CHAPTER 4

The Economic Displacement of Mexican American Migrant Labor

Disembodied Criminality to Embodied Spirituality and Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus

PRECEDING CHAPTERS have surveyed several types of internal displacements: environmental, economic, and wartime. In some cases, these types have overlapped. What has become evident from this examination is how they share large structural similarities despite the notable differences in race, region, and circumstance. Citizenship and landownership were tied to views of American-ness, a concept utilized by those in power to exclude different groups over time through various forms of governmentality. For example, the displacement of people of Japanese descent during World War II discussed in the previous chapter was a wartime event invoking a state of emergency to remove citizenship rights. Their incarceration in the heart of the country ironically was an attempt to render them foreign and external—a constitutional displacement.

Other displacements built upon and extended this same logic of foreignness and exclusion in order to continue to disenfranchise. During World War II, because of the 15 million enlisted, there was a fear of a farm labor shortage, though in reality, as Mae Ngai argues, this fear masked a desire to keep wages low by creating a surplus of laborers.1 While many people of Mexican descent had long been working in farming, as discussed in chapter 2’s analysis of the effects of the Dust Bowl migration in California, a new program

1. Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 137.
began in 1942 between the United States and Mexico that utilized many of the H-2 visa protocols for obtaining transnational farmworkers that were mentioned in chapter 1’s examination of African American and Caribbean labor in Florida. This new “emergency” migration policy lasted twenty-two years, until 1964, showing again how the concept of emergency is employed by the government to create an unquestionable normalcy.2 The Bracero Program, as it was labeled, was the largest guest worker program in the United States, involving 4.6 million laborers over the course of its history.3 Alongside those workers were undocumented immigrants as well as United States citizens of multiple ethnicities, including many Mexican Americans. Those immigrant workers were welcomed for their work, whether through open governmental policy or silent acceptance of the even cheaper undocumented labor, but they were required to return to Mexico when their work was complete. This transnational workforce had none of the protections of citizenship, and the citizens working next to them were often treated as though they too had no rights. The Bracero Program thus facilitated and expanded an already ongoing economic displacement by regularizing the idea that people of Mexican descent were temporary aliens who could never become citizens, and this stereotype continues to the present day.

In 1962, César Chávez, a prominent Mexican American labor activist from Arizona, founded the National Farmworkers Association labor union in response to the Bracero Program after his own experience working in the fields. Chávez wanted to bring together farmworkers so that they might more effectively bargain as a collective for their rights as workers and citizens. Most memorably, he led the Delano Grape Strike and Boycott from 1965 to 1970, where he and his union joined forces with Filipino American workers. Since it was already the end of the harvest, a field strike could not be successful. Instead, the workers asked consumers to boycott purchasing grapes until they were allowed to unionize and their demands were met. While this boycott was effective against one corporation almost immediately, some corporations held out because grapes were only one of their products or they sold their grapes through other company names, making them harder to track; Chávez’s union, which merged to become the United Farm Workers (UFW) union, thus expanded their boycott to all grapes as the years passed. Part of their strategy was to have local churches and national church organizations sign on to support the boycott to show that they were “a mainstream, nonradical

cause.” 4 This spiritual support for workers showed that they were moral people and therefore deserved economic support as well. Chávez himself performed a kind of Catholic penitential pilgrimage, what he called a perigrinación, when he walked barefoot from Delano to Sacramento (approximately 300 miles). 5 As he described it, the journey was both spiritual and political, a “religious pilgrimage and a plea for social change for the farm worker” to benefit both “body and soul,” where the participants were calling on divine support and solidarity just as with “our Negro brothers in Selma.” 6 By 1969, “retail grape sales were estimated to be down 12 percent nationally and down more than 50 percent in major cities,” but the government undermined this progress through President Nixon’s public support of growers and his public eating of grapes. 7 Additionally, the Defense Department quadrupled their purchasing of grapes for soldiers in Vietnam. Even so, the UFW eventually triumphed because they expanded their boycotts, explaining that harmful pesticides were being used on the grapes; these effects were felt by growers, and in 1970 they finally signed a contract with the union. 8 Overall, the UFW as it was run by Chávez operated as a “struggle in spiritual rather than simply economic terms, as a new national civil rights movement.” 9 That is, the UFW’s combination of church support and spiritual beliefs with economic activism effectively combated capitalist and racist views that served to restrict citizenship rights.

Even after the formal conclusion of the Bracero Program, however, many of the same policies and attitudes underpinning it continued. Cultural views on Mexican immigration remained much the same around the time of the 1994 passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the bills leading to it, such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. NAFTA in particular promoted trade between countries without the human bodies that are likely to come with that trade. Douglas Massey calls the U.S. policy with Mexico “schizophrenic” because “borders are rendered permeable with respect to movements of goods [. . .] but impermeable with respect to the movement of workers.” 10 This approach divorces the economic prosperity linked to an opening of borders from the workers who are part of the expanded market.

5. Ibid., 80.
7. Shaw, Beyond the Fields, 43.
8. Ibid., 43–46.
9. Ibid., 2–3; additional background on the Delano Grape Boycott is found in Shaw, Beyond the Fields, 13–50.
This chapter addresses how historical Chicana/o migrants are forced into cycles of movement based on their economic need that place them into a bare life that renders them invisible with respect to rights and marks them as criminals whose bodies need to be eradicated from the land while they are also being sought for their labor. The migrant laborer, as seen throughout this book with African Americans in Florida and Anglo-Americans on the West Coast, points to a particular configuration of the displaced person. Recognized neither as an international refugee nor as an internally displaced person moved by a single event, the repeated movement of the migrant laborer through its very regularity serves to reinforce a precarious status without citizenship rights or protection. These ongoing nonproductive movements of Chicana/o workers are part of a history of mass movements of people that are affected by governmental choices that alter self, space, and community. Because this status, however, falls outside the UN’s eventually codified legal protections and internal state aid, this particular arrangement of the workers’ lives and movement ignores the full embodiment of these individuals and creates a disenfranchised community without positive visibility.

This history shows the ongoing struggle for economic and civil liberties between workers and migrants of Mexican descent, on the one hand, and corporations and the U.S. government on the other. Literary texts, by contrast, show not only the effects of that history but also the possibility for an alternative future. Chicana author Helena María Viramontes, born in East Los Angeles in 1954, accompanied her parents to the fields of Easton, California, during her childhood summers to pick grapes with those immigrant workers. Viramontes has said that those experiences and her involvement with the United Farm Workers Support Coalition while she was in college during the early 1970s formed the basis of her 1995 novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* and its fictional representation of migrant workers. She even dedicates the book to her parents, “who met in Buttonwillow picking cotton,” as well as to the memory of César Chávez. Elsewhere Viramontes reflected on this early political involvement, stating that she learned about fighting for the collective good while participating in the grape boycott.  

In this chapter, I examine Viramontes’s portrayal of the plight of some of these workers, which, although grounded in her experience in the 1970s, nonetheless occupies an indefinite present, since her book is located in an unspecified moment in the latter half of the twentieth century. In general, Viramontes’s novel shows that although the government policies change, the result is often the same for the workers,
who are treated almost exclusively as criminals who need to be eradicated from the land even as their bodies are sought for labor.

_Under the Feet_, which concentrates on a Chicana/o family who is part of this continual economic displacement through their migrant labor in the fields of California, addresses citizenship's tie to racial identity, which was prominent in the national discourse nearly twenty years ago when the novel was first published, but which remains recognizable even today. Over the course of the book, individual characters feel harassed by the Border Patrol, are poisoned by pesticide sprayings ordered by those who disregard the effects on workers' bodies and their water supply, and are labeled thieves if they eat the fruit they pick. These actions remind them of their bare life in the eyes of the state and that their ownership of even the fruit of the land, not to mention the land itself, is impossible, as well as reminding them that their labor is desired but not their bodies. Hence, Viramontes's text portrays the ramifications of such biopolitical policies that restrict workers' movement and deny their existence.

