

East of the Center:
Resingularizations of the Avant Garde in East Austin, Texas

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DEDICATION

For My Austin Family

and

For Danny Camacho

and

Especially for Deborah Paradez, Julia M. Smith, Sarah Myers, Carrie Fountain,
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the ways in which a neighborhood's vernacular performances—its everyday spatial practices, its interactions with city and state policy, its representations of Texas identity, its communal creations of performances of festivity and protest—constitute acts of aesthetic and political ingenuity that, in the tradition of the avant garde, directly challenge the dominant forms of political subjectivity and practice that have operated across 150 years of Texas history. In the process, this study advocates for a deep examination of the relationship between performance and local productions of space in order to unearth unrecognized avant garde performances, in order to broaden the historical record of the avant garde in the U.S., and in order to challenge historiographic biases within the field of study. Using research methodologies as varied as archival research, performance ethnographies, oral histories, culturally-specific storytelling, personal interviews, and arts-based community engagement work, the dissertation offers close readings of the texts and contexts of East Austin's avant garde performance traditions including the early Juneteenth celebrations of the black community, the Chicano *teatros* of the East Austin Brown Berets, and the work of the collective theatre Rude Mechs. In each of these interpretations of East Austin performance, new understandings of avant garde performance practice highlight how minoritarian communities utilize performance as a tool with which to critique and challenge the production of space and the flows of power in Austin, Texas.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	34
Chapter 3	110
Chapter 4	208
Chapter 5	278
Bibliography	290

*East of the Center: Resingularizations of the Avant Garde in East Austin,
Texas*

East of the capitol building in Austin, Texas, sits a small neighborhood in which I worked as a collaborative performer and community engagement coordinator off-and-on for fifteen years. Across those years, I noticed a pattern within theatrical performance particular to East Austin: gritty portrayals of social inequities that explored how bodies (black, white, brown, poor, queer, under-educated, and/or rarely acknowledged) were and are policed and disciplined by realities that should ostensibly crush the imagination and crush the will to create. And yet those performances surface time-and-again across East Austin's history: the Fourth of July celebration remolded into the Juneteenth parade, a new way to understand a celebration of independence and the cultural rituals that mark participation in U.S. democracy; a performance of a cowboy western with song reshaped to question the social forces constructing ideas of gender and sexuality in the Lone Star State; a Mexican *acto* placed in the hands of youth in order to incite the reformation of Latino identity in East Austin. In each performance, East Austin citizens call upon lived images and symbols to highlight and critique the ways in which conceptions of social and political ideologies mold the practices of everyday life.

Since the foundation of the neighborhood in the late 1800s, community members in East Austin, Texas, have wielded performance as a tool with which to passionately and creatively critique the social, political, and economic forces shaping their communities. Throughout its history, East Austin has been buffeted by racist and classist public policy which has negatively impacted the infrastructure of the neighborhood: unpaved roads,

segregated schools, under-funded and under-staffed schools, limited utility services, limited presence of the fire and police department, and in the present moments, arguably the fastest gentrification processes in the U.S. In response to the inequities faced by the neighborhood, minoritarian residents of East Austin self-consciously use and have used performance as a subversive tool to comment upon the routines, hierarchies, and institutions governing life in East Austin. I argue that these performances—on stage and off—operate within revised frameworks of understanding the avant garde.

A new wave of avant garde scholarship forwards the social dimensions of the avant garde before an analysis of the forms of the art itself. Building upon this wave, this study considers avant garde performance practices in the diverse neighborhood of East Austin, Texas, a small community that sits just east of the capitol of Texas. Isolated from the rest of the city by racial and economic boundaries since the late 1800s, East Austin is a dynamic urban space whose performance history has yet to be thoroughly studied. A consideration of performance throughout East Austin's history not only expands the geographical territory typically considered in studies of the U.S.-based avant garde, the long history of diversity in this working-class neighborhood also offers opportunities to consider how avant garde performance develops within culturally-specific communities. My research examines the ways in which this neighborhood's vernacular performances—its everyday spatial practices, its interactions with city and state policy, its representations of Texas identity, its communal creations of performances of festivity and protest—constitute acts of aesthetic and political ingenuity that, in the tradition of the avant garde, directly challenge the dominant forms of political subjectivity and practice that have operated across 150 years of Texas history. In analyzing these performances through the

lens of avant gardism, I draw attention to how these performances utilize hyper-local artistic practices to create counter spaces in which to confront the hegemonic power structures that control the production of space in East Austin. Thus, I position these avant garde performances not as an ordered series of related performance techniques occurring with a period of time, but instead as culturally-specific creations that operate in response to the city's different methodologies for governing the production of space in East Austin—as the city changes tactics for disciplining bodies in East Austin, so too do the avant gardes (re)develop in response. This study dialogues with current reconceptualizations of the disciplinary, geographical, and theoretical boundaries of studies of the avant garde in the United States. How might contemporary conceptions of the avant garde illuminate the political, social, and economic stakes at play for the East Austin communities who dare(d) to use theatrical performance to critique the governance of their bodies and their cultures? How might the lens of avant gardism reveal the tactical and political nature of performances often labeled as simply folkloric or community-based theatre? Conversely, how might these avant garde performances of East Austin illuminate social and political debates that have not yet been deeply explored as a part of U.S. avant garde studies or even deeply explored as part of U.S. history?

In the twentieth century, avant garde performance was arguably considered the example par excellence of experimentation, innovation, radicality, and the rejection of the mainstream. In toting these monikers, the avant garde also gained momentous cultural and social capital within both the finest art venues and the finest academic institutions. This wave of popularity gave rise to what is arguably one of the most documented, periodized, racist, misogynist, Western-centric, patriarchal fields of study, a field of study

seemingly completely unrelated to East Austin, Texas—the avant garde. Given the rarified status of the avant garde, framing a 150 year-old pattern of performance in East Austin as “avant garde” seems counter-intuitive. Certainly a small, working-class, diverse neighborhood smack-dab in the middle o’ Texas, y’all, holds little direct and obvious correlation to traditional histories and historiographies of avant garde performance. But as scholars like Mike Sell and James Harding have recently argued, the avant garde’s very reputation, in both the art world and in academia, has in many ways stagnated the discourses surrounding the practice and its history.

In *Avant Garde: Race, Religion, War*, Mike Sell argues for an analysis of contemporary avant gardes grounded in the “social dimension of their revolt,” as opposed to a focus on artistic genealogies or a privileging of aesthetic trends (4). For Sell, an analysis of a potential avant garde is first placed in relationship to the established power structures surrounding the art. Only after are its “representational strategies” analyzed, but even then always with a focus on how such strategies confront or alter relational dynamics (5). Sell, along with scholars like Harding, Harry Elam, Jr., Marvin Carlson, Jean Graham-Jones, Adam Versényi and others, are advocating for an understanding of the avant garde that goes beyond aesthetic formations, aesthetic criticism, and European genealogies. Rather, they explore an often contradictory set of performance traditions and artistic practices from across the globe. Their studies argue for wider histories of avant garde practice and deeper considerations of the avant garde’s successes and failures in cultural activism.

In canonical studies of the avant garde, scholars like Renato Poggioli, Peter Bürger, and Matei Calinescu have defined the avant garde as art created in opposition to

historical and social orders. While such examinations of the avant garde push for a consideration of the work's social dimensions, time-and-again those dimensions have been explicitly tied to European contexts, to ordered and linear-conceptions of avant garde history, and to a hierarchical valuing of aesthetics that typically devalues performance. In so far as this literature takes into account the historical materialities of networks of artistic production, its frame is the larger social and cultural politics of the West rather than the dynamics of specific, lived-in places. While more contemporary studies of the avant garden focus upon performance and upon non-European settings, scholarship often implicitly locates U.S.-based avant garde performances in New York City and San Francisco, homogenized spaces that come to stand in for "America." Given the potential of avant garde performance to create counter spaces designed to critique specific disciplining mechanisms within historical and political order, the limitation of U.S. avant garde studies to places like New York City and San Francisco silences voices that complicate the analysis of flows of power within the United States.

Thus, I am advocating for a study of avant garde performance that deeply examines the relationship between performance and space. A study that carefully considers the deep connections between the materialities produced within a space and the avant garde performances also produced in the same space, such as those of East Austin, not only unearths unrecognized avant garde performances, thereby broadening the historical record of the avant garde in the U.S., but also challenges historiographic biases within the field. Moreover, such a study provides histories and insight relevant to the fields of American history, American Studies, Black Studies, Chicano Studies, and the like.

Beyond contributing to the expansion of avant garde studies with a locale often overlooked in analyses, this project also questions how research methodologies contour the field of avant garde studies. Typically grounded in archival research related to theatrical texts, the methodologies involved in examinations of avant garde performance are primarily situated within text-based studies: close-readings of plays, letters, programs, diaries, and reviews related to a play. Moreover, these texts—in the form of primary or secondary material—are often housed within formally regulated institutions, like archives and museums. Thus, such research documents have successfully navigated the cultural and social ordering of systems far beyond the hyper-local productions of space to which the avant garde pieces initially responded. In current studies of avant garde performance, while scholars place art within social contexts, less often is consideration given to *how* those “contexts” have already been translated into concepts and ideas most relevant to formations of knowledge already sanctioned by the academy and the state. While my own work relies on close readings, archival material, and the established field of study, this project also makes an explicit effort to involve local communities in the narration and theorization of the social and artistic dimensions of East Austin. Through the inclusion of oral histories, culturally-specific storytelling, and personal interviews collected via my own academic research process and my own arts-based community engagement work, this study considers how an expansion of the methodological approaches utilized in studying the avant garde also allows for new theorizations of the avant garde. Though an institutionalized vocabulary of the avant garde influences this study, within this project the everyday life practices of local East Austinites also forms a vocabulary by which to examine avant garde performance.

