes and femmes, display their well-trained gaze, both piercingly interrogative and guarded. The *veteranas* have rehearsed and mastered it to impenetrable perfection. Like a well-creased pair of pants, their faces know how to fall back into place. The young ones, *las tiernitas*, however, still tender with friendly shyness, sometimes bend out of place into wary smiles

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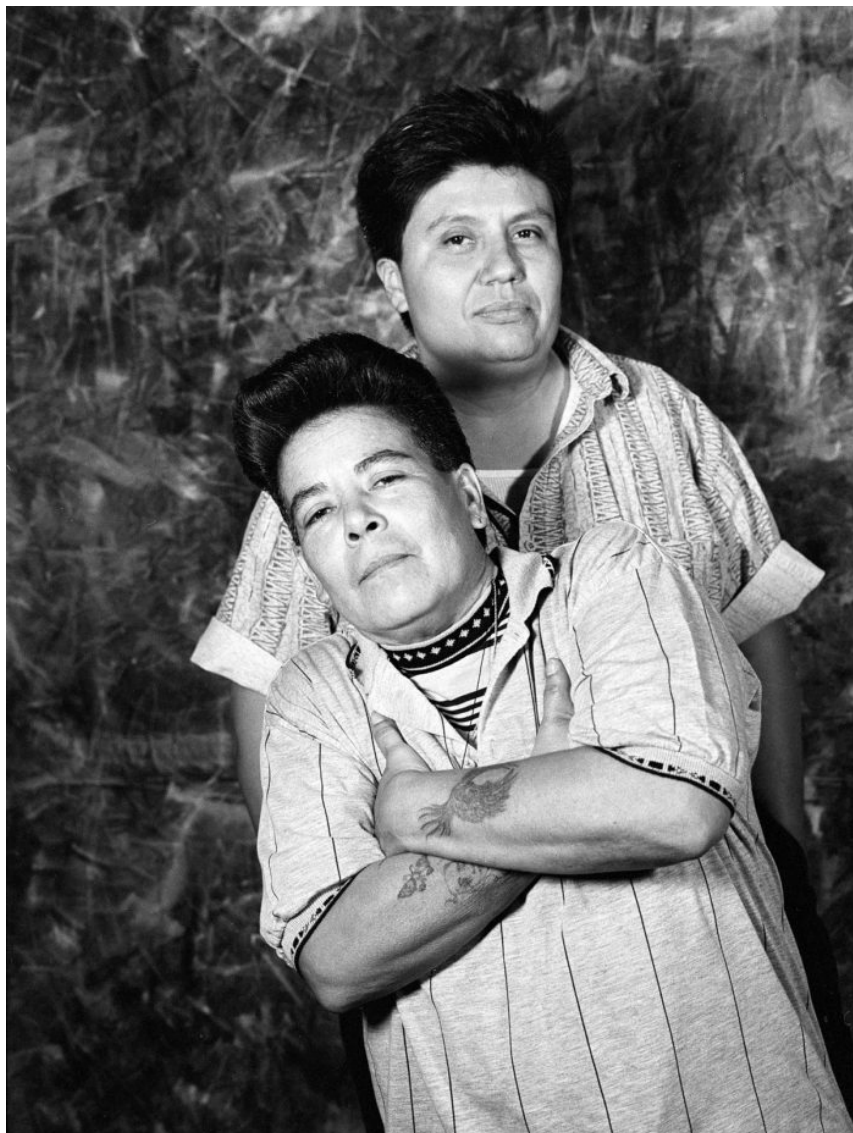


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sometimes bend out of place into wary smiles.

*Butchas* pose with defiant chins lifted to the camera, shoulders pushed wide, fists at their hips framing belt buckles typically reserved for the male crotch, as if to say, “*Aquí nuestros ovarios rifan.*” [2] In spaces like the Plush Pony, *mujeres* learn to protect their space with the hardness of their poses. No smiling *chulas* here to welcome expectant hetero males. “We act mean to defend our clubs and institutions... Being mean to boys is fun and a second-wave feminist duty,” asserts experimental writer and Chicana Myriam Gurba. [3] Indeed, Plush Pony’s message as an aggressively queer Chicana space was clear. And yet, even the hardest butch will melt in the warm embrace of her femme sweetheart.



Laura Aguilar, Plush Pony #11, 1992, Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. Artwork © Laura Aguilar.