_Under the Feet_ also shows not just how outside forces are imposed on the characters but also how they respond. My analysis of this response begins with political geographer Edward Soja’s general concept of “Thirdspace,” which views the combination of real and imagined space as creating new livable possibilities. In this chapter, I rely on one of the theorists that Soja used to build his larger argument, critical scholar Homi Bhabha, whose related term “third space” emphasizes postcolonial and historical elements, showing that the intermingling of various cultures can create a positive hybridity. Finally, I draw heavily on _mestiza_ writer Gloria Anzaldúa’s argument about the conflicts of space for people of Mexican heritage who live along the U.S.–Mexican border. My thinking is informed by her concept of the borderlands, the space “where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds,” and even more specifically her idea of _Nepantla_, the in-between space. _Nepantla_ clarifies that her borderlands theory about the ambiguities of physical space can also be understood on a more mental and spiritual level, a topic scholars often avoid. Viramontes herself has discussed this kind of overlap in her own thinking. She has said that as a child, she would learn by overhearing adults talking in her house as well as by reading the few books available to her—the encyclopedia and the Bible—leading her to develop a thought process that required

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12. Soja, _Thirdspace_.
14. Soja’s spelling of the term “Thirdspace” differs from Bhabha, who spells it “third space.” In quotations I will spell it as each scholar does, but when I am employing the term, I will use “Thirdspace.”
15. Anzaldúa, _Borderland/La Frontera_, 25.
intellect, spirituality, and a connection to people.16 Under the Feet embraces such theoretical positions that move beyond binaries by having its characters, particularly the female heroine Estrella, find ways to respond to the governmental forces imposed on them by integrating and reforming cultural and religious connections in order to develop their own symbolic response that reimagines the spaces that erase and harm them into safe havens that embrace and protect them. This reimagining is accomplished by searching for a new place that blurs physical and spiritual boundaries as well as the boundaries of linear time—inverting what I am calling their “disembodied criminality” into an “embodied spirituality” that acknowledges their complex cultural heritage. Whereas my chapter on the Dust Bowl migrants demonstrated how their utopian solution based on class and shared ownership left behind many people of color, and while my chapter on the incarceration of people of Japanese descent showed how the racial discourse of the government was challenged via the exceptional space of the camp and interrogation room, in contrast, in Viramontes’s book we see a fuller potential of Thirdspace as a site for social justice that combines the political with the spiritual.

I first briefly discuss the history of the U.S.–Mexican border and then how it underlies the disembodied criminality imposed on real migrant workers and on Viramontes’s characters. Next I examine the complex role of spirituality in the novel before turning to Estrella’s symbolic response of embodied spirituality, which creates a Thirdspace via Nepantla that utilizes layered histories, spaces, and spiritualities—reflecting Viramontes’s own development of the kind of spiritual and spatial reimaginings utilized by Chávez and the UFW. By demonstrating the disruptive possibilities of the overlaps and synchronicities of time and space, Under the Feet reveals the resistive power available to those perceived as living in the margins both in an ethnic and a gendered context. While the doctrines and practices of Christianity work in some ways to create a distinct view of community for the largely Catholic migrant workers that is not strictly limited by national boundaries in the novel or in reality, organized religion is not presented as the text’s solution to the problem of national borders because the coercive power of the church continues to colonize as well as oppress some of its followers. Instead, Estrella demonstrates how the characters must draw on their own complex spirituality that includes and then transforms their ties to Christianity, Aztec religion, and local customs into a space for social justice. In the end, through the representation of an adolescent girl, the novel continues to hope for a new community and a feeling of home that emphasizes each person’s own internal strength. Though this resolution does

not emphasize a sense of New Tribalism that expands to other ethnic groups, it is one that includes the present and the past, the imagined and the real.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{A HISTORY OF THE BORDER: COLONIZATION AND MIGRATION}

The physical border between the United States and Mexico has long been contested and shifting, and with that movement has gone the dominion of hundreds of thousands of miles of land and the people residing on it. In 1521, the Spanish conquered Mexico-Tenochtitlán and the Aztec people; this defeat of the native population, accomplished by allying with local enemies and then later turning on them, became a model for the assault on dozens of other Native American tribes over the years. Throughout these assaults, religion was linked with conquest. The Spanish brought Christianity, specifically Catholicism, and as the land was dominated, so too was the religion of the original inhabitants. At the same time, the rituals of the local people informed and altered the Catholic tradition. The Virgin Mary became the Virgin of Guadalupe, who was herself inflected with the lineage of Indigenous religious and mythical women: la Llorona, “The Weeping Woman”; Coatlicue, “Serpent Skirt”; and Tonantzin, “Our Lady Mother,” establishing early on the cross-cultural connections that point to the possibilities of hybridity and Thirdspace.\textsuperscript{18}

Eventually the Mexican people were able to win their independence from the Spanish Empire in an eleven-year war that ended in 1821. Their control of much of this land, however, only lasted a few decades because the United States was pushing west under the ideology of Manifest Destiny.\textsuperscript{19} Texas’s revolt against Mexico in 1836 and its subsequent annexation by the United States in 1845 helped to instigate the U.S. war with Mexico from 1846 to 1848, when Mexico lost even more of its land. The boundary between the two countries officially moved south 150 miles from the Nueces River to the Rio Grande,

\begin{itemize}
  \item See Anzaldúa on New Tribalism: “It’s a kind of mestizaje that allows for connecting with other ethnic groups and interacting with other cultures and ideas” (Hernández-Ávila, “Quincentennial,” 185).
  \item Anzaldúa, \textit{Borderland/La Frontera}, 50–52.
  \item del Castillo and De León, \textit{North to Aztlán}, 15. The idea of Manifest Destiny had been circulating since the beginning of the Republic but was coined in 1845 by newspaper editor John O’Sullivan: “Americans had believed they had the right to spread over the entire continent and display their republican system for the world to admire” (Wheelan, \textit{Invading Mexico}, 30). This “expansion of freedom,” of course, hides the fact that there were people already living on the land who thus had to be viewed as inferior. The expansion of land also allowed for the expansion of slave territory (Wheelan, \textit{Invading Mexico}, 97). See also my discussion of Manifest Destiny in the introduction and chapter 2.
\end{itemize}
with the United States claiming modern-day Texas, California, Utah, and parts of Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Wyoming. The document that followed the war, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, incorporated the Mexicans living there into the United States, promising them citizenship and the protection of their property.\textsuperscript{20} This treaty resulted in Mexico losing over half of its territory and was followed a few years later by the Gadsden Purchase of what is now southern Arizona and New Mexico.

The people who resided on this ground that changed hands continued to feel the conflict over their space, with those of Mexican ethnicity often being viewed by other U.S. inhabitants as foreign. As immigration became more systematized at the turn into the twentieth century, people of Mexican heritage were labeled as “alien” and sometimes “criminal” based solely on their heritage. Immigration studies scholar Juan Perea explains:

The public identification of “illegal aliens” with a person of Mexican ancestry is so strong that many Mexican Americans and other Latino citizens are presumed foreign and illegal. When citizens and aliens look alike, then all are presumed to be alien and foreign and undermining of the national character. This is an old theme in American politics.\textsuperscript{21}

Although criminal alien-ness was the general perception, Mexican immigrants were granted access to citizenship because of the previous Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Therefore, Mexicans were considered “white by treaty,” producing a conflicted notion of belonging at the U.S.–Mexican border as the dominant culture codified this racialized notion of white citizenship into law and argued that the nation’s borders needed to be watched.\textsuperscript{22} The Border Patrol was established in 1924, “inspired by the notorious Texas Rangers which had a long, violent history with ethnic Mexicans living in Texas.”\textsuperscript{23} The same year, the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 excluded many other immigrant groups but created exceptions for Mexican immigrants to fill work positions. This conflict between the United States’ desire for workers and the violence against these workers told Mexicans that their labor was desired but not their presence—an impossible request.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the United States formalized its migration laws, making entry into the country without a visa illegal. Mexican immigrants, however, were able to enter both permanently and as seasonal

\textsuperscript{20} Acuña, \textit{Occupied America}, 19–20.
\textsuperscript{21} Perea, \textit{Immigrants Out!}, 2.
\textsuperscript{23} Jurado, “Alienated Citizens,” 53.
workers. Because of their comparably unclear status, Mexican immigrants could be even more easily viewed by the Border Patrol as problematic. Thus, “the Border Patrol stood at the forefront of the reconceptualization of Mexicans into foreigners, aliens, and presumed criminals,” legally demonstrating the United States’ “fear of the foreigner within.”24 In addition to patrolling the borders, so-called repatriation programs were common throughout the century, with many Mexican Americans being deported along with undocumented immigrants; the fervor of such programs can be seen under the derogatorily named Operation Wetback, which, at its start in the 1954, was “apprehending 3000 undocumented workers a day.”25 As Robert Chang and Keith Aoki explain, “For the United States, which is not at much risk of literal invasion by another nation-state, its cultural identity and national sovereignty may be at great risk of ‘invasion’ by immigrants and would-be immigrants.”26 Although these authors are discussing a point later in U.S. history, this fear has long resided in the dominant culture. Instead of looking outward for a threat, the nation frequently looks internally for enemies and racializes the announced fear. Thus, the United States replicates in its “discourse of citizenship” the postcolonial conversation that Bhabha analyzes:

The language of rights and obligations, so central to the modern discourse of citizenship, must be questioned on the basis of the anomalous and discriminatory legal and cultural status assigned to migrant and refugee populations who find themselves, inevitably, on the other side of the law. [. . .] Cultural and political identity is constructed through a process of othering.27

By marking citizenship as an either/or binary, many are left on the “wrong” side even though they are within the boundaries of the country. These ethnically and racially based governmental policies affected not only new immigrants, but also those already living and working within the country. They, however, resisted this imposed, restricted identity through a variety of means. People of Mexican descent working as migrant laborers on the West Coast participated in a series of protests against the injustices produced by this construction of movement and self that were ultimately undermined by the increasingly corporatized farm owners and the government. Even before the predominantly white Dust Bowl migrants arrived in California, migrant laborers had performed many strikes. In total, there were more than 140

strikes in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{28} Furthermore, people of Mexican descent “participated in twenty-three strikes in California in 1933 and 1934, many of which were successful in raising wages.”\textsuperscript{29} The owners responded through acts that show the workers in the position of bare life, with violent incidents such as the shooting of strikers and the formation of an industry coalition that lobbied the government and pressured workers. These pressures included paying poverty-level wages, ignoring or removing workers’ civil rights, and physical assaults, to which the government responded with only a bureaucratic report.\textsuperscript{30} In this way, a general governmentality linking citizenship and ownership thus acted to disempower workers in the time leading up to the Bracero Program, which would formalize these conditions.