In my years of interaction with the peoples and histories of East Austin, never once did a community member utilize the term “avant garde” to describe the life practices or artistic productions born in East Austin. However, without the insights of East Austinites, without their nuanced and complicated understandings of their own spatial practices and the production of space across East Austin’s history, I could never theorize these performances as “avant garde.” Though many of the East Austinites I worked with do not have access to the academic vocabulary I use in this study, they are more than capable of offering careful and nuanced theorizations of their own lives and artistic practices. While “avant garde” provides a framework for placing these performances into conversation with one-another and with performance traditions across the U.S., I found the foundation of my analyses through the insights and theorizations of East Austinites.

The Production of Space in East Austin, Texas

Before launching into closer examinations of the history of avant garde performance scholarship, my methodological approach, and the organization of this study, I first want to tell a story. There is much telling of stories throughout these chapters, so it seems fitting to begin with a humdinger-kind-of-story and to examine how such a story illuminates the relationship between avant garde performance and the production of space in Texas.

Legend has it that the idea of Austin, Texas, began to take shape via the death of a magnificent buffalo in 1839. Visiting a lush spring along the banks of the Colorado River in Central Texas, Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, second president of the Republic of Texas, knew that his fledgling nation needed to expand its territorial claims. The nation was running out of money and was constantly at odds with the native population and with

Mexico over control of “Texas.” For Lamar, the site of Waterloo, Texas, later renamed Austin, seemed an outstanding spot upon which to locate his nation-expanding dreams. On this hunt, Lamar is said to have shot a fine bull buffalo just north of the Colorado River. Coming upon his kill, Lamar looked about and proclaimed that the new capital of the Republic of Texas would be built upon the site marked by the dying animal’s body. The location spoke to Lamar’s ultimate dream for the new nation: securing and promoting its independence via western expansion through Indian Territory and then on westward to the Pacific Coast (Kerr 1-5).

In effect, upon the plains of Texas that day Lamar acted as an advanced guard, both militaristic and imperialistic in nature. (Interestingly, in 1825 Henri de Saint-Simon coined the phrase “avant-garde” to describe an almost militaristic, advanced guard of artists.) While the story of the dying buffalo is undoubtedly mythic, the myth itself reveals the broader intentions of the burgeoning nation: the eradication of Native hunting groups via the decimation of the buffalo population and the consequent establishment of reservations in Oklahoma Territory; a geographically centralized location from which the Republic of Texas could more easily defend its territory from a Mexican government intent upon expanding its own territory northward; and the utilization of a rich flood plain just east of the area perfect for growing cotton to support the young nation’s ever-expanding, slave-based plantation system. Lamar’s advancement into this “unsettled” territory along the Colorado River signaled not simply a new epoch in Texas, but it also signaled practices of space making that would allow the nation and the idea of Texas to take shape in Austin—colonialism, the economy of slavery, genocide, and territorial war.

This re-ordering of space on the Texas plain eventually made possible the foundation of a large public university, the construction of a looming capitol building (larger even than that of the United States (because everything is bigger in Texas)), and all the industries necessary for supporting a seat of government. Austin's reputation remained that of a relatively sleepy town until the late twentieth century when two industries began to bloom. At that time, the city became a hub for large tech companies, and the city began to profit from the numerous economies surrounding its self-proclaimed status as the "Live Music Capital of the World." Now, having seemingly shaken-off the vestiges of its exploitative past, Austin is currently the fastest growing city in the U.S. and a bastion for progressive social movements inside the socially conservative stronghold that is much of the rest of the state. In fact, modern-day Austin banks on its creative capital. For example, in an attempt to stave off the impact of homogenizing growth, local businesses funded the public campaign "Keep Austin Weird."ⁱ The slogan exemplifies how the city portrays itself as a space full of rebellious non-conformists intent upon spreading creative resistance.

Such campaigns, however, obscure not only long histories of the local and state governments' control of this urban space through policies like Jim Crow, segregation, and the unceasing exploitation of migrant laborers, but these campaigns also obfuscate the city's histories of public resistance. Studying avant garde performance in East Austin reveals a tradition of citizens resisting the hegemonic practices shaping the space of their city, a tradition older and much deeper than "Keeping It Weird." By placing resistive performances into conversation with the production of space in East Austin, both the impetus for resistance and the form resistance takes become more readily apparent.

While scholars like Mike Sell and James Harding attend to the influence of social dimensions in producing the resistive nature of avant garde performance, this study focuses upon the relationships between avant garde performance and the specific production of space in East Austin, as opposed to a broad consideration of social dimensions. In particular, in order to recognize the counter-spaces produced by avant garde performance, I analyze these performances through the lens of residents' everyday life practices within the space of East Austin. In his study of the ways in which users operate within the urban landscape, Michel de Certeau theorizes everyday life practices, or "the ways of operating or doing things," as a rich and specific space in which to examine the seemingly amorphous and obscure nature of "theoretical questions, methods, categories, and perspectives" (*The Practice of Everyday Life* xi). For de Certeau, the individual regains autonomy inside pervasive forms of culture and economy via ingeniously and tactically navigating the very systems structuring her life. The cracks and slippages within a system provide the space to think otherwise. Thus, the radical is created in an attempt to sustain a sense of self via everyday life practice.

Parsing the everyday life practice in East Austin, however, requires more than a generalized understanding of the social dimensions of the neighborhood. To understand the relationship between radicality and everyday life, one also has to understand the always-changing field of influences pushing and pulling at everyday life in East Austin. To frame this field of influences, I draw upon Henri Lefebvre's influential work on the production of space, which theorizes the interdependence of the symbolization of space, the lived spatial practices of citizens, and the production of spatial structures by capitalist systems. Lefebvre's theorization of the dialectical relationship between this triad—the

perceived, conceived, and lived—calls not for a fixed and homogenous notion of the production of space but instead for an awareness of the interdependence between everyday life practices (or what Lefebvre calls “spatial practice”), ideological conceptualizations of space, and the associated images and symbols.

Importantly, the three elements within the triad cannot be boiled down to a series of oppositions within a perfect system of dualities (38-39). Instead, Lefebvre advocates for a construction of knowledge that moves beyond “cosmic principles” to include the body and the complex and peculiar ways in which bodies practically navigate conceptualized space (38-39). For example, an understanding of space organized around strict opposing binaries erases the careful calculations made by minoritarian groups who often tactically subvert pervasive forms of culture in order to oppose regulation. For instance, in the late 1900s Juneteenth celebrations did not directly oppose or antagonize the ideologies and practices associated with traditional freedom celebrations in the U.S., like the Fourth of July. Rather, Juneteenth disrupted the production of space in Austin by surfacing a set of culturally-specific spatial practices via the very structures and ideologies associated with the Fourth. Juneteenth creatively operated within the constraints placed upon daily life for black residents in Austin, as opposed to openly antagonizing those structures via a mirrored opposition strategy. Lefebvre’s triad of the perceived, conceived, and lived allows for theorizations of avant garde performance, like Juneteenth, that move beyond the ways in which the minoritarian avant garde directly oppose mainstream culture.

For Lefebvre revolutionary moments, like those often associated with the avant garde, produce new spaces—new ways of thinking, new practices of everyday life, and

new art. Such a social transformation impacts daily life, language, and space, “though its impact need not occur at the same rate, or with equal force, in each of these areas” (54).

Rather than an anomaly produced by isolated ideologies, Lefebvre regards radicality and revolution as a product of the same space that creates pervasive forms of culture and economy. Lefebvre’s theorization of the production of space allows enough breadth and flexibility to account for the radically different cultures that grow in East Austin:

demanding that any given expression or moment in space be carefully theorized in its own right rather than white-washed with homogenizing labels. Importantly, Lefebvre’s analysis of space also pushes against the flattening of space and time through systems of self-regulation. Thus, an analysis of the production of space surrounding an avant garde can also illuminate how different ideological systems develop within the same geographic and/or cultural community (23).

Thus, an idea like the production of space is a useful tool for parsing the history of East Austin, a neighborhood with an entirely unique position in Austin’s history. Over 150 years, the industry, people, and practices associated with East Austin have morphed in fits-and-starts. These transformations have never been complete in nature. Instead, they have always left behind survivors, traces, and ghosts. These traces form a palimpsest of different micro-histories constantly washing away and/or transforming one another. Initially, East Austin was home to Swedish farmers. It then housed a freedmen colony, which became the city’s only thriving black neighborhood. After each World War, working-class white citizens bought up cheap property in East Austin, property that at the time barely bordered the city’s thriving black community. As Latinos were pushed out of downtown Austin because of rising real estate values, East Austin also became

home to a robust Latino neighborhood. Latinos bought the properties of the working-class white residents who feared living near the expanding minority communities that were inching closer and closer to white homes. Throughout all these changes, East Austin has provided affordable space for the city's artists. East Austin juke joints were the home of and catalyst of Austin's now-gargantuan music industry. The neighborhood sports more large-scale public art—mostly in the form of Latino murals—than any other part of the city (Camacho and Riles). For now, East Austin houses the largest concentration of theatres (all former warehouses) in the city. Unfortunately, at this moment all working-class folks—black, white, and brown—are being pushed out of East Austin as the expanding city-center results in soaring property values.