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Laura Aguilar, Plush Pony #7, 1992, Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. Artwork © Laura Aguilar.

In another one of Aguilar's images, we see a pompadoured butch press her Tres Flores-scented head against the soft body of a *güera*, a girl with a *coqueta* [4] smile, *seguro le gusta bailar* [5]. Her head is crowned with teased golden hair and sprayed bangs. The rest of her permed hair trails *como caminito* [6] down her flower-patterned back. We find *la güera* again, more playful this time, sandwiching a different butch between her and another femme. Pressed *entre el par de piernudas, la butcha* [7] can't help but grin widely. Holding the pose is a precarious balancing act, a silly antic that renders them weightless with joy, unbounded, even if just for a few precious fleeting moments. It makes everything worth it.

Chicanx lesbian bars also present a unique opportunity to study the intersection of subculture, space, and sexuality. It's a kind of space where Chicanx queerness has come to rehearse and perform its varied identities. Away from domestic spaces, the body learns alternate vocabularies of fashion, gesture, and posture. It's where one performs these uniquely, finding mastery in one's own way of embodying them: the way one stands to order a Jack-and-Coke at the bar or the way one dances a *norteña*, just so, holding an ass *de cartoncito*, the way you've seen your *tíos* do at a family party. Holding your *haina* just right feels as good as you imagined. Better.

Though Chicanx lesbian consciousness was experiencing a golden age in high academic circles at the time she was taking photographs, Laura Aguilar was interested in the working-class Chicanx lesbians that clocked in at factory day jobs and found respite in local lesbian bars. According to scholars Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, working class lesbians "pioneered ways of socializing together... without losing the ability to earn a living." Like those in London and New York, lesbian bars in East LA are not a novelty, though they are unique as Latina spaces that have largely been kept marginalized. Dr. Stacy Macias, Professor of Gender and Women Studies at CSULB, notes, "Lesbian bars have always existed. They were not meant to be a trendy destination, they served a clientele that lived and worked locally." [8]

Moreover, according to Dr. Macias, queer Chicanx social spaces can have more direct political functions. "People often associate queer social spaces with just leisure, but organizing and political spaces are also social spaces," adds Dr. Macias. According to scholar Ken Gelder, the formation of homosexual consciousness "[arises] out of club life and its persecutions." [9] Although spaces like bars often get left out of discussions about activism for not performing the real work of activism, they too have served as tinderboxes for political organizing. Significant watershed moments for political action and awakening have been born from these spaces, such as those at the Black Cat Tavern in Silverlake in 1967 and the Stonewall Inn in New York City in 1969.



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Laura Aguilar, *Plush Pony #12*, 1992, Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. Artwork © Laura Aguilar.

### Tribes of the In-Between

*Corriendo de aquí para allá* [10], Nancy Valverde searched for a home until she found it in what Gloria Anzaldúa has described as “the thin edge of barbwire”—except for Valverde, home was a razor’s edge, as well as the edges of a pair of sheers and combs and all the tools used for trimming and cutting, parting and splitting. She shaped a home for herself in the most unlikely of places, a barbershop in East LA, where masculinities are literally shaped and reinforced.

And yet, Valverde, a queer Chicana who grew up in Lincoln Heights in the 1940s and 1950s, endured discrimination, incarceration, and near death before finally arriving to the East LA barbershop where she would work as a barber for over 30 years. Her story tells us of the great risks that queer Chicanos have taken to create spaces that will hold them together, if only briefly. It underscores the need to protect these spaces by all means possible.

Nancy Valverde was arrested numerous times for “masquerading” or dressing like a man, which had been an official criminal offense since the 1850s. Sometimes she was booked under no particular crime and jailed indefinitely. Sometimes the arrests happened on location, sometimes en route, as police scouted areas surrounding known queer bars.

By chance, Valverde’s story arrived to artist, writer, performer, and social historian Raquel Gutiérrez in a fleeting moment in another temporary space. She met Valverde at a Latina lesbian group called LUNAS (Latinas Understanding the Need for Action) that had operated briefly at Bienestar, a gay and HIV/AIDS health and wellness center in East LA. “I met Nancy at Bienestar. I recorded her story in a series of interviews. She told me the story of being a 14-year-old chauffeur for a sex worker,” says Gutiérrez [11]. In her early formative teen years, Valverde was already an independent hard worker, also delivering pastries and baked goods for a bakery. She hustled jobs, paid her dues, and understood her simple yet contested right to live her life as she saw fit: as an honest-to-God butch lesbian. Despite the consequences, Valverde wore her hair short, dressed comfortably in men’s clothes, and eventually became a barber at a men’s barbershop.



