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Fatal Contiguities: Metonymy and Environmental Justice

Hsuan L. Hsu

ENVIRONMENTAL CRITICISM HAS RECENTLY shifted its attention from classic works of “nature writing” to texts that more directly engage with social inequalities. Whereas “first-wave” ecocriticism tended to privilege rural scenarios featuring apparently unaltered “nature,” environmental-justice activism has drawn attention to urban settings where descriptions of nature cannot be isolated from uneven and contested patterns of housing, zoning, and transportation.¹ In U.S. cities, the production and reconfiguration of built space has been instrumental to perpetuating racial inequalities. Even as political discourse and mass media have become saturated with “postracial” rhetoric, spatial segregation continues to reproduce differentiated life possibilities among racialized groups. As politicians and real-estate speculators rezone and rebuild low-income neighborhoods, communities have been cut off from public services, displaced, and denigrated as urban “blight.” Public spaces and services such as buses, streetcars, sidewalks, and parks have been neglected and in some cases demolished as resources have been transferred to the construction of freeways accessible primarily to suburban residents who live far from the cities they traverse.

What can literary criticism contribute to our understanding of these issues? Whereas environmental-justice research has tended to privilege sociological data that aims “to quantify, measure, and ‘prove’ that environmental racism exists,”² aesthetic analysis productively foregrounds the conditions for perceiving (or not perceiving) the mechanisms and consequences of environmental racism. Attending to the conditioning of perception is particularly urgent in light of the unknown or invisible risk factors that increasingly characterize modern environments, as well as the intangible psychological and social losses often imposed by processes of urban “renewal.”³ How can we represent risk factors that are invisible or not yet fully understood, and how do those risks reconfigure the relations between character and environment, as well as relations between different spaces? Whereas ecocritics have shown how literature can valorize natural processes and convey place-based intimacies, the

relations between literary form and environmental injustice are less firmly established.

If relations of spatial contiguity are historically conditioned, unevenly distributed, and politically contested through processes of disinvestment and redevelopment, then metonymy—or linguistic association according to contiguity—may be a crucial figure for environmental-justice literature. While nature writing often privileges environmental metaphors that associate human and “natural” phenomena, environmental metonymies highlight already existing, historically contingent interfaces between people and their surroundings. Environmental metonymy was first deployed extensively over a century ago by naturalist writers interested in the animal aspects of human nature, environmental determinist perspectives on urban inequities, and distanced narrative perspectives. However, metonymic relations between bodies and spaces remain crucial today insofar as they make visible the invisible risk factors associated with deindustrialization, transportation inequality, and environmental toxicity.

This essay will revisit the theoretical distinction between metaphor and metonymy from an environmental-justice perspective, considering how each trope envisions relations between nature and society. Throughout, I draw examples from the novels of Helena María Viramontes, which deploy both metaphor and metonymy to dramatize the racially uneven effects of environmental harm. The first section provides an overview of critics’ reservations about environmental metaphors, and suggests that metaphor—which is often conceptualized as a figure based on the substitution of ideas—may also register perceptual habits and expectations that are environmentally conditioned (that is, conditioned by contiguity). The second section considers how metonymic language makes visible the mundane, cumulative effects of environmental racism—as well as potential alliances that might arise to redress them—through an extended reading of *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007), Viramontes’s novel about young women coming of age during the peak decades of East Los Angeles freeway construction.

I. Two Aspects of Environmental Language

In his classic study, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” (1956), Roman Jakobson argues that the figures of metaphor and metonymy express two distinct “linguistic predilections.” Metaphor makes vertical substitutions based on analogy or similarity, while metonymy highlights relations along a horizontal axis of contiguity.

The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The METAPHORIC way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the METONYMIC way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively. . . . In normal verbal behavior both processes are continually operative, but careful observation will reveal that under the influence of a cultural pattern, personality, and verbal style, preference is given to one of the two processes over the other.⁴

Jakobson suggestively frames metaphor and metonymy not as exceptional poetic devices, but as modes of expression or discursive “processes” with profound implications for everyday patterns of speech, perception, feeling, and thought.⁵ Yet, as Barbara Johnson notes, “metaphor has always, in the Western tradition, had the privilege of revealing unexpected truth,” as opposed to metonymy.⁶ This association with “truth” has sometimes resulted in the dangerous and politically charged naturalization of metaphors, as when racial difference is quantified and pathologized through the language of “blood,” when the nation is represented as a family, or when racialized groups are stereotypically depicted as animals.⁷ In the context of urban planning, developers have frequently invoked the arboreal metaphor of urban “blight” to naturalize and pathologize poverty, and to justify the “renewal” of areas with high black and Chicano populations.⁸

Environmental writing often gravitates towards metaphorical thinking that likens human and social processes to natural ones. For instance, Ursula Heise has shown that contemporary novels of multicultural or transnational scope often rely on a metaphoric equation of human diversity with ecological diversity. Recent novels by Karen Tei Yamashita, Barbara Kingsolver, and Ruth Ozeki all suggest that “the establishment of existential ties with cultural others through romance and family can metaphorically substitute for . . . solutions [to scenarios of ecological crisis around the world].”⁹ Mitchum Huehls has also noted the frequency with which “environmental authors and critics assume an Aristotelian conception of metaphor in which one object replaces another because of their shared properties.”¹⁰ When taken out of context, such environmental metaphors run the risk of reinscribing the notion of an unbridgeable distance between culture and nature.¹¹ If “metaphors assist in reducing the unfamiliar to the familiar,”¹² then uncritical environmental metaphors may effectively naturalize nature itself when they draw on it as a source of unchanging and supposedly universal materials.

Given these limitations of environmental metaphor, Viramontes’s first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), would appear to be excessive in what its publisher calls its “haunting use of image and metaphor.”¹³ A

Bildungsroman chronicling the lives of Estrella, her family, and a young man named Alejo on the migrant-farming circuit, *Under the Feet* relies heavily on metaphorical language to give meaning to the girl's experiences of dislocation and environmental injustice. Huehls counts 216 similes in the 176-page novel,¹⁴ most of which liken human experience to characteristics of animals, plants, or landscape. Even the title references a metaphorical relation between human, natural, and divine laws: Estrella's mother Petra tells her that if the immigration police attempt to detain her, "you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus."¹⁵ While Petra has literally hidden her children's birth certificates under her sculpted figurine of Jesus, her statement also suggests, metaphorically, that her children have both a religious and an earthly right to citizenship.