These issues derived from the immigration of those near readily crossable borders and from the larger history of U.S. farming that has been discussed throughout this book. For instance, during the New Deal, as Mae Ngai explains, the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) “assisted the largest farmers and encouraged the further consolidation of landholdings through programs that accelerated mechanization and paid benefits to farmers to restrict production” while at the same time excluding the workers themselves from “social and labor legislation” so that they were not seen as workers.\textsuperscript{31} This erasure of farmworkers’ rights eventually led to the reinstatement of foreign contract labor, which had been outlawed for decades because it was seen as comparable to slavery; the workers were turned into the precariat as they could not “bargain over wages or working conditions, either individually or collectively” and “did not have the right to choose [their] employer or to quit.”\textsuperscript{32} Thus, the United States reinstituted a system that denied labor protections as well as any potential for citizenship, harkening back to a system of slavery and colonialism that denied rights based on perceived ethnicity no matter the person’s actual status.

Because of these long-term conflicts, people with Mexican heritage who live in the United States, whether U.S. citizens or not, often feel liminal both spatially and culturally. They are on the U.S. side of the border, but they continue to reside in a borderland, as Anzaldúa describes it. Whereas “a border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural bound-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Shaw, Beyond the Fields, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Battat, Ain’t Got No Home, 42.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Shaw, Beyond the Fields, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 136.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 137–38.
\end{itemize}
ary. It is in a constant state of transition.” Oppressed by the governmental notion of disembodied criminality, which imagines economic and national space through techniques of abstract mapping that occlude Chicana/o bodies and their lived experience of travel, people with Mexican ancestry are viewed as alien no matter what their citizenship. Because of their placement in a borderland, their relationship to space and identity is not as simple as standing on one side or the other of a firm line. As the characters in Under the Feet will demonstrate, a Thirdspace must be sought by interjecting alternative possibilities and continuing the struggle for social justice.

THE DIFFICULTY OF MOVEMENT AND DISEMBODIED CRIMINALITY

Helena María Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus follows the predicament of Chicana/o migrant workers through a family unit made up of the mother Petra, the daughter Estrella, two sons Ricky and Arnulfo, twin toddler girls, and Petra’s companion Perfecto Flores that must move with the harvest. The novel is less interested in a specific historical moment than in how time in many ways stands still for these migrants. This story could take place during any moment in the second half of the twentieth century. This indistinctness illustrates that the characters’ situation is a perpetual one that continues in much the same fashion as it has for decades, with specific governmentalities that shift but create the same results. As Kathy Jurado states, “One cannot help but interpret the ambiguity of the time frame in Viramontes’s novel as an intentional effort to make a point about the static, abject working conditions of migrant workers in the U.S.” The characters’ difficulty traveling epitomizes this stagnancy. When they do move, the path is mostly circular—back and forth to the fields and through the seasonal pattern of crop picking. This nonproductive movement of itinerant laborers marks them as invading criminals without permanent homes, a view reinforced by U.S. policies throughout the twentieth century to the present.

33. Anzaldúa, Borderland/La Frontera, 25.
34. Soja, Thirdspace, 5.
35. The text’s present moment could be 1990, extrapolated from the year the father-figure Perfecto dreamed that he was born, 1917 (25), and his stated age of seventy-three (79). Other descriptors, however, create a more indefinite twentieth-century picture. For instance, posters of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley (110) could indicate any time from the 1950s onward, given the ongoing celebrity of these icons. Other cultural markers also connote the iconic rather than the historically specific, including automatic sliding doors (156), invented in 1954; crop dusters (42), used for the aerial application of pesticides since the 1920s; and Quaker Oats oatmeal (18), first marketed in 1901.
Viramontes’s characters are trapped in the cyclical pattern of incessant movement, are tied to the polluted land that is killing them, and are denied a sense of belonging in public and private spaces. This enforced disembodied criminality aligns with the historical fear that many Anglo-Americans had and continue to have of the “foreigner within.” Within the novel, for example, Estrella directly confronts her own insecurities about how she is or is not perceived when she witnesses a baseball game near the U.S.–Mexican border. While the novel consistently demonstrates how the Chicana/o characters acknowledge each others’ physical presence, at the baseball game, Estrella feels distanced from it since she is alone, unobserved by players and spectators alike, in her position on the railroad tracks instead of in the bleachers or on the field. As she starts to leave, however, she believes the Border Patrol has arrived and flees, fearing being seen as a criminal merely because of her ancestry.

In this spatialized scene, the field represents America’s pastime while also showing Estrella’s ongoing symbolic search for a “home base.” The sporting event illustrates the difficulty of getting into this American “game,” with the team members all “behind the tall wire mesh fence,” but the field’s “chalked boundaries” also reveal the arbitrary nature of such demarcations (58). The location of Estrella, the unseen spectator on the train tracks, compounds the symbolism of this spot. She sits on a means of motion that is getting her nowhere. The tracks extend further north into the United States as well as south into Mexico, but though she is connected to both locations, she is grounded in neither:

Estrella turned to the long stretch of railroad ties. They looked like the stitches of the mother’s caesarean scar as far as her eyes could see. To the north lay the ties and to the south of her, the same, and in between she stood, not knowing where they ended or began. (59)

Just as she was born from her mother’s abdomen, she was born from this land, but she stands “in between” because she is not “bleached white” like the baseball uniforms on the field (58). She is made to feel like an intruder on the land. Her outsider position instills a fear in Estrella so that the presence of floodlights is directly tied in her mind with the Border Patrol: “She tried to remember which side she was on and which side of the wire mesh she was safe in” (59–60). Unable to determine if she is “safe,” she runs away even though she is a U.S. citizen; she knows her raced body is seen as criminal and therefore must be kept moving. The interstitial location of Estrella and her family at the edge of the United States and Mexico reveals how motion and

stasis lead to the same uncertain space of the borderland for all of Viramontes’s Chicana/o characters. They feel the ongoing pressure to repeatedly prove their legal identity.

Citizenship implies that you have a home base, but for Viramontes’s characters movement is necessary to get to each migrant camp. That movement is almost always circular or failed. We see workers in trucks driving to and from the fields, but mostly we see how these families are both literally and figuratively stuck with “the tire sp[inning] and sp[inning] without moving an inch” (130). Under the Feet’s characters lack the money and power to change their situation, so they struggle to move from job to job even as their strained movement divulges their instability. Although they are migrant workers, there is little productive movement in this novel. The novel displays that smooth traveling is less about destination and more about a sense of belonging, legality, and identity, qualities that are suppressed by the governmentality of disembodied criminality.

Put another way, characters who can move easily are those who do not need to do so. Their ease of mobility shows their stability. The lime green Bermuda convertible that Estrella observes at the gas station is a case in point:

The white plush carpeting was so white, it was obvious no one ate in the car. She envied the car, then envied the landlord of the car who could travel from one splat dot to another. She thought him a man who knew his neighbors well, who returned to the same bed, who could tell where the schools and where the stores were, and where the Nescafé coffee jars in the stores were located, and payday always came at the end of the week. (105)

This description, interspersed with the family’s own visit to the gas station store, flaunts the opportunities of movement that they do not possess for a vehicle whose “whiteness” resonates with racial privilege. The image of the car contrasts with the earlier description of the inside of Petra’s family’s car:

Perfecto steered away from the potholes but still the car dipped and bumped and the empty water bottle on the dash and coffee cups and sun visors flapped down and the maps spilled onto the mother’s lap. Be careful, she scolded, bracing her arm against the sun-cracked dashboard. (6)

The clutter of the car and the precarity of their passage differentiate their two travel experiences. The convertible is not a home—Estrella imagines the driver has a permanent bed, neighbors he knows, and a table at which to eat. Even so, she still refers to the car’s owner as a “landlord.” A car is the only piece of
“land” that her family owns. He can also place the gas nozzle into the tank and wait for it to “trigger [. . .] off,” instead of watching for it to hit a limited dollar amount like her family does in hope of getting Alejo to the hospital on their minimal funds (105, 148–50). Although this car owner may presumably live somewhere nearby, close to the border of the United States, he is not living in the “borderlands” like Estrella’s family.