“One of the things you get most attention for as a butch is having short hair,” notes Gutiérrez. Hair was not only a central aspect of Valverde’s life and profession, but also an important and personal subject of inquiry for Gutiérrez. As she learned about Valverde’s life and what other Chicana butch lesbians had experienced in earlier decades, Gutiérrez was also learning to navigate her own queerness. After the group was dissolved due to lack of funding, she continued to develop as a *teatrística* at Highways, a queer theater and performance space in Santa Monica. With her fellow *teatrísticas* of the ButchLalis de Panochitlan (Claudia Rodriguez and Mari Garcia), Gutiérrez brought her own questions and explorations to the same black box theater where they developed *The Barber of East L.A.*

Developing identity, though personal, is not necessarily a private or even individual project as it often takes place in public spaces, away from the restrictiveness of domestic realms. For Gutiérrez, queerness was something that she was able to develop in a collective theater space, as part of an artistic and historic exploration. Well before that, her feminist and queer consciousness was already taking shape during her teen years in the 1990s Eastside punk scene. “Punk rock exposed me to more radical ideas like feminism. And not just Riot grrrl.” She points to the Zapatista uprising and the emergence of brown feminists as a key moment for her as it coincided with her “apex of going to punk shows,” when she started driving herself around the city. “I was meeting girls, trying to stay afloat amidst unchallenged masculinity.” She notes that while she found herself in politicized Chicano spaces, “there really weren’t safe queer spaces.”

“*Me hacía falta otra cosa*” [12] she says. She found that *otra cosa* in the Latina lesbian group at Bienestar where she also met other young creative Chicanas, like Aurora Guerrero, Claudia Rodriguez, Stacy Macias, and others that would go on to make art, films, literary, and scholarly work.

Though often short-lived, queer Chicana spaces necessarily create moments of intense exchange and tribe-building. Queer poet Tatiana de la Tierra defines lesbian space as tribal and nomadic, temporal nodes created when lesbian bodies can meet again. “All lesbians who leave the tribe find a way to continue finding each other. We keep uniting. Always. The tribe is as large as all of us everywhere, a place that is not a place at all, yet our home just the same. The tribe is each other, the only place where we belong: our sisterhood.”

Perhaps the most useful way to think about queer Chicana spaces is Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of the borderlands as an in-between location: a geographic, cultural, and sexual intersection that allows for an unsettled, transitory state to expand from the marginal into an entire landscape, rich with possibility. It is the true homeland to the *mestizos* or what she calls the “*atravesados*,” the transgressive, the queer.





Guadalupe Rosales' cousin, Ever, and a girl. Ever was killed in 1996. The entire Map Pointz project is dedicated to him. Image courtesy of Guadalupe Rosales.



Madness 1993. Photo taken at a ditching party. Image courtesy of Guadalupe Rosales.

### Backyard Parties: Ephemeral Archive

When Coatlicue was first unearthed in 1790, it is said she so horrified Europeans and *criollos* with her ravenous fangs, floppy breasts, and sacrificial hearts—especially when they saw indigenous people venerating her—that she was buried back in the ground. Years later, they dug her up again only to be offended still by her grotesqueness. They promptly buried her once more.

Like Coatlicue, over the decades, Chicanos in the US have come to light and submerged again into the underground, pushing and pulling cyclically against cultural and political forces. Roughly two hundred years after Coatlicue was first unearthed and reburied, Chicanos in the 1990s reclaimed Aztlán, finding home in informal, off-the-radar, underground spaces in Los Angeles. Chicanoxs created a sophisticated rhizomatic network of cultural venues that created fertile ground to give rise to a new generation of Chicana/o artists, musicians, and organizers. With urgency, they operated not in formal institutional spaces, but in vacant warehouses and cheap storefronts. Parent-free houses and backyards became sites for impromptu gigs and parties: performance spaces.