The novel's concluding scene stages a vertical ascent from literal, everyday contacts to metaphorical insight. Estrella, worn down from a long day of travel and from having to leave her friend Alejo at the hospital, "felt filthy, the coils of her neck etched with dirt and sweat. Estrella took off the muddied dress as if she wanted to discard the whole day like dirty laundry" (*UFJ* 170). After removing the stained dress in a metaphorical act of purification, she climbs up into the tower of the barn "as if she were climbing out of a box. The birds pumped their wings . . . like debris whirling in a tornado . . . the stars like silver pomegranates glimmered before an infinity of darkness. . . . Estrella remained immobile as an angel standing on the verge of faith. Like the chiming bells of the great cathedrals, she believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed" (*UFJ* 175–76). Estrella's vertical ascent transforms the barn—the last architectural relic of a smaller-scale agrarian landscape that preceded the onset of large-scale monocrop agriculture—into a cathedral, her heart into a bell, her character into an angel. Time stops as the "immobile" Estrella looks upon a landscape saturated with metaphorical associations. While this experience of the transcendence and insight offered by metaphor is compelling, Viramontes quietly qualifies it by underlining Estrella's "faith" and belief: will her vision actually suffice to undo the crushing experiences of loss and displacement documented in the novel—to "summon home all those who strayed"? Likewise, this novel's uplifting ending is overshadowed by the fact that Estrella will probably soon assist in tearing down this very barn in exchange for extra pay.

However, as Johnson observes, "It is often very hard to tell [metaphor and metonymy] apart."¹⁶ On closer inspection, many of the similes in *Under the Feet* turn out to reference not universal "natural" images but landscapes that have been produced and configured by human labor

and technology. Christa Grewe-Volpp has noted numerous metaphors and similes that illustrate the extent to which the working environment of Viramontes's migrant farmers conditions their perception of the world: "Estrella sees clouds 'ready to burst like cotton plants' (3); her mother's varicose veins remind her of 'vines choking the movement of her legs' (61). When Perfecto Flores dreams of illness, his veins appear to him 'like irrigation canals clogged with dying insects, twitching on their backs, their little twig legs jerking' (100). And Petra thinks of her baby's growing fetus as 'the lima bean in her . . . bursting a root with each breath' (125)."¹⁷ Grewe-Volpp suggests that such examples frame the natural environment as "a socially, economically, and culturally determined realm into which human beings are embedded. Their material and their psychological existence, even their visual perceptions, are shaped by their work in the fields, by the fruit that they harvest, and by culturally inherited values."¹⁸ Viramontes's metaphors and similes evoke the *embeddedness* of her characters within environments that are both socially produced and agriculturally productive: they perceive veins as irrigation canals and fetuses as lima beans because these are aspects of their everyday environment—an environment that, far from appearing "natural," regenerative, or universal, is exposed as exploitative and chemically toxic to those who labor in it daily. In addition to emphasizing similarities between terms, these metaphoric connections expose relations of contiguity by conveying the psychological and perceptual habits of characters who have become part of the agricultural landscape. They internalize the landscape as extensively—if not as fatally—as Alejo does when, exposed to a concentrated dose of pesticide spray, "He thought first of his feet sinking, sinking to his knee joints, swallowing his waist and torso, the pressure of tar squeezing his chest and crushing his ribs. Engulfing his skin up to his chin, his mouth, his nose, bubbled air. Black bubbles erasing him. Finally the eyes. Blankness" (*UFJ* 78).

Alejo's loss of self in this climactic scene is mediated by the metaphor of the tar pit—a metaphor that both alludes to his own longstanding fascination with the La Brea Tar Pits and draws attention to an inanimate substance that has its origins in organic (in Alejo's case, human) matter. Alejo's engulfment by tar evokes the perils of contiguity in landscapes produced under the logic of environmental racism. For his exposure is merely a concentrated dose of the everyday, cumulative permeation of farmers' bodies by toxic pesticides—a permeation that is referenced throughout the novel by passing allusions to different characters' illnesses, ranging from sore muscles and watery eyes to cancer, miscarriages, and unexplained chest pains.¹⁹ Alejo's feeling of sinking into the earth allegorizes the ways in which toxic agricultural landscapes affect

the physical, psychological, and social health of migrant workers. In the landscapes of racialized migrant labor, contiguity kills.

II. Fatal Contiguities

Viramontes's writings cumulatively build on the tradition of Chicana literature that, according to Mary Pat Brady, "has, from its inception, contested the terms of capitalist spatial formation, including the attempts to regulate the meanings and uses of spaces, especially the use of space to naturalize violent racial, gender, sexual, and class ideologies."²⁰ In *Their Dogs Came With Them*, Viramontes extends her treatment of environmental racism to the urban context of East Los Angeles. *Their Dogs*—which Viramontes began drafting in 1991²¹—shares with *Under the Feet* an overarching concern with how social and physical harm is unevenly distributed across spatial and racial boundaries. *Their Dogs*, however, shifts its rhetorical emphasis from the vertical axis of metaphor to foreground lateral relations of contiguity between persons, things, and spaces. While both novels employ metaphor and metonymy in varying degrees, their differences exemplify Jakobson's argument that "under the influence of a cultural pattern, personality, and verbal style, preference is given to one of the two processes over the other"²² This shift in rhetorical pattern appears, for example, in the prepositions featured in the two novels' titles: *under the feet*, as we have seen, highlights a vertical metaphoric relation (even if it also invokes the ground as a synecdoche for the entire Earth); by contrast, *their dogs came with them* emphasizes contiguity even as it also raises questions (which the novel never quite answers) about just what these dogs symbolize.²³

Whereas Viramontes's earlier novel was constrained primarily to the lives of Estrella's family and, for the most part, to its protagonist's developing point of view, *Their Dogs* encompasses multiple contiguous storylines without privileging any one of its loosely interrelated characters. The novel recounts the daily lives of several young people coming of age during the 1960s and 1970s: Ermila, an orphan living with her grandparents and dating a gang member named Alfonso; her artistically inclined cousin Nacho, "sent by his family five months ago to come live up north and help out since Grandfather had been disabled"²⁴; Turtle, an androgynous young woman who becomes involved with the McBride Boys gang; Ana, a self-sacrificing young woman who looks after her brother Ben (who has been mentally ill since he was hit by a car as a child); and Tranquilina, who helps her parents run a local church. As the novel progresses, these subplots begin to intersect like freeway

interchanges:²⁵ Nacho, who has fallen in love with Ermila, jumps her boyfriend and locks him in a lifeguard booth; the McBride Boys, with Turtle in tow, take revenge on Nacho; Ana and Tranquilina, who are on the streets searching for Ben at night, witness the ensuing assault, in which Turtle murders Nacho with a screwdriver to assert her masculinity.