Rather than present a singular history of East Austin, which could never account for the heterogeneity alive within East Austin's history, in each chapter I include an examination of the production of space in East Austin as it specifically pertains to that chapter's site of study. The public policies, the governmental structures, the economies, and the cultures are not ubiquitous to each site of study in this project. While events like Juneteenth parades, plays performed by the Brown Berets, and the work of the theatre company the Rude Mechs all happen in the same general locale, by no means are they responding to the same social and political dimensions of life in East Austin. Thus to think beyond a general conversation surrounding the social dimensions of an avant garde, in each chapter I instead consider the productions of space particular to each performance. In responding to what Lefebvre refers to as "state imposed normality," each of these avant garde performances enact a "violence of subversion" as they call

upon the signs and symbols, the labors, the bodies, the beliefs, and the ideologies of their own communities to challenge the state.

The Field of Study

To better understand how this project dialogues with the field of study surrounding avant garde performance, I first want to consider the work that provides the bedrock for avant garde performance history. Scholars like Matei Calinescu, Peter Bürger, and Renato Poggioli heavily influenced the scope and direction of this history. In particular, their work periodizes avant garde art to the mid-19th and early-20th century, placing a firm end to the movement around the beginning of the Cold War.

In *The Theory of the Avant Garde*, Poggioli forwards a now almost canonized understanding of avant garde art as a practice driven by an “activist moment,” intended to “agitate against something or someone” including “opposition to the historical and social order” (25-26). In his discussion of social alienation as a characteristic of the “activist moment” within different avant garde movements, Poggiolo ties avant garde practice to the various materialities alive within a given space: “Much more important than any ideological and psychological connection between avant-garde art and its various political orientations...is the natural and organic connection joining that art by a complex series of bonds to the society within which it succeeds in making work, even if by opposition, and which it partly expresses even while denying it” (103). For Poggioli, the study of avant garde art lies not in simply the analysis of its products, but also in critically grappling with the social processes that create and represent the cultures producing the work. Though Poggioli isolates ideological and psychological connections from social processes, he nonetheless positions the avant garde as a *practice* responding to the forces

producing the space of performance as much as it is a *product* of that same space.

However, Poggioli centers the space of the avant garde almost entirely within Europe.

Both Bürger and Calinescu then build upon Poggioli's ideas. Bürger's *Theory of the Avant Garde*, which focuses primarily upon male artists in Europe and which pays heed to few theatrical events, presses towards an understanding of the avant garde situated around ordinary experience, or rather the relationship between art and those who affect social change. Bürger's drive towards a unified, theoretical understanding of the field disregards practices and people that operate outside of his scholarly approach. Like Poggioli, Bürger applies sociological theory to his analysis of the largely European avant garde. With this methodology, Bürger creates a singular, abstracted narrative of the avant garde in which forms like surrealism, Dada, and futurism function as isolated units rather than practices in a conversation full of difference and contradiction. On the other hand, in *Five Faces of Modernity*, Calinescu argues for the avant garde's ability to rupture history and thereby create new narratives. In doing so, Calinescu does expand the field of study to include the avant garde art of the United States. However, in the process of delineating this new history, Calinescu, like Bürger and Poggioli, maintains a firm linear narrative of avant garde history and a firm focus on the role of western culture in the development of avant garde art.

Thomas Mann's *Theory-Death of the Avant Garde* self-reflexively complicates the role of theory in proclaiming the death of avant garde practices. In this manner, Mann exposes how theoretical frameworks presuppose the actual analysis of practice. Mann argues that as the field of avant garde studies became stabilized, theories of method, craft, belief, and culture—"ideological regimes"—determine the nature of

performance *before* the performance can be understood in terms of the unique set of materialities surrounding it (9). Mann's questioning of patterns of criticism surrounding the field—periodization, the death of the movement, an emphasis on crisis and discord—serves as a primary catalyst for the current state of the field of avant garde performance studies.

In the contemporary study of the avant garde, the work of James Harding and Mike Sell lay a foundation for rethinking not simply the aesthetics associated with avant garde performance but the political and historical contexts for the art and the body of criticism responding to the art. Mike Sell's *Avant Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism* focuses upon the U.S.-based avant garde during the Cold War period, paying particular attention to the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement. Sell's analysis of these movements challenges the smooth surface of popular American identity at that time via the pluralities of structures and messages alive within these counter-cultures. Sell's book also examines how "institutions of criticism, scholarship, and pedagogy" have stifled new interrogations of the field. Sell maintains that not only do new avant gardes take the foundational practices of the historical avant garde "to a new level," but these practices do so without any real assistance from the academy itself, an "assistance" at best "benign" and at worst "malevolent" in nature (4).

Sell's next book, *The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War*, argues that the avant garde is less of a substantial entity in history and more of a "critical-theoretical perspective" from which a variety of "sites, moments, creations, and critical moments" might be examined. Sell approaches the "avant garde" as a series of questions rather than a series of canonical texts (4). For Sell, these questions take aim at the "structures and

flows of power” particular to minoritarian perspectives. In particular, Sell examines minoritarian perspectives related to the production of culture in “illegal, alternative, or subversive ways” as these “ways” relate to race, religion, and war. Sell’s discussion includes analysis of not only canonical avant garde “texts” but also sites like the Afrikaner Broederbond and the French empire’s colonization of Algeria. In expanding the field of study, Sell pushes for a consideration of the catalysts of social transformation rather than a study of the “affluence-inspired tolerance style-consciousness of the haute bourgeoisie” (14).

James Harding’s prolific study of avant garde historiography offers a strong body of insight into historiographic trends influencing the academic field of study responding to the avant garde. Harding’s work delves into the myriad of ways in which the cultural criticism surrounding the avant garde delimits not only historical understandings of avant garde practices but the field’s very ability to critique itself. Considering that the field of avant garde studies is consistently presented as a product of European practice, *Not the Other Avant-Garde*, a collection of essays edited by James Harding and John Rouse, alternatively presents a transnational conception of avant garde performance. The collection demonstrates the ways in which scholars might work beyond Western formations of performance to broaden the field of avant garde studies. Taking into account, first- and second-wave avant gardes, the studies argue that the avant garde was always a transnational phenomenon full of contradictory performance traditions. *Not the Other Avant-Garde’s* consideration of the avant garde as a transnational practice illustrates how systems of governance and spatial practice allow the avant garde to flourish well beyond the European landscape.

In *Cutting Performances*, Harding pushes once again for a reconsideration of the production of knowledge shaping avant garde studies. Here Harding proposes “a fundamental rethinking of the American avant-garde along gendered lines” (7). In doing so, Harding notes that the avant garde and the study of the avant garde remain lands of privilege and exclusion. Harding’s consideration of artists like Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven or Yoko Ono not only bridges experimental feminist art to the avant garde, but also seeks to question and probe the ways in which critics receive and write about the art. Harding’s feminist rethinking does not simply move marginalized female artists into the cannon of the avant garde. Instead, Harding points to habits in critical discourse that continually destabilize the possibilities of greater inclusion, including the reinforcement of male-centered narratives and positivistic genealogies of the avant garde.

Harding’s *The Ghosts of the Avant Garde(s)* challenges a major trend in avant garde scholarship: pronouncing the avant garde dead. Arguing that the avant garde never died but rather the scholarship surrounding it petrified, Harding delves into the plurality of gestures and approaches that constitute avant garde theatre and performance. To surface this plurality, Harding surveys a wide variety of canonical and non-canonical avant garde texts from multiple vantage points in terms of both theory and aesthetic. These vantage points move beyond strict definitions of the avant garde forwarded by scholars like Bürger, Calinescu, and Poggioli. While much of contemporary scholarship no longer speaks of *the* avant garde but instead of avant gardes, according to Harding such acknowledgement of multiplicity does not guarantee an equally diverse and rich response in theoretical approaches. Accordingly, *The Ghosts of the Avant Garde(s)* not

only takes up the study of less-considered performances, like the Riot Group's *Pugilist Specialist*, but the study also reconceptualizes canonical work, like Hugo Ball's work at Cabaret Voltaire. Harding's study presents the practices of avant gardes as a complex web of performances both on the stage and in theoretical and historical discourse: "It is in the provoked slippage of the discourses of the avant-gardes where the avant-garde perform" (27).

In positioning my work within the field of avant garde studies, my research takes direction from both Sell and Harding. I am particularly inspired by Sell's idea of the avant garde as a series of questions intended to provoke thought about flows of power, both within broad social cultures and academic culture. *The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War* not only takes up a detailed study of flows of power as they relate to race, religion, and war in the last three decades, Sell approaches these sites not through a study of a particular piece of art but through a study of the "social dimension of their work" (4). In this vein, Sell pushes past considerations of art and literature, and at times, argues for the avant garde as an "epidemiological practice" supported within a hyper-local context (6). His emphasis on epidemiological practice and the hyper-local helped me understand how a neighborhood like East Austin could produce across time radically different manifestations of avant garde performance. Like Sell, Harding is invested in examining flows of power as they relate to the avant garde. In *The Ghosts of the Avant Garde(s)*, Harding's analysis of the "competing, frequently incompatible, and individually autonomous avant-gardes" provides a jumping off point for framing how I might consider three autonomous avant gardes within a single neighborhood (16). Harding's critique of

uniformity, linear history, and generalized history urge me to fight the impulse to write a tidy, linear study of East Austin's avant garde practices.