Guadalupe Rosales's *Veteranas and Rucas* Instagram archive of LA's 1990s party crew and rave scene is a digital documentation of a culture defined by its ephemeral and underground nature. Unearthing a whole new set of archives using social media, Rosales is mapping new territories. She is measuring out the terrain, fleshing out its features with the photographs of young men and women striking their hardest poses. With time, the finer features of this territory will emerge to reveal unspoken niches, sensual zones once carefully guarded.







An image part of the archive project *Veteranas and Rucas*. Courtesy of Guadalupe Rosales.

This multi-locational, ever-shifting constellation of informal spaces was purposefully ambiguous, constituting a form of strategic resistance and self-preservation. Aware of their socio-political place in the intensified racist and anti-immigrant climate of the 1990s, Chicanxs identified with notions of *Chicanidad*, recognizing Aztlán as their unique, literal, and metaphorical homeland. Though locations themselves were unanchored, the youth culture that emerged was as well defined as the lipliner on a homegirl's lips. Fashion, music, and dance coalesced not just into a singular scene, but into an entire multi-faceted landscape complete with its own thriving economy. Teenagers became culture-makers as well as entrepreneurs as they organized increasingly elaborate parties.

However, although the party scene was a kind of haven for marginalized brown youth, it was also intensely patriarchal and hetero-normative. All-woman party crews emerged as an alternate, perhaps safer space for girls and young women, though Rosales was not aware of specifically queer-friendly niches. As a young woman still grappling with her own sexuality, she found queer spaces hard to come by in the party scene. I did attend a queer rave once," she recalls. "It was the first time I saw girls making out... It felt safe. We could drink and not feel endangered," says Rosales.

Rosales' *Veteranas and Rucas* project can be understood as an "archive of the ephemeral," a concept of queer scholar José Esteban Muñoz's. Muñoz calls on intellectuals to look at dance floors, cruise spots, and other temporal spaces where queerness is performed as archival sites. To find these, a different, more agile way of looking is required. Queer historian Emma Pérez argues for a "decolonial queer gaze that allows for different possibilities and interpretations of what exists in the gaps and silences but is often not seen or heard." [13] In effect, Rosales' work is an approach, a "queering" of the archive by looking through ephemera—stray objects not part of any official archive.



An image part of the archive project *Veteranas and Rucas*. Courtesy of Guadalupe Rosales.



## Digital Space: New Generations

*Some lesbians are clay/they are the ones who wear the pants and permit others to take them off. They are the sporty ones, the androgynous, the new generation.../They are the most excited. They sing and dance desire. [14]*

Poet Tatiana de la Tierra uses clay, a pliable earth material, to represent queer youth that would shape themselves differently from previous generations. There will always be the hard ones, the butch *lesbianas*, as well as the femme “*muñecas*” as Tatiana describes them, but a new in-between emerges in more flexible, defiant, and unruly ways. For queer Chicana artists and activists, digital space plays an essential role in identity-building and space-making, presenting new possibilities and limitations. As identities become increasingly “*átravesadas*,” [15] so does the nature of spaces with the accelerated hybridization of digital and physical spaces. Spaces, like sexualities and genders, are also expanding spectrums.

“My generation, I guess, is the youngest. We’re different... We are very event-based... A lot of queer community is online,” says Chicana artist and scholar Angelica Becerra [16]. A doctoral candidate in Chicana/o Studies at UCLA, Becerra’s doctoral work focuses on how political graphics have evolved to find a new life in digital space. Some of the earliest signs of queer Chicana artists in the digital world can be found in the work of artist Alma López. During the 1990s and into the early 2000s, her widely circulated re-imaginings of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a sensual, queer body found their way to a new generation of Chicanas with a flowering queer consciousness that would bear fruit in both the arts and academia.

As newer generations of Chicana artists and crafts-makers come of age in the digital age, they are able to access wider audiences and can more easily participate in alternate arts economies that are not entirely at the mercy of commercial galleries and institutional grants. Becerra, for example, has seen her illustrations of feminists of color grow in popularity on her online shop (as well as in galleries), which she cheekily tags on social media as 1-800-PAY-A-FEMME. Larger projects, particularly in film, have seen some considerable success in online crowd funding campaigns that have helped launch Chicana queer films such as Aurora Guerrero’s *Mosquita y Mari* and, more recently, Adelina Anthony’s *Bruising for Besos*.