In addition to interweaving these subplots in the novel's climactic scene, Viramontes also unifies her characters through dynamic descriptions of the spaces they inhabit and traverse. The demolition of houses and construction of new roads and freeways in East L.A. permeates the novel with a (literal) atmosphere of abandonment. *Their Dogs* is set during the period when deindustrialization, suburban sprawl, and the rapid spread of automobiles led to—and were in turn intensified by—the construction of freeways through low-income neighborhoods such as Watts, South Central, Compton, and East L.A.²⁶ Despite decades of complaints, protests, and lawsuits by local residents, East L.A. became “home to more freeways than any place in the country” in the decades following the 1956 Interstate and Defense Highway Act.²⁷ In his introduction to *Highway Robbery: Transportation, Racism and New Routes to Equity*, environmental-justice scholar Robert Bullard summarizes the social and environmental consequences of “transportation apartheid”:

Many federally subsidized transportation construction and infrastructure projects cut wide paths through low-income and people of color neighborhoods. They physically isolate residents from their institutions and businesses, disrupt once-stable communities, displace thriving businesses, contribute to urban sprawl, subsidize infrastructure decline, create traffic gridlock, and subject residents to elevated risks from accidents, spills, and explosions from vehicles carrying hazardous chemicals and other dangerous materials. Adding insult to injury, cutbacks in mass transit subsidies have the potential to further isolate the poor in inner-city neighborhoods from areas experiencing job growth—compromising what little they already have. So while some communities receive transportation benefits, others pay the costs.²⁸

Their Dogs frequently registers the psychological, social, and physical effects of the “seven freeways and one massive interchange” that emerged in East L.A. between 1953 and 1972.²⁹ The freeway's devastation of community and collective memory are evoked, for example, when Tranquilina's mother contrasts the present space with the spatially and racially integrated neighborhood she recalls from an earlier time: “The streets Mama remembered had once connected to other arteries of the city, rolling up and down hills, and in and out of neighborhoods where neighbors of different nationalities intersected with one another. . . . But now the freeways amputated the streets into stumped dead ends” (*TD* 33).

The freeways' effects on health are apparent on several occasions when Turtle (whose name references the slowdown or "*time-space expansion*" that freeways imposed on inner-city residents who lacked automobiles³⁰) feels a physical *exhaustion* directly precipitated by "carbon exhaust": "[T]he thick, choking stench of blackened diesel smoke rose from the dump trucks, and bulldozers blew carbon exhaust into a haze. Her eyes were so tired, they squeaked as she rubbed them"; "the groan, thump, and burr noise of the constant motors [of earthmovers] would weave into the sound of her own breath whistling the blackened fumes of dust and crumble in her nasal cavities" (*TD* 27, 168). These airborne interweavings of noise, exhaust, and bodies pose a representational problem insofar as they are invisible, transient, difficult to document, and uncertain in their effects. Such environmental risk factors partake in the temporality of "slow violence" that critic Rob Nixon has associated with chemical and radioactive pollutants, whose slow and indeterminate effects challenge narrative conventions: "such invisible, mutagenic theater is slow-paced but open-ended, eluding the tidy closure, the narrative containment, imposed by visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat."³¹ Ben's accident, in which he and another boy are struck by a speeding cement truck, more directly illustrates the risks posed by increased automobile traffic: as Nancy Jakowitsch and Michelle Ernst note in a commentary on "Just Transportation," "people of color are . . . disproportionately the victims of pedestrian fatalities."³² Such passages frame the setting of Viramontes's novel not as a fixed place, but as an ongoing process of spatial transformation.

Aside from the noise and soot of home demolition and freeway construction, *Their Dogs* draws attention to several other instances of environmental injustice. Viramontes notes, for example, how the L.A. riverbed—once a public agricultural and aesthetic resource—has been rechannelled into "a huge straight artificial river naked of water," both for flood control and to make room for real-estate and freeway development (*TD* 225).³³ The enclosed river contrasts with the artificial pond of "colored, treated," toxic water at Belvedere Park, in which Ana is baptized (*TD* 281–82). The novel also depicts a "smog alert" on a school playground and several instances of occupational health hazards that range from Ermila "stomach[ing] the heavy smell of Pennzoil" while working at a used car shop to her friend Lollie helping her mother at a garment factory "while wafts of lint dried her throat like cheap-brand cigarettes" (*TD* 151). These encounters with environmental contaminants foreground relations of "trans-corporeality" in which human bodies and their surroundings interpenetrate and continually reshape one another.³⁴

In a further satirical, surreal twist, Viramontes's East L.A. is also placed

under a quarantine to protect residents from rabid dogs that overrun the *barrio*:

From First Street to Boyle to Whittier and back to Pacific Boulevard, the roadblocks enforced a quarantine to contain a potential outbreak of rabies. Back in early February, a pamphlet delivered by the postman read: *Rising cases of rabies reported in the neighborhood (see shaded area) have forced Health officials to approve, for limited time only, the aerial observation and shooting of undomesticated mammals. Unchained and/or unlicensed mammals will not be exempt.* (TD 54)

As Viramontes has noted, this fictional public health quarantine loosely parallels the actual “public safety” curfews imposed during the Chicano Moratorium of 1969–71.³⁵ Like the historical curfews, the emerging freeway system, and racist policing techniques,³⁶ the rabies quarantine restricts the movements of residents while segregating them from more affluent, healthier neighborhoods: as the historian Rodolfo Acuña puts it, East L.A. in this period was “a community under siege.”³⁷ Viramontes’s selection of rabies—a term that derives from the Sanskrit *rabhas* (“to do violence”)—as the pretext for the quarantine raises critical questions about whether the roots of street violence lie in stray dogs, gangs of unemployed and stigmatized Chicano youths, or Quarantine Authority snipers who indiscriminately shoot stray “mammals” from their helicopters. When Ermila conjectures that her grandmother has placed a vicious dog in her bedroom to prevent her from sneaking out of the house at night, it becomes apparent that the young women in the novel (with the exception of the cross-dressed turtle) are doubly quarantined—alternately shut up in their homes and blockaded out of their neighborhood.