Nor does the car owner have to worry about the hills, valleys, and traffic patterns missing from the symbolic realm of maps but felt when traveling with more limited means. As we learn,

Petra knew the capricious black lines on a map did little to reveal the hump and tear of the stitched pavement which ascended to the morning sun and through the trees and no trees, and became a swollen main street and then a loose road once again outside the hamlets that appeared as splat dots on paper. (103)

Travel is difficult in the material world, and the family’s movements reveal the limits of the symbolic spaces that describe the “facts” of travel as well as mark the boundaries that limit their lives. Maps lie. They suppress certain details, such as the very existence of the borderlands, yet they claim to represent an objective and totalizing view. Representational maps reflect the imagined lines that designate national identity and colonial power, but these imposed demarcations hide the complexities of the borderlands and fail to reflect the lived experiences for Viramontes’s characters.

STRUCTURING THE BORDERLAND: NONLINEAR INTERSECTIONS

The borderland, the novel demonstrates, may be seen by many as the edge of society, but the space can also be seen as the “spinal cord of this continent.”38 As Guillermo Gómez-Peña explains, “The border is the juncture, not the edge, and monoculturalism has been expelled to the margins.”39 Like Anzaldúa, he sees the borderland as a place where various cultures come together, and because of that it should not be viewed as liminal but as the location that structures the society. He continues his argument by saying that to analyze border culture, one must “look at the past and the future at the

38. Gómez-Peña, Warrior for Gringostroika, 44.
39. Ibid.
same time.”  

Bhabha combines these ideas about place and time in his own view of third space:

The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.

Bhabha emphasizes the combination of various ideas across time and the generative capabilities of hybrid space, ideas that Viramontes dramatizes. The novel employs religious elements from different traditions and periods that are grounded in both historical and mythological locations, also employing a version of Soja’s real and imagined spaces. Time no longer exists only in its linear form; instead, the past, present, and future need to be spatialized themselves, placing each moment side by side and then surpassing each. This connection of the complexity of the borderland with the blending of time periods appears in the structure of the novel.

*Under the Feet* demonstrates this Thirdspace of overlapping times through its replication of the cyclical movements of the characters, creating a circularity by starting and ending with the image of the barn. The first line of the novel asks, “Had they been heading for the barn all along?” (3), and it turns out that the rickety façade was the destination, since the last scene displays Estrella standing on its roof. Beyond that largest of frames, however, are the scenes that cinematically jump readers from place to place with a quick line break, jarring us for a moment until we recognize the new site. In addition to the change of location, there are changes from linear time. In some cases, a simple image provides the catalyst for a leap to a memory in another time and place. For instance, in one scene in the present, Alejo makes shadow animals for the deformed boy he finds in the barn. The boy, however, hurts himself when he chases after the shadow of an eagle “sprinkling droplets of blood [...] until it zigzagged across the dented trough and finally returned to the tower from where it first appeared, and vanished” (23). After a line break, the story continues several years earlier, when Estrella’s father was leaving the family: “Not even a few drops of menstrual blood in his coffee would keep him from leaving” (23). Blood ties these two scenes across not only time but also space:

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40. Ibid.
41. Bhabha, “Third Space,” 211.
one in a barn and the other in the family’s home. Also connecting them is a disappearance; the bird transfixes the boy until it disappears, just as the father’s disappearance confuses and saddens Estrella and Petra.

The escape of the father figure in the past and the eagle in the present symbolizes the lack of accessibility to a reliable patriarch both on the familial and the national level, since the eagle represents the United States and the mythical Aztlán. Viramontes’s characters cannot find security, and in the temporal hybridity created by these overlapping experiences, we feel this loss in a new way that links the deformed boy’s experiences with Petra’s and Estrella’s. This is a displaced community. Like Marcel Proust’s episode of the madeleine, objects can create involuntary memories, altering time and place. But in this book, that memory is not stirred solely by individual recollection. It is also stirred by the unseen narrator’s knowledge of all these characters, creating for them a type of collective consciousness. After all, the example just mentioned rapidly takes the reader from a scene written from the limited omniscient point of view of Alejo to the limited omniscience of Petra, yet they connect through their borderland location.

Linear time is also affected in the novel through the repetition of the same moment from different perspectives. Sometimes this shift is marked by a line break, but at other times the shift happens in the unmarked space between paragraphs. For example, in the first sequence of scenes, the reader observes the arrival of the family to their new home at the same time that Alejo and his cousin Gumecindo pick peaches in a field. Estrella and her twin sisters investigate the barn and scare out some birds that “shriek” along with the girls’ surprised “screams” (10). Back in the field, Alejo comments that the sound must be “cats fighting,” although he later admits he was also thinking about the animals trapped in the tar pits (10, 88). Meanwhile, his cousin fears that the noise is la Llorona, a mythic woman who drowns her children in retaliation for a man leaving her. In this moment, we get three different interpretations of the same sound. Interestingly, two of those views contain references to history or long-believed cultural myth, so that even these multiple perspectives on the same instant reveal how the present and the past overlap.

The other key scene that plays out from two perspectives occurs near the end of the book when Petra accidentally breaks her Jesus statue and Estrella overhears her mother. This important symbolic loss is timed with both Petra’s loss of religious faith and Estrella’s sudden realization that Alejo may not be all right: “It only now occurred to her that perhaps she would never see him alive again, that perhaps he would die” (170). Intersecting time and place here

42. The common link of the blood also shows that these families, although not literally related, have cultural bloodlines uniting them.
connect to religious beliefs with a long history. Petra’s response is to turn to Perfecto for an answer—a traditional one of a woman turning to a man. Estrella’s response, however, moves the reader to a new location and possibility, as I will explain shortly.

Although reviewer Valerie Miner makes note of the novel’s style as a “poetic, fragmented narrative [that] mirrors her characters’ dislocations,” I extend this idea because the novel does more than dislocate its characters; it relocates them through a new sense of space and time. The postmodern introduction of various perspectives and the unexplored ties of a historical-spatial narrative allow the characters to reclaim the past moments that have led up to the current one. By setting those time periods side by side, Viramontes allows for the possibility of moving beyond those moments to a beneficial Thirdspace.

THE POTENTIAL AND LIMITATIONS OF ORGANIZED RELIGION AND RITUAL

While the Border Patrol and the corporations biopolitically affect these workers to make them homeless, criminalized, alien bodies that are only useful for labor, spirituality is incorporated into characters’ lives as a potential, even political, solution, echoing Viramontes’s own experiences with the UFW. Organized religion and ritual offer the building blocks for a Thirdspace because of the solace they provide and the ways that they can be used to bring together not just different spaces but also different times. The use of organized religion and ritual in Under the Feet presents the possibility for this type of symbolic conception, but such practices ultimately fail to create a hybrid space that reconfigures authority when uncritically accepted.

Religious figures play a prominent role in this novel, starting from the title itself, but the title’s conflicting meanings, which range from the literal to biblical interpretations, also reveal the ambiguous nature of religion in this text. The literal meaning of the title is twofold: the family’s legal documents lie under Petra’s Jesus statue and the earth naturally lies under Jesus’ human feet. The former point highlights concerns about questioned citizenship and national landownership rights, as Petra directly states: “If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them” (63). The latter point about the earth indicates ecological concerns that scholars such as Mitchum Huehls have

noted in relationship to the pesticide use in this text—a concern that again echoes the boycott led by Chávez and the UFW.\textsuperscript{44}

In addition to these literal meanings that point to the plight of the workers, there are also religious interpretations of this title that provide the characters with hope through Catholicism. The title invokes a set of biblical passages that portray a conflict between humans and serpents, where the serpent is crushed underfoot. In Genesis 3:15, for instance, God himself establishes that there will be eternal conflict between Eve, the mother of humanity, and the earthy, devilish serpent: “I shall put enmity between you and the woman, / between your brood and hers. / They will strike at your head, / and you will strike at their heel.”\textsuperscript{45} The “brood” that will be born to crush the serpent has been interpreted by Christians as Jesus, but other quotations from the Old and New Testaments often leave open the identity of the treader. Psalm 91:13 states, “You will tread on asp and cobra, / you will trample on snake and serpent,” and Luke 10:19 declares, “And I have given you the power to tread underfoot snakes and scorpions and all the forces of the enemy. Nothing will ever harm you.” In all these examples, God gives his followers the permission and the power to destroy their opponents as a way to remain safe. The novel’s title thus appears to present organized religion as promising the migrant laborers an eventual triumph over their oppressors.