Like Sell and Harding, I too am interested in considering the social dimensions of the avant garde. However, rather than strictly defining flows of power within a binary of opposing forces, I am more interested in considering the myriad of artistic, ideological, and daily practices that give rise to the social dimension of avant garde work. The avant gardes I consider did (and do) oppose restrictions made upon neighborhood residents' lives and their art; however, the avant gardes of East Austin did not always enjoy the privilege of being able to radically strike out as a form of response. At times, avant garde gestures in East Austin were more tactical and less strategic in nature. As in Sell's analysis of cultural events, this study takes up cultural practices—like Juneteenth parades—that move beyond events strictly labeled as “art” and places events like Juneteenth parades, a paratheatrical performance, into relationship with avant garde practices that have been praised as “high art.” In doing so, I do not portray Juneteenth as an aggressive gesture but instead as a purposeful co-opting and manipulation of dominant cultural practices.

Moreover, with this project I also want to consider the social dimensions of avant garde research. Just as the events like early Juneteenth parades, Brown Beret performances, and the plays of the Rude Mechs might expand the history of avant garde performance, so might they also serve as catalysts for rethinking the research methodologies typically utilized in the study of the avant garde. Sell and Harding both provide rich historiographies of the field of avant garde studies. These historiographies reveal a reluctance on the part of avant garde scholars to engage with fieldwork that

includes direct community engagement. While my project also pushes for non-normative readings of the history of the field, in line with contemporary avant garde theorizations, this study also calls for examining how methodological practices impact the shape and scope of avant garde studies. Within each chapter, I spend considerable time examining how culturally-specific examinations of the archive, performance ethnography, and community engagement might further reveal complexities within and new understandings of the avant garde.

Research Methodology

The story behind the methodological approach to studying avant garde performance in East Austin actually begins in 2006, years before I would begin “official” work on this research project. In the spring of 2006, I stood atop a hill in East Austin with Karen Riles, at that time a historian and archivist at the Austin History Center. From the hill, an observer could view the central hub of Austin and also parts of East Austin. In 2006, the skyline of downtown Austin featured the capitol building, a series of modest skyscrapers, a not so modest football stadium, and a new, glassy tower whose top reminds me of Superman’s Fortress of Solitude. (With hindsight, I realize now that the Fortress of Solitude stood as the true harbinger of Austin’s future.) To the east, trees and rooftop, empty lots, a gas station, and the pointed roof of Angie’s Mexican Food Restaurant marked the landscape. As part of an art project for Refraction Arts, an arts collective that has since morphed into the contemporary arts festival, Fusebox Festival, a group of artists had gathered with Riles atop the hill to listen to the local historian tell stories of East Austin.

That day, Riles first addressed the visual differences in the landscape between east and central Austin. She immediately pointed to the great thundering interstate that divided the city in half. Thus, Riles began her presentation with the land. However, to dig into the history of East Austin and its relationship to the wider city, Riles did *not* offer historical facts and archival minutiae and government dates. She instead told stories of people of color who dared to leave East Austin in order to make their presence known in the city's broader urban landscape, and she told stories of East Austinites who tactically manipulated city-wide systems from within East Austin in order to better their own living conditions. Riles' stories painted a picture of a neighborhood that survived despite constant bombardment from governmental and social structures designed to isolate it from the rest of the city. These stories of East Austin included tales of famous and/or infamous citizens like Lottie Stotts, whose history of performance is included in the second chapter of this study. Riles's preferred method of conveying East Austin history, through story and from a position literally grounded in the community, mirrors much of the research conducted in this study. Even before I knew that I would examine avant garde performance in East Austin, I had already learned a thing or two about methodology from Karen Riles.

Unlike many broad examinations of the avant garde, this study is not only grounded in a single location, but my methodological approach for research is propelled by the very spatial practices of each separate site of study in East Austin, as opposed to a strict focus upon the analysis of archival material, analysis of secondary source material, and close-readings of creative texts. While this study does include analyses driven by archival research, close readings, and historiography, I did not engage with those

methods out of a predetermined sense of “this is how one studies avant garde performance.” (Rather, when the fieldwork I was conducting with community members in East Austin needed the support of these more traditional methodologies, I then turned to modes of analyses more typical of avant garde studies.) To no small extent, I could not readily rely upon traditional methodologies for studying the avant garde because I could not locate examples of avant garde performance in local archives or readily accessible scripts. Moreover, East Austin is not mentioned in prior studies of the avant garde, so there is limited opportunity for historiographic comparison. In any number of moments during my fieldwork, the lack of readily-available, traditional source material—especially in terms of work by the black and Latino communities in East Austin—almost halted this study. How does one study the avant garde when popular modes of examination are no longer on the table?

In my research process however, I found an incredible wealth of resources in the neighborhood itself. Community members consistently provided me with my next research action step or helped guide my archival wanderings: you need to go to the archive and look in this particular file that has nothing to do with performance; you need to visit this community meeting; let me introduce you to this person because he/she knows; you should eat this taco before you do more work... Thus, the path for researching avant garde performance in East Austin was determined as much by the neighborhood as it was by established methodological practices in the field of avant garde studies. Importantly, the guidance of the neighborhood did not lead to a singular pattern in my methodological approach. Rather, my research process most resembled an assemblage of lines of flight. In an effort to innovate, to move beyond the status quo of

methodological approaches for studying the avant garde, my research process became a web of possibilities guided by the hyper-local power apparatuses shaping the production of space in East Austin (Deleuze and Guattari 13-15). In a moment, I'll detail one mapping of those lines of flight, but I first want to point to the heterogeneity within local sources of knowledge helping to structure my research process. Though each particular site of study in this project is housed in East Austin, the neighborhood's spatial practices are by no means homogenous, even within a given culture, and by no means, did a particular performance site necessarily speak in relationship to the others.

For example, my sources for information and insight into the Rude Mechs' work did not have information on the Brown Berets, and most of the folks who helped along my research process for the chapter focused on the Brown Berets did not have insight into Juneteenth parades. While economic struggle arguably marks the continuity within my three sites of study, economic struggle did not produce similar spatial practices across all three sites. Because of the particular histories of these three sites of study in East Austin, my methodological approach shifts somewhat from chapter to chapter. Throughout my time researching East Austin, my research process remained in a constant state of movement: territorializing, de-territorializing, and re-territorializing what I understood about the research process itself, about East Austin, and about the avant garde. This project is nothing if not a discussion of the necessity of flexible modes of inquiry.

To offer a flat picture of an object moving at once in multiple directions is necessarily a failed offering. Nevertheless, the following narrative presents an attempt to map how I located sites of study in East Austin. I began this project already connected to

East Austin via years of artistic practice in its local warehouse theatre scene with numerous companies, including the Rude Mechs. That artistic practice eventually led me to a hilltop encounter with Karen Riles, and that practice also eventually led me to graduate school. For example, a Rude Mech wrote one of my recommendation letters. Initially this research project focused solely on the work of the Rude Mechs, but as I spent time conducting performance ethnographies as well as interviewing company members, I began to see connections across seemingly unconnected stories and places. The Off Center, the Rude Mechs' performance space, was once a feed-and-seed supply company. As I sat in Rude Mechs' rehearsals, watching performers bodies labor on stage, I began to consider the other bodies that had once labored at the Off Center: working class men and women of color whose stories were likely never to be told on that stage or in histories of Austin. These thoughts circled my memory back to Karen Riles and the story of Lottie Stotts, so I sought out Karen Riles once again at the Austin History Center—even as I continued to think about the Rude Mechs' work. In meeting Riles a second time at a local East Austin library, she not only expanded my understanding of Stotts' story, she also introduced me to Danny Camacho, another local East Austin historian who volunteered at the History Center and who primarily shared his knowledge of East Austin's history through storytelling. (Camacho passed away shortly after this dissertation was completed.) Riles and Camacho pointed my research process back towards the History Center and to research topics I had never thought to engage: chautauquas, Juneteenth, the Pan Am Hillside Theatre, *Pastorelas*, and more. Back at the History Center, as I researched Stotts, I also began to consider sites like Juneteenth parades and *Pastorelas*. During this new line of flight within the research process, I

continued watching the Rude Mechs rehearse. On a return visit to the History Center, I met Gloria Espitia, the Center's then archivist focused on Latino history in Austin. Espitia pointed me in additional new directions, including a potential performance history of the Brown Berets. My pursuit of the Brown Berets ran dry until I was invited back to Austin to work as the Artist and Scholar-in-Residence for Fusebox Festival. My work at Fusebox Festival, which utilized lessons learned in East Austin as an artist and as a scholar, unexpectedly brought me into contact with former members of the Brown Berets, who eventually shared their rich history with me at community events, through artistic projects, and in personal interviews. I also invited Danny Camacho, who I met through the History Center, to give presentations during the festival. Large pieces of the festival took place at the Off Center, which gave me time and opportunity to finalize interviews with the Rude Mechs. Despite the confusion and frustration I felt at points during this always-diverging process, simple commonalities surfaced across all the sites of study: the potency of good storytelling and the importance of the culturally-specific, local spatial practices alive within this good storytelling.