The novel’s title and epigraph also connect the rabies quarantine with the long history of New World colonialism by invoking a passage from Miguel Leon-Portilla’s *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*. The epigraph, which describes the approach of the conquistadors, suggestively describes conquest not just in terms of weapons and soldiers, but as the onset of an invasive, militarized milieu³⁸—an assemblage of humans, accoutrements, animals, noise, dust, and drool: “The dust rose in whirlwinds on the roads. . . . They made a loud clamor as they marched. . . . Their dogs came with them, running ahead of the column. They raised their muzzles high; they lifted their muzzles to the wind. They raced on before with saliva dripping from their jaws” (TD, epigraph).

In the novel, a similarly violent environment has been imposed on East L.A. By rearranging and policing urban space, freeway construction and the Quarantine Authority collude to impose experiences of constrained

mobility and social interaction upon all the novel's characters. Like earlier literary naturalists such as Émile Zola, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris, *Their Dogs* often describes characters anonymously, associates them with animals, and implies an outlook of environmental determinism.³⁹ Indeed, Viramontes's motive "to write about the colonized imagination" in this novel leads her to deliberately distance its characters from the Chicano movement:⁴⁰ brown berets, school walkouts, and political dissent appear only in passing as her characters go about their daily lives. But if Viramontes deploys naturalist techniques, *Their Dogs* also adapts them to address problems such as invisible pollutants, deindustrialization, and the rapidity of urban "renewal." Viramontes adapts the environmental determinism of earlier naturalist novels to explore how her characters' lives and social relations are paradoxically determined by *indeterminate* risk factors. Whereas Crane often personifies New York's tenements to highlight the damage that they inflict on Bowery residents, *Their Dogs* depicts the production of urban spaces as a dynamic force that quietly affects all the characters' lives and establishes the conditions for the murder (which ensues when Turtle is told to "waste" her victim) that retroactively structures the novel's plot. Viramontes depicts the brutalization of her young characters by surroundings subjected to environmental devastation, helicopter surveillance, state-sponsored bulldozers, and capital flight.

III. Environmental Metonymy and the Function of the Stain

The centrality of spatial transformation to the novel's form is evident from the first sentence, which abruptly shifts from recounting an action to describing a material interface between a body and its environment: "The Zumaya child had walked to Chavela's house barefooted, and the soles of her feet were blackened from the soot of the new pavement" (*TD* 5). In an opening sentence that revises the title of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes transitions from a vertical relation to a lateral one: the soot under the child's feet effectively becomes part of her. By the second sentence, she has "tar feet" that reflect not only her family's lack of means, but also the environmental disturbance of road construction and the inextricable connection between body and (socially produced) space. Unlike the metaphor of being engulfed by tar that mediates Alejo's toxic exposure in the earlier novel, the contiguous relation between the child's feet and the tar she has just traversed embeds her body in time (how long she has walked on soot, how long ago the pavement was laid)

and space (interrelations between large-scale urban planning, highway construction, and the Zumayas' immediate neighborhood). When the child "[swings] her tar feet under the vinyl chair" at Chavela's house, the street itself has in a sense entered the house, tracked onto the floor and distributed through the air by the child's swinging feet (*TD* 5). By the end of the chapter, Chavela's house, along with all the other homes and residents on its side of the street, "would disappear forever" as bulldozers raze them to be paved over with tar (*TD* 12).

Just as *Under the Feet* was filled with similes, *Their Dogs* consistently features metonymic human-environment relationships patterned after the description of the Zumaya child's soot-blackened feet. The second page, for example, describes a chair "stuck to the child's thighs," Chavela's "tobacco-tarnished hand," and the Gamboa boy's "tar-smudged" face (*TD* 6). The novel is filled with passing references to scummy fingernails, sooty skin, paint-stained clothes, fingers smudged with pollen, body-shaped indentations on cushions, and other interfaces between bodies and environmental elements. While the novel's pervasive smudges and stains resonate with the symbolic ritual of Ash Wednesday⁴¹—in which ash is smudged on the forehead to temporarily signify penitence, mortality, and membership in a community of believers—they also bear witness to the ways in which characters and their surroundings unavoidably leave marks on one another. Stains are doubly metonymic, partaking not only of the environment that they materialize but also the surfaces and bodies stained. They are materialized traces of soot, tar, oil, mud, and "the black fumes of the bulldozer exhaust hovering over the new pavements of First Street"—exhaust that paved the way for still more harmful automobile emissions from the freeways on which few of the novel's characters ever get to drive (*TD* 8). Viramontes persistently deploys stains to make visible the human effects of ambient (often imperceptible) environmental harm concentrated in low-income neighborhoods such as East L.A.

Jacques Lacan's theorization of the gaze provides a useful framework for understanding how visibility and invisibility are conditioned by social and environmental factors. Implicitly drawing on Jakobson,⁴² Lacan describes "the function of the stain and of the gaze" in the field of vision in terms of metonymic slippage: "In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze."⁴³ While Lacan's concept of the gaze has been brought to bear on questions of race and gender by thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Kaja Silverman, its environmental undertones have largely gone unnoticed. Nature and landscape—whether in the eye-shaped stains that appear

on insect wings or Sartre's discussion of "the sound of rustling leaves, suddenly heard while out hunting" (*FFC* 74, 84)⁴⁴—figure prominently among Lacan's examples of the gaze, and they are nowhere more striking than in the famous autobiographical passage describing a vacation taken while he was in his twenties. Attempting to "throw myself into something practical, something physical, in the country say, or at the sea," the young Lacan ends up on a boat with a family of fishermen in Brittany (*FFC* 95). In this anecdote, the "gaze" appears when one of the fishermen—"an individual known as Petit-Jean, that's what we called him"—draws attention to the social and geographical distance separating the vacationer from the fishermen by pointing out a glittering sardine can floating in the water: "*You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!*" (*FFC* 95).