The characters in Viramontes’s novel, however, discover they are interchangeably both the treader and the trod upon. They may walk with Jesus in their belief, allowing them to symbolically destroy those who attack them, just like “Perfecto’s boot pop[s] the scorpion” under his shoe (8). At the same time, the manual labor that exhausts them every day and leaves them without even basic acceptance by their country shows how cruelly they are stepped on. Being on the road makes them feel like the “perfectly crushed” snake, run over by a truck, that they “couldn’t even scrape [. . .] off the pavement with a butterknife” (106). After all, behind this entire religion are the Spanish conquerors who once trampled their ancestors. The characters can be identified as the snakes and scorpions—the \textit{niños de tierra}, the children of the earth—who were sacrificed in the past for land and wealth and continue to be sacrificed in the present for the same reasons. Although religion is sometimes tied to nationality, the land upon which Jesus walks theoretically should not be limited by country or by citizenship. Therefore, violence to the characters and the land upon which they walk replaces the inclusive, accepting space that should

\textsuperscript{44.} Huehls, “Ostension, Simile, Catachresis,” 352.
be beneath Jesus’ feet. In the ambiguity created just by analyzing the title, the text already highlights its multifarious relationship with Christianity.

*Under the Feet* specifically questions too much dependence on Christianity to “solve” the plight of the Mexican American migrant, thereby attempting to incorporate and then even go beyond Chávez’s pilgrimage. When the statue of Jesus falls and his head breaks off, “[Petra] was surprised by the lightness of the head,” and shortly thereafter she comments on her “broken faith” (167–68). Perhaps, the novel says, this ideology does not hold as much weight as it should. Yet, while the text questions relying too much on organized religion, Petra’s devotion is sincere, and it does create positive results such as her caring for Alejo because “she did it for the love of God” (124). For Petra, Christianity acts as an anchor that helps her to make positive moral decisions for her family and to broaden that definition of family to include others who need the support of the community. In the book, Christianity has its benefits and limits.

There are, however, representations of the kind of hybridity that Bhabha and Soja desire across time and space, but they fail to lead to a productive Thirdspace because they have become popularized and uncritically accepted. Christianity and its blending with Mexican tradition appears even at the grocery store in a poster of the Virgin of Guadalupe:

A lopsided poster of the holy Virgen, Our Lady of Guadalupe was tacked between the posters of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe holding her white billowing dress down. La Virgen was adorned by red and green and white twinkling Christmas lights which surrounded the poster like a sequin necklace. Each time the lights blinked, Petra saw herself reflected in La Virgen’s glossy downcast eyes. Unlike Marilyn’s white pumps which were buried under the shriveled pods of Chile Negro, La Virgen was raised, it seemed to Petra, above a heavenly mound of bulbous garlic. (110)

This image, like the book’s title, is fraught with complexity. Its “lopsided” angle shows that religion has been skewed. The gaudy Christmas lights, out of season in the midst of summer, illustrate how Christianity has been commodified and refocused on decorations and material goods rather than on the birth of Jesus. The other posters also highlight the commercialization of religion, since the Virgin is hung as a celebrity of popular culture just like the Hollywood and music stars beside her.

Even so, the Virgin most reflects how Catholicism had to adjust in Mexico. As Anzaldúa explains, the Virgin of Guadalupe, while seemingly a Catholic representation of Spanish culture in Mexico, also brings Mexican culture to Spanish symbols. She is “a synthesis of the old world and the new, of religion
and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered” because she is a blending of the Virgin Mary with the Aztec religious figure of “Our Lady Mother” Tonantzin.46 Worshipping the Virgin of Guadalupe disguised a continued worshipping of Tonantzin.47 Because of this combination, the Virgin of Guadalupe is sometimes called the First Mestiza. She symbolizes the Chicano/mexicano “rebellion against the rich, upper and middleclass; against their subjugation of the poor and the indio.”48 Therefore, the poster in the novel suggests a positive combination of cultural elements in the Virgin of Guadalupe. Nevertheless, here in the gas station where the children are forced to stay outside and the fruits are the “relics” of what they had been in the fields, a positive Thirdspace cannot be found (110). Although cultural hybridity and spiritual possibility are presented, they are the commodified shell of a Thirdspace. The Virgin may hide Tonantzin within her, but this poster ultimately points out the restrictions of organized religion. The church, Anzaldúa states, like any institution, “come[s] with agendas and trappings which lull you into not challenging things”; through dogma it “eliminates all kinds of growth, development, and change.”49 When this idea is applied to the scene, one recognizes that the static images of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis from their youth reveal that the Virgin, too, is unchanging. She may give Petra comfort, but she does not provide any major transformation, revealing the necessity to constantly reimagine ways of making the past relevant to the present.

Petra also reveals this type of stagnancy through her non-Christian rituals, which she uses to protect their home and bodies. She believes in drawing a line in the sand to keep the scorpions away from the house, and she believes in home remedies for Alejo when he becomes ill. Though Petra feels secure in her practices through most of the book, warding off “white rationality,” one wonders if she performs these acts to keep the scorpions away or if she does so, like her Christian prayers, as a ritual that, through its mere repetition, gives her a sense of ease.50 Again, like organized religion, rituals can be productive. They can create a sense of calm where there is only anxiety, but they can also cause harm when they are the only long-term solution. After all, when Alejo is poisoned by the pesticides, he needs medical attention, not

46. Anzaldúa, Borderland/La Frontera, 52, 50.
47. On December 9, 1531, the Virgin of Guadalupe is said to have appeared in the same place where Tonantzin had previously been worshipped. See Lafaye for more on the ties between these two figures, including the linguistic and symbolic overlaps (Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe, 211–17).
48. Anzaldúa, Borderland/La Frontera, 52.
49. Weiland, “Within the Crossroads,” 73, 98.
50. Anzaldúa, Borderland/La Frontera, 58.
folklore remedies. By getting “stuck” in religion and ritual, Petra reflects the larger stagnancy in their lives.

The characters’ cultural grounding in Aztec beliefs extends beyond the worship of Tonantzin to Aztec beliefs about the space they inhabit. Though the characters themselves may not directly mention this historical tie, their location in the Southwestern United States invokes this past. The Aztecs viewed this region as Aztlán: “According to myth, Aztlán is the ancestral homeland in the north that the Aztecs left in 1168 when they journeyed southward to found the promised land, Tenochtitlán (Mexico City), in 1325.” This “mythohistorical” tie, as Lee Bebout labels this important narrative that counters the U.S. ideology of Manifest Destiny, was also connected to politics when in 1969 at the Denver Youth Liberation Conference this idea of the Southwest as the mythic Aztlán was reenvoked under the preamble of “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” a foundational document for the Chicano Movement that fought for Chicano civil rights. Additionally, this same concept was used by Chávez and the UFW in their pilgrimage, since they marched with banners of the Virgin of Guadalupe as well as of the ever-present symbol of the cause, the Aztec eagle flag representing the mythic Aztlán. By connecting themselves to a cultural history as well as a claim to the land, “this narrative [of Aztlán] positioned Chicanos and their struggle both geographically and historically.” It disrupted colonization, built a tie and respect for Indigenous cultures, and fought colonial mapping while “imagining community and mediating the heterogeneity of the movement,” and, according to Rudolfo Anaya, brought together “spiritual and political aspirations.” People of Mexican descent thus are linked to this culture through their native bloodlines and through the land itself. Of course, even this tie to a pre-Conquest culture has its own problems, since it “romanticizes an era marked by war and conquest and a rigorous class hierarchy, an Aztec culture that had eradicated a matriarchal Mayan culture.” In other words, all of these cultural belief systems provide Viramontes’s characters with the material to construct hybridity. Viramontes’s awareness of this connection is evident when Estrella is handed “white leaflets with black eagles on them” (84), but active engagement on the part of her characters continues to be needed to produce a Thirdspace that moves beyond the stagnancy of the present along the contested space of the U.S.–Mexican border.

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52. Bebout, Mythohistorical Interventions, 1–5.
53. Shaw, Beyond the Fields, 80–81.
54. Bebout, Mythohistorical Interventions, 2.
55. Ibid., 3–4.
56. Grewe-Volpp, “‘The oil was made from their bones,’” 73.
ESTRELLA’S EMBODIMENT OF SPIRITUALITY IN MEXICAN AMERICAN TRADITION

In *Under the Feet*, Estrella synthesizes and adapts spiritual elements from Catholic and Aztec beliefs to create a symbolic response that addresses the problems of disembodied criminality. This embodied spirituality acknowledges the need to change preexisting stories so that individuals have a way to understand their bodies and move beyond the criminalization imposed on them by the United States. Petra’s daughter personifies the complications beyond the binary, starting with what Anzaldúa labels “folk Catholicism,” which blends Catholic and Indigenous elements. Reclaiming female strength from various sources, Estrella is, at various times in the novel, the Virgin of Guadalupe and la Llorona, Eve and Coatlicue. Since many of the Christian and Indigenous female figures are already “telescoped onto the other,” as Sandra Cisneros phrases it, Estrella needs to find a way to alter these stories to rewrite the past and reimagine the future, or, as Norma Alarcón states, “It is through a revision of tradition that self and culture can be radically reenvisioned and reinvented.”