Once I had accessed a site of study, my approach to the analysis of pertinent material was also determined in no small part by the spatial practices alive within that particular East Austin community. For example, my considerations of Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth parades exemplify how avant garde sites might be analyzed through multiple modes of investigation: oral history examinations, storytelling, archival research, close readings, the creation of art, and historiographic comparisons. My study of Lottie Stotts and early Juneteenth parades, both products of East Austin's black community, began with Karen Riles and an almost-forgotten encounter with an East Austin oral history.

Riles's presentation of Lottie was grounded in her own experience of everyday life in East Austin as well as her study of the neighborhood from the point of view of a historian. After living imperfectly in my memory for years, I next investigated such stories in the archive. In the archive, Juneteenth and Lottie Stotts were placed into conversation not with the everyday life practices of East Austin but with the ideologies governing the broader city at that time, especially emerging Jim Crow laws. The fragmented resources of the archive then lead me back out into the community for more work with their stories, and it also led to encounters with Danny Camacho's own private collection of archival material. Camacho had reconfigured Stott's sparse archival history into a timeline of events, driven by source material no longer available at the Austin History Center. By placing oral histories into conversation with memory, lived experiences, and institutional and private archival material, Lottie Stotts became a three dimensional figure capable of disrupting and critiquing public institutions via her unique public persona. In my final approach to studying Lottie, I questioned how she might be placed into conversations with her contemporaries in the avant garde world. How does Artaud's conception of the avant garde artist in *Theatre and Its Double* illuminate the public performance of Lottie Stotts? And conversely, what does Lottie Stotts teach about Artaud's vision of the radical within the avant garde? Of course, my methodological approach to studying Stotts or Juneteenth was not reproducible across all sites in this study. My work with the Rude Mechs takes into account considerable time conducting performance ethnographies. My study of the Brown Berets theorizes community outreach and art-making as a part of methodological processes. Across all the sites, the

one constant was the influence of East Austin itself upon my methodological approach to studying the neighborhood.

As I would learn over years of study, East Austin's history is passed around local taco shops like Jo's Bakery and at neighborhood barbeques in Rosewood Park or Chicano Park. You might hear bits and pieces of East Austin's history at Le Resistencia Bookstore or at the Carver Library or if you're talking to the right person at Victory Grill, East Austin's historic juke joint. Undoubtedly, it's a history that you will *hear* first. As you listen to these stories (oftentimes they are offered along with a glass of iced tea poured by the storyteller), you will take in tales of scandalous residents, neighborhood activism, segregation and integration, food, labor in the fields, church celebrations, residents tensely moving through other parts of the city, police brutality, outdoor concerts, food, annual celebrations, murals, local businesses, poetry, English classes, family life in Mexico, food, family in other parts of the south, concerts, public performances, food, and crazy radicals. Avant garde performance in East Austin is not hermetically sealed off from other modes of *being* in East Austin. Rather East Austin's avant garde is a direct product of the process of living in East Austin. Because of the tie between the production of space in East Austin and the community's avant garde practice, my research strategies needed to not only account for how space operates in East Austin, but my methodologies also needed to dialogue with those operations.

Had I approached this project strictly through the archive, none of the sites considered in this study would have risen to my attention, and yet without the archive, I could not have placed any of these sites into conversation with city-wide policies and traditions. Had I not engaged with local community members—via the lens of my own

artistic practice in East Austin—I would have never met the Brown Berets, and my consideration of the Rude Mechs would have read like a simple close readings of a script or a show. Hearing the stories of Karen Riles, Danny Camacho, the Rude Mechs, and the Brown Berets always reminds me of the importance of listening as a powerful research methodology. In “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin theorizes the value of lived experience, or “an orientation toward practical interest,” in the craft of the storyteller (1-2). In the process of sharing stories, “traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (5). My research methodology aimed to capture the movement between lived experience and artistic production in East Austin. Hence, through each chapter, I work to acknowledge the “handprints” of those storytellers—at community events, in rehearsals, in the archive, and sometimes even on their front porches—who overtly shaped my research process.

Sites of Study in East Austin

In order to trace the development of East Austin as a neighborhood, the chapters in this study occur chronologically: chapter two, the 1880s; chapter three, the 1970s; chapter four, the late 1990s and early twenty-first century. By no means however, does this ordering of dates indicate a clear genealogy of avant performance in East Austin. While each of the sites of study occur in the same geographical place, each also produces distinct cultural reactions to the production of space in East Austin. There is little, if any, artistic or political carryover from site to site. While the black community, the Latino community, and the theatre company the Rude Mechs are all undoubtedly responding to unjust economic, political, and social conditions faced by the residents of East Austin,

their modes for producing avant garde performance and the shape and form of these performances clearly reflect distinct reactions to the production of space in East Austin.

Because each chapter captures a unique vision of the history of East Austin, ostensibly these chapters could have occurred in a completely different order. However, by placing them in chronological order, a history of the neighborhood develops alongside stories of avant garde performance. Through this study of performance, a patchwork vision of East Austin comes to life: a neighborhood moving from a freedman colony largely inhabited by black residents, to a more diverse neighborhood that housed the city's Chicano Movement, to a place for contemporary, often-white, working-class artists to practice their life's work. Across all three of these sites, avant garde performance is placed in direct conversation with the production of space in East Austin and with how that production of space influenced my methodological approach.

Chapter Two focuses on two early forms of avant garde performance in East Austin: the Juneteenth parades of the 1860s and 1870s and the rabble-rousing Lottie Stotts, who roamed the streets of Austin in the 1870s and 1880s. Juneteenth Parades have not yet been considered as a kind of avant garde performance, and no history has ever been written addressing the life of Lottie Stotts, a pale-skinned, mixed-race woman who challenged the state's anti-miscegenation laws through a series of public disturbances. In this chapter, neither the Juneteenth parades nor the behavior of Lottie Stotts are viewed as "theatre." Rather through a consideration of the everyday life practices of East Austin residents in the late 1800s, many of whom were freedmen and women, I theorize how their cultural performances served as theatrical and performative mechanisms of radical creativity intended to disturb Austin's racist social policies. The

chapter is in direct conversation with scholars of contemporary avant garde performance who, using frameworks borrowed from performance studies, theorize the contemporary avant garde not in terms of aesthetic structures or established traditions, but in terms of the performative nature of vanguard activism. Through a dialectical analysis between present and past culturally-specific knowledge formations, this second chapter considers how the contemporary production of space in East Austin heavily influences conceptions of past avant garde performances.

Much like the chapter focused upon East Austin's black community in the late 1800s, my theorization of the avant garde performance practices of the East Austin Brown Berets, in Chapter Three, relies heavily upon unofficial archives, oral histories, and storytelling. Of all the chapters in this study however, Chapter Three examines most thoroughly the relationship between the positionality of the avant garde scholar and the ways in which cultural and political practices create space. The chapter also features a close-reading of *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*, an original work of Susana Almanza, a former *jefa* of the East Austin Brown Berets. In sum, this third chapter considers how the production of numerous forms of Latino space in East Austin gave rise to radical performance, which necessitate flexible research methodologies.

My final chapter focuses upon the most traditionally theatrical piece of this project, the plays and practices of the Rude Mechanicals, or the Rude Mechs. Founded in East Austin in the late 1990s, the Rude Mechs, a theatre collective made up of working-class, mostly-white artists, have been labeled as "avant garde theatre makers" by any number of media and scholarly publications. To date however, no study of the Mechs has placed their creations into conversation with the social and political dimensions of

their work as it pertains directly to East Austin and Texas. Like in chapters two and three, this final chapter also examines how a scholar works in relationship to a site of study. In 2001, I performed the role of Mercedes in *El Paraiso*, and so much like in the other chapters, this study of the Rude Mechs wrangles with the relationship between the past and the present, between memory and the archive, between the story on the page and the story alive within a community.

Together, these three sites of study offer an example of the ways in which the field of avant garde studies might become more nuanced and complex through the inclusion of little-considered research sites and less-practiced research methodologies.

Conclusion

In the conclusion of this study, I return to the questions framing the initial chapter and assess how the specific sites not only respond to those queries but result in even further questions about avant garde performance in East Austin, Texas.

As I worked to theorize the public protests and ritual performances of Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth parades in this next chapter, I found myself continually struggling to embrace that same cycle of knowledge formation: the answer that results in more questions. What other local East Austin historians might know the story of Lottie Stotts, and how might their local knowledges provide new insight into “mad” Lottie Stotts’ public protests and the production of space in late nineteenth-century East Austin? While Juneteenth parades can be read through the lens of avant garde performance largely because of the ways in which they survived within and surface within an archive, what other modes of radical culturally-specific performance lived beyond the awareness of the greater Austin public?

In the next chapter, I inaugurate this study through analyses of two different forms of avant garde performance particular to the black community of late nineteenth-century East Austin. Both Juneteenth celebrations and the public protests of Lottie Stotts utilize performance as a mechanism for surfacing the ways in which the city and state disciplined black bodies in Austin.

¹Too little too late Portland, Oregon. Austin invented that slogan.

***Radical Rest and the Wild Woman:
Black Avant Garde Performance in Late 19th Century East Austin***

It is really funny in documentation to see how she intersects history, the different parts of Austin history. There she is on the poor farm. There she is in Guy Town. There she is in Mexico. And there she is a party to the governor being charged. She is just this larger than life kind of figure. And there are holes. You just don't know. What is this dynamo?