Lacan's ironic self-portrait as a young intellectual playing at manual labor is grounded in serious issues of class, risk, and environmentally induced predispositions to death. In an aside (whose digressive insertion in the text discursively echoes the "gaze" embodied in the anamorphic skull of Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*), Lacan notes that "like all his family, [Petit-Jean] died very young from tuberculosis, which at that time was a constant threat to the whole of that social class" (*FFC* 95). The vacationing intellectual may momentarily "share" the fishermen's "risk" of shipwreck or accidental drowning, but his daily life is protected from the environmental risks associated with poverty and poor working conditions that made Petit-Jean's family vulnerable to diseases like tuberculosis. The anecdote is intended to illustrate how Lacan "looked like nothing on earth" to fishermen habituated to "the struggle with what to them was a pitiless nature." However, Lacan's own invisibility in the social "picture" composed by the fishermen and the sardine can is counterbalanced by the family's "disappearance" (Lacan writes of Petit-Jean, "*il est, comme tout sa famille, disparu*").⁴⁵ This exemplary manifestation of the gaze emerges from geographical inequalities that were only exacerbated by the industrialization of Brittany ("At that time, Brittany was not industrialized as it is now. There were no trawlers . . .") and its growing canning industry (*FFC* 95). Instead of simply illustrating the elusive, ungraspable nature of the "point of gaze," this anecdote also registers the invisibility of social factors such as class, labor, and environmental risk. (Lacan may be hinting at the metonymic nature of the "picture" he describes when he insists, "I am not speaking metaphorically" [*FFC* 95].) In this anecdote, the glimmering sardine can performs "the function of . . . *the stain*" by "mark[ing] the pre-existence to the seen of a given-to-be-seen" (*FFC* 74). However, instead of occurring naturally (like the markings on the wings of insects, or like the designs on rocks

that fascinated Lacan's source on animal mimicry, Roger Caillois), the sardine can is an industrially conditioned "stain" produced by intersecting forces of nature, capital, technology, and labor. To recuperate Lacan's French term for "the gaze" (*le regard*), the can *regards* or concerns the geographically privileged viewer, inducing him to see (as well as to see the occlusion of) the relations between country and city that condition these fishermen's vulnerability.

Viramontes shares Lacan's interest in what conditions the social visibility of "disappeared" persons and disregarded landscapes. One of the more mysterious figures in *Their Dogs* is an anonymous vagabond referred to simply as "the ubiquitous woman" or "the street woman," who joins Tranquilina's makeshift church. Ben eventually attempts to write the ubiquitous woman's biography, conflating her life with that of his own mother, who vanished when he was a boy. "If one would pass the woman while driving home from the office," Ben writes, "Could the driver know what the woman thought? In order to envision her life, one would have to think of her with greater generosity. . . . One would have to be close enough to look into her eyes, jump into the trunk of her heart, lift the stage curtains to see behind her props. It was one thing to assume, another to conjure, and yet another *to feel for her. One would need metaphor to love her*" (*TD* 125). At this point in his composition, Ben falls asleep, waking up the next morning with "his cheek imprinted by a folded page" (*TD* 125). If Ben's privileging of metaphor depends on his substitution of the ubiquitous woman for his own missing mother, the page's imprint on Ben's face displaces his call for metaphor with a metonymic relation. This shift to metonymy retroactively draws attention to the socially orchestrated contiguities between office, car commuter, street, and anonymous pedestrian in Ben's unfinished text.

By the end of the novel, Ben himself is in the ubiquitous woman's position. When he vanishes from his apartment, his sister Ana searches for him in the streets: "She drove beneath the overpass at the edges of a no-man's land where a single eucalyptus tree stood tall and slight, an anomaly of nature. Otherwise the deserted area revealed the congealed remnants of squatters like scabs on a wound. Ben-like people bequeathing cold and blackened wood chips to campfires; abandoned makeshift cardboard beds; forsaken newspapers. . . . Everywhere, Ben appeared" (*TD* 276). The social invisibility of "Ben-like people" and the "ubiquitous woman" is geographically conditioned: they exist on the edges of the freeways and roads, in parking lots, or beneath the overpass.⁴⁶ They appear interchangeable not only with other evictees and squatters, but also with nearby objects: "congealed remnants[.]" "blackened wood chips[.]" "abandoned makeshift cardboard beds." In a related scene, Tranquilina

encounters a man building a shelter in a parking lot—a man who “had risen from the ash of neglect, the smog of passing cars, and now he had appeared. . . . Sometimes he disappeared behind a sheet of aluminum siding, only his two hands and two bare feet visible, and sometimes he disappeared altogether under a newfound board. In the frenzy of his activity, it seemed the ropes of his beard often caught in the splinters or nails of the board” (*TD* 204). Perceiving these evictees and vagabonds requires that viewers physically approach their abandoned spaces and attend to the makeshift objects with which they are enmeshed. If—as the geographer Paul Robbins has argued—suburban lawns can “interpellate” people to become ecological subjects who water, mow, and dispense pesticides, the socially forsaken landscapes in Viramontes’s novels may solicit suburban commuters away from such practices. Perceiving the “anonymous woman” and “Ben-like people” along with the environments they inhabit might call forth different kinds of “political and economic subjects” who acknowledge the spatially occluded connections between the urban poor and the beneficiaries of white flight.⁴⁷

These scenes in which characters perceive the relations between bodies, environments, and the viewer’s own subject position foreground relations of contiguity that have been eloquently described by the Indian poet and critic A. K. Ramanujan. Commenting on the classic Tamil poem “What the Concubine Said,” Ramanujan draws on the concept of metonymy to describe landscape representations that attend to reciprocal relations between natural and human elements. The poem’s speaker describes her lover as follows: “You know he comes from/ where the fresh-water shark in the pools/ catch with their mouths/ the mangoes as they fall, ripe/ from the trees on the edge of the field.”⁴⁸ Ramanujan observes that “the poem does not use a metaphor. The human agents are simply *placed* in the scene. Both parts of the comparison (the man and shark) are part of one scene, one syntagm; they exist separately, yet simulate each other. . . . In such a metonymic view of man in nature—man in context—he is continuous with the context he is in.”⁴⁹

Viramontes similarly highlights the continuities between her characters and the urban environment. However, unlike the idyllic scene described in Ramanujan’s example, East L.A. is a heterogeneous space shot through with contradictions. In addition to visualizing environmental pollutants, stains also function as traces of a character’s varied movements and contacts, as when objects begin to rub off on Ermila’s bandaged hand: “First there were the bluish and yam colors from Jan’s car, which remained steadfast on the bandage from this afternoon. Then Ermila had pressed her palm on a crinkled, weatherworn billboard to slip off her shoes and the ass-colored peachy flakes of the Coppertone girl smudged Ermila’s bandage as well. The second she saw her hand on the little girl’s bare

ass, Ermila attempted to erase the colors, to eliminate the ass sensation by rubbing her palm against her Levi's" (*TD* 237).