Estrella’s work aligns with that of Chicana feminists; by containing the supposed binaries, she creates a new Thirdspace for understanding that surpasses each individual religious tradition and demonstrates her willingness to assume the multiple roles of being in-between. She knows that finding a new resolution is a matter of survival, and although only a teenager, she tries to save Alejo and then her larger community, developing over the course of this *bildungsroman* from innocent girl to potential savior through her transformation at mythically resonant locations such as the canal, the tar pits, and the barn.

This integration begins in Estrella’s connection to the story of la Llorona. While scholars such as Ana María Carbonell and Wendy Swyt have pointed to the use of la Llorona mythology in short stories by Viramontes, this theme has not been fully explicated in *Under the Feet*, despite its importance. Some early versions of the myth of la Llorona focus on a goddess named Chihua-coatl, “serpent woman”—itself a telling name in connection to the other reli-

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57. Anzaldúa, *Borderland/La Frontera*, 58.
59. Other Chicana authors have also sought ties to Aztec goddesses. For instance, Sandra Cisneros’s poem “It Occurs to Me I Am the Creative/Destructive Goddess Coatlicue” states her desire to claim the breadth of Coatlicue’s powers.
60. Carbonell, “From Llorona to Gritona” and Swyt, “Hungry Women.”
gious elements of the story—and reveal that this story has its foundation in the reign of the Aztecs:

According to [an] Aztec codex, just a few years before Spanish ships first landed on the Mexican coast of Vera Cruz in the sixteenth century, a woman circled the walls of the great Aztec city of Tenochtitlán. Late at night she was heard weeping in mourning for the impending destruction of the great Mexican civilization, and especially for her children: “My children, we must flee far from this city!” The Aztecs took this as the sixth of eight omens warning of their imminent ruin. Because of her signaling doom, the Weeping Woman, or La Llorona [sic], became a perennial avatar of Snake Woman.61

This story of an Indigenous woman who warns about the impending arrival of the *conquistadores* was altered after the actual arrival of the Spanish to a distraught woman killing her children after her husband leaves. That change disempowers the woman and demonizes her as a child killer, something Víramontes revisits.62

La Llorona first appears only a few pages into the novel, when Alejo and his cousin hear the screech of birds and Estrella’s sisters scream in response to those birds. Spooked, the cousin says, “I always thought la Llorona was just a story” (11). Later the narrator notes, “[Alejo’s] cousin had not stopped talking of la Llorona and the ghosts of her drowned children” (39). After these two mentions of la Llorona, the novel focuses on Estrella. In the first instance, the scene changes to a previous time when she is with her father, stealing an orange, just as the boys in the previous scene stole peaches. This memory leads to the statement, “It was her father who’d ran [sic] away,” and the male betrayal that Estrella experiences parallels la Llorona’s betrayal by her husband (13). After the second mention, Alejo watches Estrella swim naked in the canal after a watermelon. Associated with water, Estrella again replicates a feature of la Llorona’s story, but whereas la Llorona is said to haunt the waterways where she drowned her children, Estrella’s aquatic link is one of both seduction and innocence. She attracts Alejo with her body, even though she is innocent of doing so.

Both connections of la Llorona and Estrella indicate the disparity between the myth and its current reimagining. Not an evil temptress, Estrella is a young girl for whom a watermelon may easily become a child. As Petra observes, “Estrella cradled a watermelon like a baby and this vision saddened her” (40).

62. For more details about the various versions of the story of la Llorona and her connection to other female goddesses, see Luis D. León’s *La Llorona’s Children*. 
This formulation of Estrella as pregnant without sexual contact recalls the pregnancies of two other religious figures, the Virgin Mary and Coatlicue.63 Through her embodiment of such cultural stories, the child alters them and rewrites history, eventually realizing this symbolic mother role in her relationship with Alejo. He becomes the child she must sacrifice when she hands him over to the hospital, and she becomes the mother figure who loses her child because of the power of those above her.64 She is a renewed la Llorona, one with whom the reader can empathize instead of fear.

Connecting Estrella to well-known figures but adapting familiar images, the novel stresses her transformative role in relation to both native ritual and Christianity. On the basic level of listening to various spiritual narratives, Estrella supports her mother’s Catholicism by reading her catechism chapbook and her non-Christian rituals by drawing the line in the ground: “Her mother believed scorpions instinctively scurried away from lines which had no opening or closing. Estrella never questioned whether this was true or not” (42). She even tells her mother when the line has become faded, showing that she willingly participates in these rituals.

Estrella, however, moves beyond these rituals that draw lines in the sand, invoking the flawed logic of national borders. She also looks beyond the act of merely praying for a solution, breaking with convention in relationship to organized religion and ritual. Early in the novel, she reads with a friend when she “was supposed to be in church,” and later she watches a lunar eclipse with the men even though she “should have been safely tucked away like the other women of the camp because the moon and earth and sun’s alignment was a powerful thing” (38, 69). She begins to break cultural traditions when she sees how they limit her as a woman. It is during this same scene, though, when she recalls her chapbook reading. Seeing a bonfire set by the men “like a beacon for them to find their way back to their beds [. . . with] the sizzling red sparks spear[ing] up into the night,” Estrella recites, “The Holy Spirit came in the form of tongues of fire to show His love” (68).65 She sees this moment with

64. In this moment, she is also rewriting the historical figure of Malinali Tenepat (Malintzin), who was a Mayan woman sold as a slave to Cortez. She functioned as his translator and has been presented as a betrayer of her people. Anzaldúa, along with many other feminists, marks her as a mother figure instead of a whore, “la Chingada.” She says that this version of history has made women “believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer” (Borderland/La Frontera, 44). With this figure in mind, Estrella’s actions rewrite this narrative. Though we see her functioning as a translator for Alejo and her family at the clinic, this time she is giving voice to her Indigenous family, and this time her giving up Alejo is in the hopes of saving him.
65. Although Estrella does not state it, the second part of her remembered chapbook reading also has relevance in this scene. When Estrella feels afraid after Alejo leaves her, she hears “wind groaning over the mouth of the bottle, notes far and wayward in the night” (71; italics
people together beneath the stars, the barn as the only structure in sight, as a holy moment with the potential to bring together all of those around her. Unfortunately, this tradition is one not intended for women. Estrella begins searching for a new remedy that would include women, but one that continues to draw upon her spiritual heritage, including Catholicism, folk rituals, and Aztec religion, to create a new space and spiritual identity for herself and her community. In this way, Estrella echoes Viramontes’s sense of the spiritual achieved through reading and community in her own personal growth.

Her actions have ramifications on the individual and communal levels. As Bhabha explains, these “in-between” spaces where cultural differences are distinguished “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.” Estrella’s combination of spiritual elements, far from being a garbled conflation of religious practices and symbols, actually produces her identity in a way that exposes rather than conceals the space’s history and tensions for her community.

While Bhabha stresses the political and social aspects of these spaces, Anzaldúa’s spatial view of a culturally specific “in-between” space, a translation of “Nepantla” from the Aztec language of Nahuatl, adds a spiritual dimension:

Nepantla [sic] is kind of an elaboration of Borderlands. I use nepantla to talk about the creative act, I use it to talk about the construction of identity, I use it to describe a function of the mind. [. . .] I find people using metaphors such as “Borderlands” in a more limited sense than I had meant it, so to expand on the psychic and emotional borderlands I’m now using “nepantla.” With nepantla the connection to the spirit world is more pronounced as is the connection to the world after death, to psychic spaces. It has a more spiritual, psychic, supernatural, and indigenous resonance.

added). As Alejo walks into the distance, he continues to practice the method of blowing in the cola bottle that she had just taught him. His “wind” becomes the “great wind [of the Holy Spirit] to show the power of His grace” (31).

66. After all, Estrella herself has been associated with fire even at the start of novel, when “her chest breathed and crackled like kindling” and “her cheeks [were] as red as hot embers” (15). Estrella is that spirit come to earth.

67. Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 1–2.