---Karen Riles and Danny Camacho on Lottie Stotts

Late nineteenth-century Austin, Texas, seems an unlikely place in which to theorize avant garde performance. At that time in Europe, from Moscow to Paris early forms of the avant garde, like symbolism and naturalism, were catalyzing new thinking about gender, sexuality, class, and religion. At the same time in Austin however, two “opera houses” sat on a boulevard leading to the capitol building. These dance-hall like institutions, accessible to only white patrons, organized local performance events and showcased plays like *The Black Crook* and *Ben Hur* (Humphrey and Crawford, Jr. 148-149). No records or legends tell of secret salons (or secret saloons) in which writers and aspiring artists gathered to oppose dominant thought and social codes. In the capital city of Texas, crystal spiders did not spark the exploration of gender norms and cherry orchards did not provide a garden in which to question social realities. And certainly, scholars, artists, and the occasional flâneur did not scrupulously archive records of performances taking place in Austin in the late 1800s.

However, in late-nineteenth century Austin, the city’s largest minority population, composed of former black slaves and their descendants, utilized cultural performance to explicitly challenge the ideologies and beliefs of the ruling class. From Juneteenth

Parades to the performative public protests of citizens like Lottie Stotts, black residents of Austin employed performance as a subversive mechanism for countering the governing structures of mainstream Austin culture. Juneteenth parades appropriated (and continue to appropriate) a white cultural tradition—the Fourth of July parade—to levy social commentary; Lottie Stotts offered a social critique catalyzed by her public (and much publicized) protests. As these performances moved between spaces designated as “black” or “white” by city policy—neighborhoods, newspaper coverage, even courtrooms—their direct challenges to racist social and governmental structures highlighted the different modalities for disciplining black bodies in Austin. In this chapter, I argue that these culturally-specific avant garde performances of East Austin’s black community offer to the study of the avant garde not only new ways of understanding the interplay between avant garde performance and the spatial practices that create performance but also new ways of understanding how communal archives, rich in memory and storytelling as well as traditional archival documents, might shape the field of avant garde studies. While the archive provides baseline secondary source material for both a study of Juneteenth parades and Lottie Stotts, the local knowledges and insights of East Austin residents shift the interpretation of these documents. Local knowledge lifts this material from a formation of knowledge primarily concerned with the preservation of an easily legible narrative of Austin’s history, and instead places the material into conversation with the production of space in East Austin, a narrative not always welcome in larger city histories. Such a rethinking moves events like Juneteenth celebrations and Lottie Stotts’ public rabble rousing from ordinary frameworks like

“holiday celebration” or “public nuisance” into a place in which the political and radical nature of such events comes to light.

I ground my study in not only the conditions shaping the production of space in late nineteenth century Austin but also in the conditions that shape contemporary analyses of those events. This spatial analysis of the East Austin’s avant garde works in two ways. I consider the ways in which the community’s everyday life practices and the disciplining mechanisms of local government produce and live within the artistic critiques offered by Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth parades. Simultaneously, I consider how the influence of the production of space in contemporary Austin and in contemporary scholarship then dialogue with the production of space of late nineteenth-century Austin. That is to say, by no means does my analysis offer a “true” or objective portrayal of life in East Austin in the late 1800s. Instead, a dialectic is created between the fragments and rough edges surfaced by the spatial analyses of “avant garde.” This series of past and present rough edges, when placed into relationship with one another, shed light on the interplay between artistic production and circuits of exchange and labor. These relationships teach about not only the connection between avant garde art and spatial practices but also about the connection between avant garde scholarship and spatial practices. Thus, this study offers not only an analysis of avant garde events but also an analysis of *how* these very avant garde events are shaped and given meaning by academic study.

In order to recognize and theorize these culturally-specific manifestations of late nineteenth century avant garde in East Austin, these performances must be placed into conversation not with European modes of cultural production but rather with local

cultural production. To gain a sense of local cultural productions, the spatial practices of black residents of Austin, most of whom resided in East Austin, must be placed into conversation with the creation of avant garde performance, as framed by contemporary scholars like Mike Sell. Additionally, I draw upon what theorist Henri Lefebvre refers to as the perceived, conceived, and lived realities of spatial production, applying these concepts to late nineteenth century Austin and suggesting that they are inextricably tied to slavery. Thus, a spatial analysis of East Austin must account for how systems related to the practice of slavery and colonization directly shaped these avant garde performance practices. Texas's early economies and the establishment of different nation states within Texas were fueled by in large part by black labor.

In placing culturally-specific avant garde performance into relationship with such systems, I do not seek to create a singularized portrait of how black life (and thereby the black avant garde) develops across the history of Texas. Instead, I want to point to the complexities of black identities within the state. I want to show how the development of those identities were in constant dialogue with the modernization of Texas, particularly in Austin. And I want to examine how these systems then gave rise to avant garde performances. In particular, Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth parades highlight different iterations of the black community in East Austin and different understanding of how communal history develops in a neighborhood whose histories have been little recognized within formal, written accounts of Austin's history. Thus, with both of these sites, my analysis will cover not only a reading of the performance but also how that performance speaks to the formation of black identity and black history in East Austin

As I work to theorize Juneteenth Celebrations and Lottie Stotts as avant garde events and characters particular to the development of the movement within the United States, I also want to consider how the social products born from various spatial practices surrounding black bodies in the United States speak to the particularities of modernity in the U.S. To do so, I turn to two very different considerations of the ways in which bodies reflect the development of modernity: Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* and Walter Benjamin's *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*. Gilroy's examination of the black Atlantic critiques the political geography of race. Gilroy points to the ways in which cultural studies often depict the "cultures and consciousness of European settlers" and the cultures—African, Native, and Asian—they enslaved, slaughtered, and indentured as "sealed off hermetically from each other" (2). Namely, Gilroy assesses a trend within cultural theory to first separate groups that signify as culturally unique based upon phenotypical identification and then portray these groups as having completely individuated experiences of modernity. Gilroy argues that this pattern of thought within scholarship produces an "over integrated sense of cultural and ethnic particularity," particularly between white and black life in the black Atlantic. Moreover, this same sense of ethnic and cultural particularity also produces false "conceptions of pure and homogenous culture" within the black diaspora, thereby construing all political struggles as "*expressive* of national or ethnic differences with which they are associated [author's emphasis]." Such expressions hold no room for differentiated experiences shaped by social factors other than race, including factors like gender and class.

Gilroy's insistence upon individuation and the "restless, recombinant qualities" of the black Atlantic's culture helps me to recognize the cultural differences at play between Juneteenth celebrations and the life of Lottie Stotts. Rather than considering both as representative of "black culture" in Austin, Texas, my examination of each seeks to explore their cultural particularities. Juneteenth was and is a communal celebration marking the shift in the political and social status of blacks in Texas. The holiday speaks to a movement from slavery to freedom, from labor to rest, from social isolation to transgressive boundary crossing. Lottie Stotts, on the other hand, reflects a different set of cultural transgressions. She was mixed-race woman—a black woman who read as white. Lottie was married to a white man. She worked as prostitute. She crossed into white neighbors not within an organized system of communal celebration but as a single woman with an overtly personal and political intent. Hence, Lottie Stotts' performances tell a very different story of black life in Austin than do the celebrations of Juneteenth. While both Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth Celebrations are marked by the racial signifier of "black," each represents a distinctive expression of how modernity impacted black life in Texas. Juneteenth marks a shift in labor practices; Lottie Stotts, on the other hand, marks new forms of social discipline—like anti-miscegenation laws. The connection I see between the two examples is not then based in a homogenized notion of black life in Austin, Texas, but instead on a similarity of movement. Both Juneteenth Celebrations and Lottie Stotts challenged cultural and political boundaries via the transgressive movement of "black" bodies within a highly segregated city. The public responses to these movements, recorded in local newspapers, speak to not only the formation of black

cultural identity in Austin but also to the intersection of black culture and the city's urban development.

Walter Benjamin's *The Writer of Modern Life* offers a close examination of how social movement patterns reveal the impact of modernity upon urban life. In his consideration of Charles Baudelaire's work, Benjamin characterizes modernity via an analysis of a singular individual, Baudelaire's flâneur strolling through the arcades of Paris. As the flâneur moves from the street to the newsstand from tiny shops to the café and onward through the arcades, the pedestrian's everyday movement reveals his relationship to power dynamics within the city. Benjamin describes these movements as revelatory to the sociology of growing urban spaces (68-69). For example, in the arcades, bodies must engage in new ways of being. The urban visual overtakes the rural aural; city dwellers are not laborers but "debtors and creditors, salesman and customers, employers and employees, and above all competitors"; the passerby learns to identify his fellow citizens through a taxonomy of assumptions free of empirical evidence—"profession, character, background, and lifestyle" conjured through a glance (70). In Benjamin's analysis, the flâneur comes to embody the ways in which modernity reshapes the urban individual. The walk reveals how the ability to see and hear, divisions of labor, and the establishment of identity are reshaped within an expanding urban landscape fueled by the tidal wave of capitalist industry. While Benjamin's consideration of Baudelaire does not directly take up avant garde art, his emphasis on movement, on walking through the city, provides a structure for understanding the relationship between an everyday practice and how that practice is inherently shaped by larger social forces.

Late nineteenth century Austin, Texas, of course, was more than just geographically distant from the streets of Paris. If modernity as a cultural and political phenomenon is catalyzed by a post-feudal society operating inside an expanding urban landscape, if the period/phenomenon/movement captures how the rise of industry, science, and governmentality reshape the life of the individual, then necessarily the pace and development of modernity happens not in a global blast of growth but in waves of ebb and flow that correspond not to some universal cycle but instead to the tides pulling upon particular locations. Hence the development of modernity in Austin, Texas, grows from a different set of spatial practices. Moreover, in Texas, slavery plays an integral part in supporting these processes and thereby the production of space and citizens' artistic expressions. To speak of modernity in Texas is also to speak of the practice and lasting impact of slavery.