Despite her attempts to efface these stains and her inability to empathize with the white Coppertone girl's shame at having her swimsuit tugged off by a dog, "an account of today's experiences including the girl's ass had been deposited all over her bandage" (*TD* 245). Here, the relation between body and environment is not idyllic or "natural" but awkward and conflicted: socially distanced from the modesty and "peachy" skin that characterize the Coppertone girl, Ermila nevertheless passes in close proximity to the billboard that, intended for light-skinned viewers enclosed in automobiles, was not designed to be approached so closely.

In addition to documenting mundane interactions between characters and the conceptually incongruous (yet physically contiguous) traces of nearby freeways (billboards, car seats, fumes), Viramontes also describes the McBride Homeboys' resistance to freeway construction: "Searching out the freshly laid cement of the freeway bridges and sidewalks in order to record their names, solidify their bond, to proclaim eternal allegiance to one another" (*TD* 163). Although *Their Dogs* makes passing references to the presence of graffiti, the narrator points out the limitations of such attempts to mark the freeway. If, in the short term, freeway tags were "the Caltrans contractor's worst nightmare," in the long term they merely became part of the transformed landscape:

The boys would never know that in thirty years from tonight, the tags would crack from the earthquakes, the weight of vehicles, the force of muscular tree roots, from the trampling of passersby, become as faded as ancient engravings, as old as the concrete itself, as cold and clammy as a morgue table. And in those thirty years the cracks would be repaired here and there with newer patching cement, making the boys' eternal bonds look worn and forgotten. Not even concrete engravings would guarantee immortality, though tonight they would all feel immortal. (*TD* 164)

As they are cracked, patched, and faded, and as the graffiti artists themselves disappear (or are made to disappear) from the streets, the tags transition from active metaphors into more passive metonymies. Instead of registering the nicknames, relations, and rivalries of the Homeboys, thirty years later they merely register physical interactions between newly laid concrete and forgotten youths.

Instead of valorizing the counterstains represented by freeway graffiti, Viramontes dwells on the ethical and intersubjective relations inherent in stains. In addition to materializing a metonymic interface between bodies and environment, the stain also raises questions of contagion. When Ermila attempts "to eliminate the ass sensation by rubbing her palm against her Levi's," for example, she merely redistributes the skin-

colored paint from her bandage to her pants. The brutal climax of *Their Dogs* is focalized through a Japanese American shop owner obsessed with the notion of contagion. A member of a minority group with its own history of repression, Ray finds himself in an ambivalent position. On the one hand, his daily car commute from Monterey Park falls into the pattern of selective disinvestment from urban centers characteristic of “white flight.” On the other hand, Ray’s own past as an internee at Manzanar lays the groundwork for suggestive parallels: the “charcoal rising up to his throat and making his mouth powdery like dust” in L.A. recalls the internment camp where “he ate [dust] at every meal, slept with it between sheets, had breathed in the dust storms like smoke”; similarly, to him “the Quarantine Authority sounded just like the War Relocation Authority” (*TD* 256, 260). Nevertheless, Ray’s paranoid reaction to touching Turtle’s hand disavows these commonalities. When Turtle (dressed as a boy) steps into his store in search of food, Ray briefly empathizes with her, offering her a job and shaking her hand. Afterwards, however, Ray repeatedly attempts “to wipe the sweat from his palms . . . the sticky press of the boy’s handshake. . . . Whatever object Ray had touched after that, be it the steering wheel of his Rambler or the knob of his front door, Ray embossed the boy’s microbes and germ contagion on everything. No matter how much Ray washed his hands, no matter how hard he wiped and rubbed the sweat off his palms, his hands couldn’t forget the boy’s lingering stink, like flowers left way too long in a vase of putrid water” (*TD* 261–62). Ray’s anxieties about contagion effectively deny the fact of contiguity, insofar as both words share an etymological sense of “touching together.” By shrinking from Turtle’s touch and implicitly blaming her for her “stink,” he disavows his own complicity, as a regular freeway commuter and a local business owner, in the configuration of her environment. The metaphor of flowers left “in a vase of putrid water” represents a bourgeois, domesticated version of the pathologizing metaphor of urban “blight.” Such paranoid and stigmatizing responses to biological and social contagion disavow its basis in social interconnectedness: contagious disease, writes Priscilla Wald, “illustrates the logic of social responsibility: the mandate to live with a consciousness of the effects of one’s actions on others.”⁵⁰ Ray’s paranoia is especially worrisome when we learn that, as one of the last people to have seen Turtle before she assaulted Nacho, he may be the only official witness to the crime.

Whereas Ray ends up disavowing his economic and environmental ties to Turtle, Tranquilina vividly perceives the implications of contiguity in the novel’s concluding scene. After witnessing the McBride Boys’ assault on Nacho, she runs to the scene, arranges Nacho’s body, and attempts to

protect Turtle when Quarantine Authority snipers in helicopters shoot her down. At this point, Tranquilina sheds her eponymous calm, roaring “We’rrre not doggggs!” and turning on the sharpshooters.⁵¹ “Absolutely drenched in the black waters of blood and torrents of rain, Tranquilina couldn’t delineate herself from the murdered souls because these tears and blood and rain and bullet wounds belonged to her as well” (*TD* 324–25). The contrast between Tranquilina’s enmeshed perception and Ray’s inadequate witnessing of the event effectively reiterates Lacan’s analysis of the “gaze.” There can be no transcendent view of the novel’s climactic event, because its only full witness is a woman stained by all the bodies involved: “Except for Tranquilina, no one, not the sharpshooters, the cabdrivers, the travelers dashing out to the depot, the barefoot or slipper-clad spectators in robes, not one of them, in all their glorious hallucinatory gawking, knew who the victims were, who the perpetrators were” (*TD* 325).