68. Keating, “Making Choices,” 176. I italicize and capitalize Nepantla as Anzaldúa does in Borderlands/La Frontera. In other interviews, the word is often not marked in this way, but since the discussions were presumably spoken, I defer to Anzaldúa’s written text.
The spiritual space of *Nepantla* exists beyond the confines of established religion in the body, beginning in the gendered space of birth. *Nepantla* is “this birthing stage when you feel like you are reconfiguring your identity and do not know where you are.”69 This renewal is difficult, but it resolves the body/spirit dichotomy and uses it as a place for metamorphosis.70

Estrella continues her own journey toward rebirth when Alejo tells her about the La Brea tar pits, which formed millions of years ago, turning the bones in them into consumable oil. The novel creates corresponding images of women screaming in order to show the importance of saving women from being silenced by unearthing their stories. The text first associates Estrella with mythic characters like la Llorona through Alejo’s cousin’s fears and then later aligns Estrella with the buried girl in the tar pits after she considers the larger human ramifications stemming from Alejo’s concerns about animals being enveloped by the earth. Alejo’s comment, “Once, when I picked peaches, I heard screams. It reminded me of the animals stuck in the tar pits,” leads Estrella to ask, “Did people ever get stuck?” (88). The voices of la Llorona and the girl in the tar pit have been reduced to inarticulate screams, burying the former’s warnings about the coming conquest and the latter’s lessons about how bodies and their work are consumed. Their anger against oppression goes unheeded as they and their stories are figuratively and literally buried. Estrella, struck by the image of the fragmented remains of the young girl, later repeats her story when she, too, is buried in mud: “They found her in a few bones. No details of her life were left behind, no piece of cloth, no ring, no doll. A few bits of bone displayed somewhere under a glass case and nothing else” (129). By making a connection between their situations, Estrella demonstrates that she wants to save herself and this girl so that they both are not merely used up as expendable bare life. To achieve this goal, she seeks to return voice and body to these lost and disempowered women.71

Although Estrella feels a specific tie to the women who are repeatedly silenced, such as the girl in the tar pits, she wants to find a home and a recon-

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70. For an extended analysis of the spiritual elements of Anzaldúa’s theories, see Delgadillo, *The Spiritual Mestizaje*. In this text, the focus is on the term “spiritual mestizaje” and only briefly touches upon the idea of *Nepantla*, which she states is the “active engagement in a stage of spiritual mestizaje,” or, as she quotes Anzaldúa, it is the “site of transformation” (Delgadillo, *The Spiritual Mestizaje*, 8).
71. Estrella plays out what Viramontes says is her own goal through her writing, to first “conjur[e] up the voices and spirits of women living under brutal repressive regimes” and then “do justice to their voices. To tell these women in my own gentle way that I will fight for them, that they provide me with my own source of humanity. That I love them, their children” ("Nopaltos," 34–35).
nection to the earth for all her people. The land should not poison; if you pick the fruit, you should be able to eat it; if you walk the land, you should be able to live on it freely. As Estrella continues on this path, she draws on the story of Coatlicue, the Aztec Earth Mother who “represents duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective—something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality.”72 As Coatlicue, whose name means “serpent skirt,” she is the goddess who creates and destroys, the guardian of the womb and grave.

At the clinic, Estrella puts her destructive side into action when the nurse takes all of the family’s money. At this moment, Estrella thinks, “If only God could help,” and while at first it may seem that God does not answer, her spiritual connection to the women before her does help her to make a decision (147). First, she draws on the history she has learned:

She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones and it was their bones that kept the nurse’s car from not halting on some highway [. . . .] It was their bones that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. Why couldn’t the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed them as much as they owed her. (148)

She invokes the past to talk about the pain of the present, showing her political awareness that the current governmental practices and their abstract mapping of space without bodies give benefits only to the dominant group. Her internal theorizing then leads her to the duality of Coatlicue. She grabs a crowbar and demands their money back: “She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother had requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money” (150). Here, the destructive side emerges. She finds that she has to choose just the aggressive side of herself to take action. As Anzaldúa explains,

The male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities. They divided her who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects.73

72. Anzaldúa, Borderland/La Frontera, 68.
73. Ibid., 49.
Estrella is still trying to find an integrated self that allows for a balance between the opposing forces inside her. Even so, this is a major scene of change because she begins to recognize the power she has within.

Estrella again sees this doubling of herself when she enters the barn a few scenes later: “She spoke to her shadow as if she were not alone” (172). Here her shadow stands in as the “dark” side of her new strength, but she embraces that darkness with an “Okay” said “to her other self” (172). Then the two sides of Estrella work together to climb the chain in the barn. By entering the space she has vowed to destroy in order to birth herself, she presents the full complexity of the Coatlicue figure, where the both/and of destruction and creation are joined.

In this way, Estrella reforms the female goddess who, along with other female deities, has been demonized under patriarchal power. Alicia Arrizón articulates the specificity of this historical transformation:

After the conquest, Tonantzin/Guadalupe was established as the “good” mother, while Coatlicue and her female deities Cihuacoatl and Tlazolteotl were rendered into defiant beasts. They are the transgressors of marianismo (the cult of the Virgin Mary and her subject position as the mother of God), imposed by an entrenched Christianity. Thus, as an opposing force, Cihuacoatl’s legacy helps to explain the whore-virgin dichotomy that has shaped gender relations and sexuality in post-Spanish colonial sites.74

By reincorporating the elements of all of these women, Estrella empowers herself. Through her transmogrification of the religious and cultural stories that shape the borderland, she also hopes to strengthen and reunify her people.

**RETURNING TO THE BARN: A SOCIAL JUSTICE THIRDSPACE FOR THE MIGRANT LABORER**

The fullest picture of Estrella’s Thirdspace of embodied spirituality emerges in the symbolic final scene of the book, where it acts to blend the ethical demand of the refugee with the citizenship protections that should be afforded to the internally displaced person for the repeatedly displaced migrant laborer. This scene incorporates previous allusions to spiritual narratives in the text and imagines how not only the women that she embodies but all of the Mexican migrants can come together. Estrella searches for a communal space, and the barn becomes her choice. She is intrigued by this rickety, old building partly because she has been forbidden to enter it by Perfecto, so claiming it

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asserts her newfound female authority. At the same time, she is also tied to it because it was a focal point during her spiritual experience on the night of the eclipse.75 The barn holds many other symbolic benefits, as well. In Christian tradition, it is important as the place of Jesus’ birth. Agriculturally, barns, as the storehouses for food and animals, signify fertility. In Aztec history, the barn parallels the cave-like spaces of worship and the symbolic cave space of rebirth. In the novel, it is also an internal space for reflection and a sanctuary. As Estrella states, when things have gotten so bad for Alejo that they have finally taken him to the clinic despite the cost, “all she wanted was to find a deep, dark quiet place like the barn to cry” (139–40). It is also the place where the deformed boy is seen, the symbolic and literal child of the people who have been harmed by the poisoning of the fields. All of these representations are drawn upon in this ending scene.

Early in the text, the barn evokes organized religion when it is described as a “cathedral of a building” (9). At the end, that tie remains, but with a difference. Although the barn is still a cathedral, it is now Estrella’s heart that is “like the chiming bells in the great cathedrals” (176). In an interview about the book, Viramontes herself comments that the barn is “a rejection of her mother’s faith but a reemphasis as well.”76 That is, Estrella has become the heart of the “church” under a spiritually embodied viewpoint, and the barn becomes not only a place of refuge but a living entity—a Thirdspace for the migrant workers. It, in effect, represents the book’s new spirituality, standing physically for all the people who seek refuge. Estrella imagines the pain the barn would feel in its humanized state if she were to tear it down like Perfecto, her stand-in father figure, has asked:

The nails would screech and the wood would moan and she would pull the veins out and the woodsheet wall would collapse like a toothless mouth. Nothing would be left except a hole in the baked dirt so wide it would make one wonder how anything could be so empty.

Is that what happens? Estrella thought, people just use you until you’re all used up, then rip you into pieces when they’re finished using you? (75)

Like the mythic and religious women who have been subsumed by dogma or oppressed by a masculine power, the barn would be harmed and silenced. With the reference of the barn’s veins, Estrella also invokes her mother’s pain-

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75. Importantly, during the eclipse she blows on the bottle because she feels good but could not “build the house of words” (70) to express herself; she could not yet “build rooms as big as barns” (70; italics added). Now Estrella is trying to utilize the barn that does exist so that it can house her feelings, her spirituality, and the voice of her people.

ful varicose veins, while the toothless mouth recalls Toothless Kawamoto, a *piscador* who stands for all migrant workers and importantly marks, through his Japanese name, a connection beyond a singular ethnic space: “She saw the bend of a back, and at first could not tell whether it was female or male, old or young” (56). The tearing down of the barn is the tearing down of all the people who are being “used up.”

By embracing the barn, Estrella makes the decision to fight for the community. She chooses to avoid selfish individualism, like Perfecto’s dream to return to Mexico alone or Alejo’s cousin’s decision to leave the sick Alejo. Instead, Estrella’s connection to the barn shows that the focus should be on expanding the definition of family and a home, since, as Cecelia Lawless argues, “a home cannot be conceived as a private, protected, and individualistic place” unless through “homey nostalgia” because that definition of home has long been a place of oppression for women.77 Estrella’s expansion of the homespace imitates Petra’s accepting Alejo into her family or the *piscadores*’ helping her family stuck by the side of the road. They all need to work together to get unstuck and reborn.