By no means do Lottie Stotts and East Austin's Juneteenth parades represent traditional theatrical practice, although each is rife with theatricality. In late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth parades took on the flavor of public dramas intended to skewer the city's larger vision of black life. These performances auditioned visions of black life and black womanhood that were in many ways unimaginable within the everyday practices of black life in Austin. Despite their differences, both forms of performance translate as recognizable (albeit differently) to the larger public, both within and without the neighborhood. The differences in translations of these performance—from within a place largely inhabited by black people and from the rest of the city, largely inhabited by whites—highlights how the coding and then interpreting of oppositional performance practices is dependent upon the perceptions and

interpretations of highly localized spatial practices. The very suppleness of performance practices like those of Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth parades allowed residents of East Austin to create a counter space inside a city that was working diligently to control and discipline all aspects of black life.

Because my study of Juneteenth Parades and Lottie Stotts as avant garde performance relies so heavily on the local East Austin community, this chapter opens with a consideration of my research methodology. I then offer a history of how other scholars have addressed Juneteenth and Lottie Stotts. Next, I provide a brief history of the development of East Austin in the 1800s. Finally, I give a close reading of how Juneteenth parades operated in East Austin and of how Lottie Stotts rose to infamy. Rather than approach these close readings as strict textual interpretations, I also focus upon the ways in which memory and the archive shape their interpretations as avant garde performance.

Expanding Methodological Approaches in the Consideration of Avant Gardes

More so than in other chapters, my analyses of Juneteenth celebrations and the figure of Lottie Stotts as examples of early avant garde performances in the United States illuminate the movements between historical documents and the local, unwritten histories of East Austin. I offer a close reading of Juneteenth Celebrations and Lottie Stotts as avant garde performances based in archival research. Like many studies of the avant garde, my consideration of these subjects relies heavily upon a collection of archival documents. But throughout my analysis, I also found myself asking questions about the kinds of “documents” that actually inform a close reading: Where does the archive of

these performances *actually* live, and how might these performances necessitate modes of analysis that move fluidly between the archive and memory?

In both locating these archival documents and then interpreting their roles in Austin's history and in the history of avant garde performance, I rely heavily upon the local knowledges of East Austin historians to place archival documents and stories into relationship with the history of spatial practices in East Austin. The insider knowledges of Danny Camacho and Karen Riles placed into relationship with archival documents allow me to understand Juneteenth Celebrations and Lottie Stotts as subversive events that used the mechanism of performance to publicly critique the ways in which the city of Austin disciplined black bodies and black lives. In this fashion, my close reading of Lottie Stotts' public protests and of Juneteenth celebrations is then not simply textual analysis but rather an analysis of the movement between archival fragments and the formation of memory in East Austin. While fields that focus on subaltern historiography and social history frequently work with archival material in this manner, little work has been done in applying these methodologies to the study of the avant garde.

Both the story of Lottie Stotts and the importance of Juneteenth celebrations were brought to my attention by local East Austin historians, Danny Camacho and Karen Riles, whom I met on different occasions through the Austin History Center. By no means are Camacho and Riles performance historians. However when I described avant garde performance as a mechanism for turning local artistic production into a tool with which to critique disciplining structures that overtly shape life in East Austin, Camacho and Riles readily responded with any number of research possibilities. Though Riles and Camacho, who have lived in the neighborhood and who pursue its history as a vocation

and not as a career, could not exactly parse the terminologies related to “avant garde performance,” they readily understood the concept of performance as a subversive tool for critique because subversive performance so often surfaces in East Austin. While the research topics they recommended included Juneteenth celebrations and Lottie Stotts, Camacho and Riles also suggested the rich musical traditions of East Austin, the neighborhood’s black beauty pageants, performances related to spiritual practice, and the yearly encampments (or black chautauquas) hosted by East Austin churches as possible research sites. I honed in on Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth parades for a number of reasons. First, there were traces of these performances in the Austin History Center, and these traces readily spoke to their galvanizing nature across the city and not just within the neighborhood. Because Camacho and Riles were both interested in Stotts and Juneteenth and because both had lived in East Austin, I could lean on their expertise in exploring the dynamics between institutional archival records, the way records operated within the archive, and how these records did or did not reflect the particular spatial practices of East Austin

As I talked with these two local historians, Camacho and Riles consistently placed the archive into conversation with both their lived experiences and the oral histories passed down to them by their families and neighbors. When theorizing, they lift pieces of newspaper reporting or governmental records (written by non-East Austin residents) out of normative rhetoric about Austin life and history and then place them into conversation with the everyday life practices of East Austin, passed down from generation to generation through embodied experience, oral histories, and storytelling. While their theorizations are grounded in archival research, the stories they tell of

Juneteenth and Stotts are overtly shaped by their own local cultures. For example, using local knowledge, the two historians decoded how and why different documents report Stotts as “white” or “colored.” Camacho, who is himself fair-skinned, has been labeled white, Caucasian, Mexican, Mexican-American, and Hispanic on his own birth certificate. That is the institution of the state, without Camacho’s knowledge or permission, consistently reclassified his racial identity within its own record-keeping system. Given his own life experience, when studying documents about Stotts’ life, Camacho was then more attune to the ways in which Stotts’ racial identity shifted across institutional documentation, with its various regimes of racial categorization. He applied his own knowledge of how the government used racial labels to control how he moved about the city to then theorize Stotts. Importantly when Camacho offered these theories, he did so in the form of a third-person narrative, a kind of embellished oral history, replete with touches of fiction. Camacho used these stories (which I present later in the chapter) to explain when and why Stotts was reported as “white” or as “colored” or where and why she used that phenotypical slippage to create public disturbances. Unquestionably, Camacho’s stories of Stotts were influenced by the narrative languages of East Austin. Had I come across these archival documents on my own (and as I will discuss later, in the case of Lottie Stotts I would have never located resource material on my own), I would not have understood the ways in which these events directly challenged the governing structures of Austin in the late-nineteenth century, nor would I have understood the potential for using storytelling structures to breathe life into fragments of the archive.

Following the theorizations and research methodologies of Camacho and Riles, my own research methodology for this chapter began to take the shape of a reflexive movement between oral histories, storytelling, and archival records. Primary and secondary source materials were then supplemented with critical theory, theatre histories, and histories specific to Austin and Texas. After developing analyses of Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth Celebration, I then went back to Riles and Camacho to share my thinking about these events. Upon hearing my thoughts, Riles and Camacho would then offer new places to research and more of their own stories as catalysts for further nuancing my analyses.

In many ways, in this chapter I seek to theorize the ghosts and traces of an avant garde. Almost the entire research process for this chapter was a movement between archival fragments and the oral histories and stories that live within East Austin. This movement occurs across the archive, which often does its best to eliminate these fragments; the movement occurs within the memories of Riles and Camacho; and the movement marks by own process as the researcher.

This chapter thus draws heavily upon the mental, oral, and written histories of a number of historians even as it exposes the processes of what historian Jacques Le Goff refers to as “unconscious manipulation”, particularly of my own memory (xi). Unquestionably, some of this chapter is a fiction nourished by histories, and some of it is a history nourished by fictions. However, rather than read Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth Celebrations through historiographic traditions and mainstream histories that can never account for all that has been lost about the history of East Austin, I work to theorize and

acknowledge what is forgotten and lost in studies of radical cultural practices that operate well outside of normative social orders.

If as James Harding suggests “that there is much more to be gained by tapping into the resulting slippages and play” alive within the historiography of the avant garde than in continuing to pay tribute its “stable etymology,” then part of locating a wellspring of new ideas must not only be to seek the avant garde in new places but also to allow ourselves new means of understanding what we find (*Ghosts* 4).

Reviewing the Records

In order to understand how this theorization of Juneteenth celebrations and Lottie Stotts operates, one must first take into account how such performances have already been positioned in academic study. A formal review of scholarly literature covering Juneteenth celebrations in Austin, Texas, or the machinations of Lottie Stotts as avant garde performance is quite short indeed. No such material exists. However, unlike many cultural rituals associated with black life in late-nineteenth century Austin, a great abundance of secondary source materials exists regarding Juneteenth celebrations and Lottie Stotts, especially in terms of newspaper reporting. In no small part, the greater part of the documentation of these events evolves from the ways that Juneteenth and Stotts disturbed the spatial practices of non-black residents in Texas, a pattern of critique made clear in newspaper reporting. Later in this chapter, in my performance analyses of Juneteenth celebrations and Lottie Stotts, I rely heavily on these newspaper reports to explain not only the shape and form of these events but also to build a picture of the differing local spatial practices surrounding the events. A consideration of the relationship between these events and the spatial practices that both produce them and to

which they respond illuminates the ways in which Juneteenth celebrations and the public protests of Lottie Stotts actively challenged hegemonic systems of governance through the mechanism of performance.

In terms of non-Austin-specific scholarly material addressing Juneteenth and the avant garde, I pull from source material that operates on the local/state, national, and global level in order to examine how Juneteenth celebrations and Stotts' public protest function as avant garde performances particular to the economics and social dynamics of the U.S in the late nineteenth-century.