The novel ends with a small act of resistance as Tranquilina, ordered “not to move” by the sharpshooters, advances with clenched fists. In a passage that echoes an earlier description of Tranquilina’s father—a visionary who once had a spiritual experience of liberating ritual flight that “eliminated the borders between the human and inhuman”—Tranquilina rides the wind “beyond the borders, past the cesarean scars of the earth, out to limitless space where everything was possible if she believed” (*TD* 47–48, 325). This abstract description of centrifugal flight towards “limitless space” inverts the concluding scene of *Under the Feet*, where Estrella removes her “muddied dress,” climbs up towards numerous metaphorical perceptions, and stands “immobile as an angel on the verge of faith.” Instead of shedding her bloodstained clothing, Tranquilina becomes a part of the scene she has just witnessed. Her defiance of the sharpshooters is narrated as an apotheosis in which she ironically transcends spatial limitations and borders by advancing towards death. By contrast, an earlier draft of the novel’s ending features an unambiguous miracle as the character Remedios (an earlier version of Tranquilina) awes the sharpshooters by flying around the crowd, “promis[ing] her people she would return to them with a piece of cloud,” and vanishing into the sky.⁵² Physically blocked by the helicopters overhead, Tranquilina’s ambiguous attempt at flight in the revised novel both reprises the role of the *volador*—a mythical intermediary between humans and the god of fertility who enacts a productive reconfiguration of human relations with nature⁵³—and exposes that for East L.A.’s residents the mobility and environmental integrity embodied by the *volador* could be achieved only through a direct confrontation with state violence.⁵⁴ For it is the state that guarantees the reproduction of the fatal environments confronting East L.A.’s population in and beyond the decades covered by *Their Dogs*.

Grassroots environmental-justice movements have drawn critical attention to the ways anthropogenic factors in environmental change intersect with political and economic forces to produce differentiated spaces and populations. The foregoing analysis of *Their Dogs Came With Them* suggests that metonymy may play a productive role in aesthetic attempts to represent local instances of environmental injustice. Insistently local and material in scope, metonymy makes visible the fatal contiguities—the effects of environmental risk factors on bodies, minds, social relations, and lived space—experienced in places that have been abandoned or deliberately blighted by deindustrialization, urban “redevelopment,” and other reconfigurations of social space.

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NOTES

- 1 Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 21. Recent efforts to place environmental justice perspectives in dialogue with environmental criticism include Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001); Joni Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 2001); Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, and Rachel Stein, eds., *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 2002); Jeffrey Myers, *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2005); a special issue of *Discourse* 29, no. 2–3 (2007) on *Race, Environment, and Representation*, coedited by Mark Feldman and Hsuan L. Hsu; and a special issue of *MELUS* 34, no. 2 (2009) on *Ethnicity and Ecocriticism*, coedited by Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic.
- 2 Julie Sze, “‘Not By Politics Alone’: Gender and Environmental Justice in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*,” *Bucknell Review* 44, no. 1 (2000): 33.
- 3 See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992); on “intangible” points of everyday contact decimated by urban renewal, see Raúl Homero Villa, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2000), 12.
- 4 Roman Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” in Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), 90.
- 5 See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson: “Metonymic concepts allow us to conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else. . . . Thus, like metaphors, metonymic concepts structure not just our language but our thoughts, attitudes, and actions.” George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), 239.
- 6 Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), 157. See also Paul de Man: “The inference of identity and totality that is constitutive of metaphor is lacking in the purely relational metonymic contact: an element of truth is involved in taking Achilles for a lion but none in taking Mr. Ford for a motor car.” Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), 14.

- 7 “Monkeys, bats, rats, and ants have each been likened to various racial groups in American history, setting a cultural precedent for postwar understandings of the affinity between nonhuman and nonwhite.” Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2004), 98. On the figuration of race as blood, see Shawn Salvant, *Writing Race in Figures of Blood* (PhD diss., Univ. of California, Berkeley, 2003).
- 8 See Villa, *Barrio-Logos*, 71–72.
- 9 Ursula Heise, “Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies,” *American Literary History* 20, no. 1–2 (2008): 394.
- 10 Mitchum Huehls, “Ostention, Simile, Catachresis: Misusing Helena Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus* to Rethink the Globalization Environmentalism Relation,” *Discourse* 29, no. 2–3 (2007): 351.
- 11 On the “assertion of otherness” implicit in metaphorical associations, see Neil Smith, “Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of Geographical Scale,” *Social Text* 33 (1992): 63–64.
- 12 Neil Smith and Cindi Katz, “Grounding Metaphor: Towards a Spatialized Politics,” in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1993), 69. Smith and Katz’s critique of spatial metaphors that fail to treat space materially pertains to some environmental metaphors; however, this by no means entails that all metaphorical treatments of the environment are misguided.
- 13 Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1995), back cover.
- 14 “[T]he novel’s 176 pages contain, by my count, 216 similes, which are made all the more conspicuous by the complete absence of metaphor” (Huehls, “Ostention, Simile, Catachresis,” 357). Similes, however, function on Jakobson’s vertical, “metaphoric” axis; moreover, there do seem to be quite a few examples of metaphors in *Under the Feet*.
- 15 Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 63 (hereafter cited as *UF*).
- 16 Johnson, *World of Difference*, 157.
- 17 Christa Grewe-Volpp, “‘The Oil was Made from Their Bones’: Environmental (In)justice in Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus*,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 12, no. 1 (2005): 66.
- 18 Grewe-Volpp, “The Oil was Made,” 67. Cf. Johnson: “The material for this metaphor is drawn from the narrative world of contiguity . . .” (Johnson, *A World of Difference*, 163).
- 19 These pervasive health conditions are exacerbated by the migrants’ lack of access to health care and medication—a problem that informs a climactic scene in an inadequate medical clinic, as well as several descriptions of Petra’s unsuccessful attempts to heal herself and Alejo with garlic, egg, and homemade elixirs.
- 20 Mary Pat Brady, *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), 6.
- 21 Daniel Olivas, “Interview with Helena María Viramontes,” *La Bloga* (April 2, 2007), <http://labloga.blogspot.com/2007/04/interview-with-helena-mara-viramontes.html>.
- 22 Jakobson, *Fundamentals*, 90.
- 23 This is not to suggest that there are no similes in *Their Dogs*, or metonymies in *Under the Feet*; instead, I am arguing that each of the novels, respectively, privileges relations of contiguity and substitution at the levels of style, imagery, and plot.
- 24 Helena María Viramontes, *Their Dogs Came With Them* (New York: Washington Square, 2007), 71 (hereafter cited as *TD*).
- 25 “The list of characters kept increasing and with this increase, the stories multiplied like freeway interchanges. Having this Eureka moment, I realized that the structure of the novel began to resemble the freeway intersections” (Olivas, “Interview”).