As Michael Nieto García states, the barn in part becomes a womb for Estrella’s symbolic birth.78 Extending García’s claim, I suggest that the barn becomes a womb-space tying the *Nepantla* idea of rebirth to the pre-Conquest time of Coatlicue. In myth the Mexica (part of the people later named the Aztecs) migrate, developing into the most powerful tribe in the region. On their journey, they stop at “the mount of the seven wombs”:79

> There at Coatepec, Huitzilopochtli burst forth fully grown and armed from the womb of his mother Coatlicue, to slay his sister, Coyolxauhqui and his four hundred, or innumerable, brothers the Centronhuitznatua, the episode functioning as a metaphor for Mexican dominance over enemy peoples.80

Estrella, the Coatlicue figure, leaves her mother Petra, who, attempting to thwart her rebirth, “was trying to hide her back in her body” (171). She travels to the dark refuge of a cave-like space that doubles as her own womb, and in this reimagining, a son is not born from her. Instead, she gives birth to herself. She grabs onto the metal chain dangling in the middle of the barn:

> She wrapped the chain between her thighs now and jerked down to raise herself up as if she were tugging on a cord of a bell. She stopped to release

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one hand and wipe her sweaty palm against her trousers while she hugged tight the chain against her chest with her other. (173)

As García explains, Estrella becomes the child attached to the umbilical cord of the chain, pushing through the door on the roof into life, but she is also the mother in labor, sweating and feeling the tearing between her thighs. For Viramontes, barns carry dangerous knowledge about sexuality via intercourse and birth, and for that reason are often prohibited to girls.81 Estrella’s entering the barn and reclaiming it as the site of her own birth is an entry into empowered womanhood.

Through her actions, Estrella leaves Anzaldúa’s Coatlicue state: “When you’re in the midst of the Coatlicue state—the cave, the dark—you’re hibernating or hiding, you’re in a womb state. When you come out of that womb state you pass through the birth canal, the passageway, I call nepantla [sic].”82 Having come through Nepantla, she, like Huitzilopochtli who stands on the mountaintop ready for battle, stands on the roof of the barn ready for a new phase of her existence. She will not slay her sister like Huitzilopochtli did. She will look for a way to bring all of her people together, drawing on all the histories and the space out of which she has come.

In the final scene, Estrella enacts this metamorphosis of religious symbols. In her rebirth, she becomes a male figure ready to do battle to show that the Mexicans will not be conquered. She also alters the gender of the Christian story by taking on the role of the newborn Jesus figure. Assuming his characteristics from the title, she walks on the roof: “The termite-softened shakes crunched beneath her bare feet like the serpent under the feet of Jesus” (175). At the same time, she functions as Eve, who, like Coatlicue, is the mother of all. God’s injunction against the serpent in the garden of Eden foretells that Jesus will eventually crush the serpent as Eve’s “brood,” but in the present moment Eve has that power. In this way, Estrella again complicates the timeline as she is both Eve and Jesus at once.

Estrella more fully realizes this Thirdspace when she steps out on the roof and encompasses all of time. She reflects on her surroundings:

She was stunned by the diamonds. The sparkle of stars cut the night—almost violently sharp. [. . .] Over the eucalyptus and behind the moon, the stars like silver pomegranates glimmered before an infinity of darkness. No wonder the angels had picked a place like this to exist. (175)

81. Kevane and Heredia, Latina Self-Portraits, 150.
Standing there “bathed in a flood of gray light” (175) on the roof that “reminded her of the full moon” (3), she looks like the woman of the apocalypse, “clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars” (Revelation 12:1). Estrella as Eve and as the woman of the apocalypse has encompassed the first and last books of the Bible—from creation to destruction and rebirth. Additionally, Miguel Sánchez uses the same biblical quotation to describe the Virgin of Guadalupe in his 1648 tract Imagen de la Virgen María, Madre de Dios de Guadalupe.83 Estrella, like the woman of the apocalypse and the Virgin of Guadalupe, may found a new spirituality even as the apocalypse is at hand.

Estrella’s multiple representations bring forth a complicated image that demonstrates the importance of a Thirddspace as a place where new ideals such as her symbolic act of embodied spirituality can develop. Through her embodiment, Estrella accomplishes Viramontes’s generational goal: “As we slowly examine our own existence in and out of these cultures, we are breaking stereotypes, reinventing traditions for our own daughters and sons.”84 This final scene utilizes the traditions of Estrella’s community and reconceives them to create a better future and a stronger community that asserts in the interests of social justice an unqualified belonging that is not subject to the precarity of the migrant labor movement.

To that end, Estrella “believ[e] her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed” (176). Although this hope may mostly reside on the symbolic and mythical level, her desire is a real one. She sees herself as powerful as religious narratives, and she wants to use that strength. How precisely she will use that power toward social justice lies beyond the ending of the text, but as the novel closes, she stands on a roof, another boundary line between home and sky, trying to figure out how to break down barriers while building up her community.

Under the Feet, as a recent representation of the contested borderland, reveals the necessity of reimagining space by blurring the boundaries between the two sides and recognizing the complexity of interstitial locations and identities. By incorporating Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory about the cultural intricacies of the borderland and about the boundary-crossing identity issues of Nepantla, Under the Feet demonstrates how the people who live in this space assume a borderland mentality. The novel represents the dualities of everyday life for the poor and oppressed subjected to disembodied criminality, includ-

83. Brading, Mexican Phoenix, 58. Sánchez’s text has been republished in 1952 under the title Historia de la Virgen de Guadalupe de Mexico.
ing a young girl who acts to create a third possibility that upsets binaries, expands beyond them, and shows the potential of the most disempowered.

CONCLUSION: THINKING THROUGH THE MIGRANT

The history of space and movement in the United States is not homogenous, nor are its traces visible on the map. By attending to culturally contested and semantically rich regions such as the borderland between the United States and Mexico, it is possible to imagine alternative solutions to problems caused by the binary discourses of nation, race, and gender and to avoid the pitfalls inherent in modern culture’s notion of abstract, legalized, supposedly neutral space. The borderland and those who reside in it contain the potential of Thirdspace that combines the real and imagined to contemplate not just space but also how identity is affected by that space and by the economic displacements that continue to drive it. Viramontes’s characters live and move within the borderland, overcoming established oppositions that mark them as bare life through the use of other women’s stories and the seemingly disempowered locations of gender and race, combining what she calls “the creative process and the imagination” with their complex histories. Because the governmentality imposed on them often does not allow them to feel a sense of permanency, and because Estrella still stands alone on the edge of that roof, this novel ends without having fully realized a response that touches the entire community. Estrella’s embodied spirituality, however, presents the possibility of how migrant workers might start a quest for a sense of belonging and visibility in the United States through a reclaiming of their individual and collective histories, culture, and religion that will lead to a site for social justice and to an altered perspective of self, space, and community. The characters have had to embrace a “traveling identity,” as James Clifford labels people for whom the question is “not so much ‘where are you from?’ but ‘where are you between?’” Nepantla demonstrates the creative possibilities within these uncomfortable places that can lead the migrants to embodying positive responses of their own.

This chapter, as well as the ones before it, has shown the importance of imagining beyond the spaces in which we currently reside. More broadly, this is the power of literature to help us to imagine a world outside the one as it exists, or to “imagine otherwise.” Viramontes herself has invoked

85. Kevane and Heredia, Latina Self-Portraits, 150.
86. Clifford, Routes, 37.
Avery F. Gordon’s term for the power of literature to help us to create new political and cultural possibilities:

To imagine otherwise, [is] not to see things as they necessarily are but to imagine what can get better, giving them an awareness of the fictional dimensions of their personalities. The person before me is not simply who he or she seems to be but infinitely something more, something beyond what we could ever know. [. . .] Our lives are not set in stone, not fixed, static, dead.87

Viramontes’s novel takes seriously this task of mindfulness that she learned by connecting her historical and cultural knowledge with her spiritual and political awareness and a compassionate and imaginative self that tries to see what has been as well as what could be. Her project, as I have shown, should be understood in the context of the history of Mexican immigration and the migrant labor of people of Mexican descent in the United States, including early visa regulations, the strikes of migrant farmworkers, the Bracero Program, the responses by the UFW, border patrols and deportation programs, and NAFTA. The paradoxical figure of the migrant laborer, who is always moving without ever arriving, most strongly emblematizes the shortcomings of the legal categories of the refugee and the internally displaced person while indicating the obligation to consider migration and movement more fully. Today the deleterious impact of migrant laborer status acutely affects those of Mexican descent regardless of their citizenship, though, as I have shown, it has undermined the rights of all the peoples discussed in this book. All of these governmental restrictions that seek to create a precarious, bare life for certain individuals and the responding oppositional fights for citizenship rights are part of a broader struggle over the meaning of landownership, American-ness, and movement. Exposing the constructedness of these terms, the connections among environmental, economic, and wartime displacements for different racial groups across the twentieth century, and the need to imagine otherwise has been the goal of this book.