Chicanas are also using the digital sphere to re-summon the more radical qualities of Indie radio in the form of podcasts. Where pirate radio was once a method of communication of the pre-digital underground and thrashy Xerox-copied zines offered DIY tutorials on how to set up clandestine radio stations, a growing number of podcasts are creating space for queer Chicana voices. They are proving to be especially useful as platforms for candid conversations about queerness and culture, racism, and any other topic under the sun. On Becerra’s podcast, “*Anzaldú-ing It*,” she and her co-host Jackie chat about everything from navigating queerness at family holidays to racial violence at Charlottesville and imposter syndrome among Chicana academics.



LA car show, photo taken around 1994/1995. Image courtesy of Guadalupe Rosales.

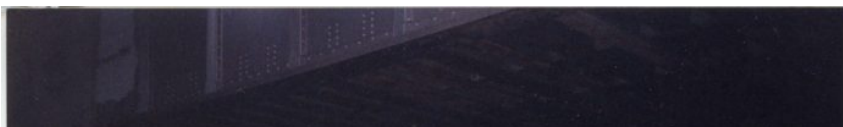




Photo taken at a cruise night on Whittier Boulevard in 1995. Image courtesy of Guadalupe Rosales.

And yet, for all this digital rush, the need, desire, and use of physical space are never far removed. “We imagine virtual space as one that is more democratized, but it is also very limited. That’s why we are having desire to return to space and books,” says Dr. Stacy Macias [17]. Spaces like La Concha, “an autonomous community center and safe space,” is managed by the feminist cycling group, the Ovarian Psychos. Both the space and the bike collective defiantly and consciously hold space in Boyle Heights, a community that is currently in the spotlight for its brutal fight against gentrification. As lack of access to affordable real estate for housing and small businesses reaches a breaking point in poor and working class communities of color, creating a physical presence represents nothing less than militant action. The visibility and physical occupation of public space by a brown body, a female and queer body, is an act of war.

New generations of queer Chicaxns occupy a kind of hybrid space that is both digital and physical. For young Chicaxns like the members of Muy Monte, a music and arts collective that regularly organizes and participates in events like the East Los Angeles Art Walk as well as their own dance parties, they live on Instagram, less so on Facebook, where they post up their party flyers, remixed versions of Chico Che, and swapmeet cassette tape covers. It’s the 90s version of the party flyer flipped into digital form for a digital audience whose members will still find each other in the physical world, a shitty bar for a night just to dance.

The return to material experiences of culture in physical space through the revival of vinyl records and dance parties perhaps comes from an actual need to occupy more than Internet space. As live active bodies in the world, there is as much need to claim space as there is to re-invent it for our reconfigured communities and selves.

#### Notes:

1. Reference to the book: Tatiana de la Tierra. 2002. *Para las duras: Una fenomenología lesbiana*. USA: Calaca Press and Chibcha Press.
2. Transl.: Here our ovaries rule.
3. Myriam Gurba. (2017). *Mean*. USA: Coffee House Press.
4. Transl.: coquettish or flirtatious.
5. Transl.: She surely likes to dance.
6. Transl.: “...like a garden pathway.”
7. Transl.: “... between two pairs of bare legs, the butch...”
8. Dr. Stacy Macias, interview by the author on August 2017.
9. Gelder, Ken. (1997). *The Subcultures Reader*. USA and Canada: Routledge.
10. Transl.: Running from here to there.
11. Raquel Gutierrez, interviewed by the author on August 2017.
12. Transl.: “I was missing something.”
13. Emma Perez. *Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard*. USA: Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, Vol. 24, No. 2/3. University of Nebraska Press.
14. Poem by Tatiana de la Tierra.
15. Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (USA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).
16. Angelica Becerra, interviewed by the author on August 2017.
17. Dr. Stacy Macias, interviewed by the author on August 2017.

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**ARCO Madrid 2016**



[\(http://terremoto.mx/arco-madrid-2016/\)](http://terremoto.mx/arco-madrid-2016/)

July 13, 2014

**Cabeza, pies o entrepierna**



[\(http://terremoto.mx/cabeza-pies-o-entrepierna/\)](http://terremoto.mx/cabeza-pies-o-entrepierna/)

May 27, 2017

**arteBA 2017, Buenos Aires**



[\(http://terremoto.mx/arteba-2017-buenos-aires/\)](http://terremoto.mx/arteba-2017-buenos-aires/)

January 21, 2014

**Transacción pública**



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