- 26 For statistics establishing the extent of environmental racism, see Robert Bullard and Glenn Johnson: "African-Americans and Latinos live in these Los Angeles communities with the dirtiest air; the South Coast Air Quality Management District estimates 71 percent of African-Americans and 50 percent of Latinos live in areas with the most polluted air, compared to 34 percent of white people." Robert Bullard and Glenn Johnson, "Just Transportation," in *Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1997), 18.
- 27 Bullard and Johnson, *Just Transportation*, 18. On the contested process of freeway construction in Los Angeles, see Avila, *Popular Culture*, 185–223; Gilbert Estrada, "If You Build it, They Will Move: The Los Angeles Freeway System and the Displacement of Mexican East Los Angeles, 1944–1972," *Southern California Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2005): 287–315; Villa, *Barrio-Logos*, 111–55; Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997), 38–50. For an analysis of an earlier story in which Viramontes's thematizes the dissolution of community and place-based collective memory brought about by freeways in East Los Angeles, see Villa, *Barrio-Logos*, 115–34.
- 28 Robert Bullard, introduction to *Highway Robbery: Transportation, Racism and New Routes to Equity*, ed. Robert Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres (Boston: South End, 2004), 4.
- 29 Eric Avila, "East Side Stories: Freeways and Their Portraits in Chicano Los Angeles," *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007): 83.
- 30 See Cindi Katz, "On the Grounds of Globalization: A Topography for Feminist Political Engagement," *Signs* 26, no. 4 (2001): 1224.
- 31 Rob Nixon, "Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque," *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 3 (2009): 445.
- 32 Nancy Jakowitsch and Michelle Ernst, "Just Transportation," in *Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism and New Routes to Equity*, ed. Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel O. Torres (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2004), 168–69.
- 33 See Blake Gumprecht, *The Los Angeles River: Its Life, Death, and Possible Rebirth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001).
- 34 See Alaimo's discussion of "trans-corporeality," which uses Multiple Chemical Sensitivity and "toxic bodies" to rethink feminist theorists' tendency to essentialize categories like "nature" and "the body": "by underscoring that 'trans' indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality opens up an epistemological 'space' that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, non-human creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors." Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 2008), 238. Similarly, Tuana argues for an "interactionist ontology" that attends to various relations of "viscous porosity" between bodies and environments. Nancy Tuana, "Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Alaimo and Hekman, 188–213.
- 35 Interview with Michael Silverblatt. *Bookworm* (audio interview, KCRW, Aug 16, 2007), http://www.kcrw.com/etc/programs/bw/bw070816helenamaria_viramon.
- 36 Dating to the Zoot Suit riots of 1943, racist policing techniques included "roadblocks, unwarranted searches, mass arrests, and the padding of statistical 'gang files' with names of youth (Villa, *Barrio-Logos*, 68). Villa writes, "The intensified spatial vigilance and containment of the barrios were effective border-patrolling practices of particular strategic value to police agencies as Chicanos increasingly became automobile owners, with greater facility to move out of their barrios and potentially into the segregated enclaves of the Anglo-American majority" (*Barrio-Logos*, 68).
- 37 Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River, 1945–1975* (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Resource Center, UCLA, 1984).

38 See Peter Sloterdijk's discussion of "the problematization of human dwelling in gas and radiological milieus" during the decades between the first gas attacks of WWI and current U.S. military research on using climactic alteration in warfare in *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 63. Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*, an important precursor of literary naturalism, opens with paragraphs about smoke that are highly resonant with Viramontes's descriptions of bodies interacting with smog, soot, and exhaust: "Smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river,—clinging in a coating of greasy soot to the house-front, the two faded poplars, the faces of the passers-by. The long train of mules, dragging masses of pig-iron through the narrow street, have a foul vapor hanging to their reeking sides" (Rebecca Harding Davis, "Life in the Iron-Mills," *The Atlantic Monthly* 7, no. 42 [April, 1861]: 430).

39 See Buell's discussion of deterministic attitudes in works of urban fiction in "Discourses of Determinism," in *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), 129–66.

40 Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia, "Praying for Knowledge: An Interview with Helena María Viramontes," in *Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers*, ed. Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 2000), 154.

41 Other examples of Viramontes's blending of Catholic and environmental justice themes include W. Eugene Smith's *pieta*-inspired photograph of a mercury-poisoned child in Minamata, Japan (which inspired Viramontes's story "The Moths") and the Jesus statue in *Under the Feet* ("Praying for Knowledge" 145).

42 Lacan engages Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy more directly in Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud," trans. Alan Sheridan, in *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: Norton, 1977), 146–78.

43 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981), 74, 73 (hereafter cited as *FFC*).

44 On the concept of "environmental blending" in relation to Lacan's conceptualization of the gaze, see Hsuan L. Hsu, "Mimicry, Spatial Captation, and Feng Shui," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 3 (2006): 675–704.

45 Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 110.

46 Viramontes has stated that she "felt a real desire to portray the lives of those who disappeared" in the wake of freeway construction, when "whole city blocks were abandoned, then chewed up, our neighbors disappeared" (Olivas, "Interview").

47 Paul Robbins, *Lawn People: How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2007), 15.

48 Quoted in A. K. Ramanujan, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23, no. 1 (1989): 49.

49 Ramanujan, "Is There," 50.

50 Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2008), 22.

51 A comparison with Viramontes's early drafts shows her increasing attentiveness to the role of spatial ordering and state violence in conditioning the murder: initially, Remedios (who was renamed Tranquilina) utters the phrase "We're not dogs" immediately after arriving at the scene of the murder, as if to reprimand the killer for a lack of self-discipline. Viramontes, "DOGS: A Novela" unpublished draft at University of California, Santa Barbara, Helena María Viramontes papers Box 20 Folder 16 (1992), 21.

52 Viramontes, "Their Dogs Came With Them: A Novella," second draft 10/12/92,

unpublished draft at University of California, Santa Barbara, Helena María Viramontes papers Box 20 Folder 16 (1992), 63.

53 In the ceremony—still practiced in parts of Mexico and Guatemala—up to five Indians attached to ropes soar in circles around a straight tree trunk installed in an open space (often the town square). In a twentieth-century *volador* ceremony in the state of Puebla, for example, “the Indians thought that by renewing the *volador* the spirits of the earth and maize would be satisfied and again give them good crops, as they put it.” Helga Larsen, “Notes on the Volador and its Associated Ceremonies and Superstitions,” *Ethnos* 2, no. 4 (1937): 182. Larsen provides an extensive account of the ceremony and theories concerning its origins.

54 State violence and the assault on East Los Angeles infrastructure by sharpshooters, helicopters, and bulldozers have their counterparts in the Vietnam War—which affects many of the novel’s families—and the two wars waged in Iraq, which Viramontes has acknowledged as indirect influences during the novel’s composition. Helena María Viramontes, “Interview,” in *La Bloga*.