Outside of East Austin, a number of wide, general studies of Juneteenth exist. These often longitudinal studies explain the advent of Juneteenth and then consider its development over many years. Even today, across the United States these celebrations are documented in newspapers, oral histories, and community literature. In these formal studies, historians, sociologists, and American Studies scholars have analyzed the cultural and historical significance of Juneteenth as ritual celebration. For example, in his study of the history of Juneteenth, William Wiggins positions Juneteenth as a celebration particular to Texas but also one of fifteen different Emancipation celebrations that emerged in the United States in the late 1800s (237). Wiggins's historical account of the holiday provides a general record of the event from Union General Granger's reading of the Emancipation Proclamation in Galveston, Texas, to the passing of Texas House Bill 1016, which in 1979 declared Juneteenth a legal state holiday (238; 247). Studies like Wiggins's provide a useful picture of the social, religious, and economic factors shaping the celebration of Juneteenth. Moreover, they highlight the progression of the holiday

from one of a radical presentation of rest by former slaves to a contemporary, state-sanctioned mainstream ritual.

For a consideration of systems of economy and governance impacting Texas in the nineteenth century, Richard Flores's *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* provides a compelling account of the social, economic, and political transformation of the Texas landscape during the nineteenth century. In particular, Flores pays attention to how global processes of modernity happened in shifts and starts across Texas (2). Flores's analysis of the "Texas Modern" offers insight into the economic policies impacting Austin in the late nineteenth century, especially the link between the establishment of systemic racism and the industrialization and commercialization of the state (4). Though Flores's model focuses on south Texas and the "relations between Anglos and Texas Mexicans," his study paints a vivid picture of the relationship between macro-level systems of governance and everyday life practices in Texas cities and town. He moves between cultural, symbol, and economy, between iconography and everyday life practices, in order to query how memory and mythology gave rise to the Texas Modern. This analyses provides a useful framework for understanding the structural inequities particular to Texas to which events like Juneteenth celebrations or the protests of Lottie Stotts respond.

To position Juneteenth within the study of similar culturally-specific responses to racial subjugation during the nineteenth century, I turn to texts like Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*. Hartman's consideration of the forms of racist terror and black resistance shaping black life during slavery and its aftermath offers insights into how black performance and everyday life practices created space for resistance and

transformation within the black community. Though Hartman does not place these performances into relationship with greater movements of artistic practice, like that of the avant garde, her portrayal of performative “scenes”—based in analyses of diaries, slave narratives, legal cases, and popular theatre—situates them within the same systems of global economy and governance that were simultaneously creating “official” avant garde performances. In order to position Juneteenth celebrations and the public protests of Lottie Stotts as avant garde performance, they must be placed into conversation with systems of governance particular to the U.S. and Texas at that time. Thus, Hartman’s performance study provides a useful lens through which to consider the wider cultural patterns and infrastructures that are shaping black life in the U.S. during the nineteenth century.

In *The Avant Garde: Race, Religion, War*, Mike Sell seeks to reinvigorate the study of the avant garde through a “historiographical analysis” of the movement that focuses not on prior understanding of how the avant garde functions “in advance” but instead on how the movement responds to the “social groupings around it and how it relates to and distances itself from broader cultural patterns and infrastructures” (45). Given the lack of scholarly material addressing figures like Stotts or Juneteenth celebrations, this chapter relies on scholarship that addresses the cultural patterns and infrastructures that surround such celebrations and protests. I use those texts to illuminate how such culturally-specific performances by the black community in late nineteenth century Austin respond to and move with the infrastructures shaping the Texas Modern.

Juneteenth Celebrations: Radically at Rest

Though Abraham Lincoln penned the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, news of the document reportedly did not “officially” reach the shores of Texas until June 19th, 1865 (although undoubtedly some Texans already knew). Two years and eighteen days later. As Union General Gordon Granger read General Order Three, which proclaimed black slaves in Texas “henceforth and forever free,” citizens of Galveston stood in stunned silence (Campbell). News of emancipation did not reach Austin, Texas, until the next week. In the capital city, Major General Wesley Merritt and his troops paraded down Congress Avenue, the city’s main thoroughfare, and after a 36-gun salute, shared the Emancipation Proclamations with local citizens (Riles “Emancipation” 1). A year later, in a state and city still wrestling with the economic and social changes following the end of slavery, the black citizens of Austin began to celebrate the anniversary of their emancipation in a ritual that moved through East Austin and down the city’s main thoroughfare. With a heretofore unthinkable celebration, the freed men and women of Austin crafted an event that combined proud parades, delectable barbeque, impassioned testimony, spiritual songs, devout prayer, the occasional baseball game, and rest. Black bodies at rest and leisure...perhaps the most radical of embodied acts in the south in the late nineteenth century.

With its parades and its barbeques, structurally Juneteenth reads as a decidedly typical United States holiday, in many ways a mirror to the Fourth of July. However, early Juneteenth celebrations moved beyond simply reflecting the nationalistic propaganda propping up the U.S.’s self-image at the end of the nineteenth century. Instead, by staging a holiday within and without their own neighborhood, for their own community, and in acknowledgement of the fettering of human bodies whose labor made

possible the idea of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, black Americans in East Austin used performance as a mechanism to shatter the illusion of a more perfect union. With their creation and annual performance of Juneteenth, these citizens then used the leftover shards of this illusion to radically counter the political and cultural beliefs of not only a majority of Texans, but a majority of Americans. Like Baudelaire's flâneur, Juneteenth reveals the forces of modernity at play in Austin via its movement down public pathways and streets. Unlike the flâneur however, the bodies who artfully created a holiday in which to celebrate their freedom and their right to rest were also the same bodies that built the city's and state's economies via a labor system based upon brutality and oppression. As Juneteenth parades rolled down the streets of the state capital, black citizens were not merely participating in a bit of bourgeois saunter, they were marking an unparalleled shift in the state's and nation's economic systems. Participants were exposing their own spatial practices and their everyday lives to citizens at-large, many of whom still advocated for the return of slavery.

Early Celebrations

Rather than a broad study of Juneteenth celebrations in the U.S., I am interested in its earliest iterations, and in particular how those celebrations moved through the streets of Austin and how those celebrations portrayed black life and black bodies. Like more noted avant garde practices, for example the poetry of Dada or the use of automatic writing in surrealist poetry, framing Juneteenth as a piece of avant garde art requires placing the practice into relationship with the specificities of the spatial production that birthed it. Just as Dada or automatic writing became removed from the spatial practices that gave rise to the forms, so too do Juneteenth celebrations in Austin eventually shift

away from the spatial practices that first built the neighborhood of East Austin. From the 1860s to the end of the century, the celebration operated not just as a socially-sanctioned and highly-structured holiday, but more as a cultural performance still finding form, still indicative of the burgeoning relationship between free black life in Austin and the development of the city. In both public records and oral histories, these earliest celebrations of Juneteenth are not only marked by a sense of wonder but also function as fierce testimonies of the oppressive and dangerous social and economic regimes surrounding black life.

By the twentieth century however, Juneteenth celebrations in Austin had gained a more standardized structure. Though Jim Crow laws were blossoming throughout the south in the late 1890s, by the turn of the century Juneteenth no longer sparked the outrage and consternation within the wider Austin community that the celebration did upon its inception. In part, Juneteenth celebrations were seen as less of a threat because Jim Crow laws then took on the work of vigorously disciplining black life. At the same time, part of the city's wider acceptance of Juneteenth was also driven by the commercialization of the holiday. Sales of both food and clothes to the black community spiked around Juneteenth, profiting both black and white merchants. Within the black community, in-fighting among different black organizations as to the programming of the event, the values the event promoted (for example the acceptance or prohibition of alcohol)¹, and the availability and placement of sanctioned spaces in which the event could take place reveal how the celebration had become a space in which the black community promoted its own definitions of social order ("Dis Am'Mansphashun"; Grey 11; Riles "Juneteenth" 1). Thus in thinking through how Juneteenth celebrations

challenged established social orders, I am most interested in the earliest iterations of the celebration.

In my analysis of the early Juneteenth celebrations in Austin, Texas, as a kind of avant garde performance practice particular to the United States, I seek not to forward these celebrations as new, radical performative structures—after all picnics, barbeques, and parades existed in the United States well before the advent of Juneteenth. Instead, following the arguments of avant garde performance scholars like James Harding and Mike Sell, I seek to think through how Juneteenth tactically manipulated spatial practices via performance. By positioning Juneteenth as a celebratory structure co-opted by freedmen and tactically transformed to reveal the relationships ordering space in Texas and Austin, Juneteenth becomes emblematic of the ways in which avant garde performance comments upon and critiques the systems of modernity particular to the United States.

The Practice of Juneteenth

In order to see Juneteenth as an avant garde event exposing Austin's varied spatial practices, Juneteenth must be conceived of as not only as a performance practice but also as an event purposefully critiquing systems of governance in late nineteenth-century Austin. As Diana Taylor reminds us, an analysis of ritual and celebration as "performance" works on two levels: "the object/process of analysis" and the "methodological lens" enabling the analysis. Following Taylor, my consideration of Juneteenth frames the celebration—with its parades, feasts, and orations—as a ritual that involves "theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/event-appropriate behaviors." In addition to reading Juneteenth as a performance, I also consider how Juneteenth exemplifies "ways of knowing." Namely, though I read Juneteenth as a live event, I also want to

deliberate upon how the celebration reflects ideas of citizenship, gender, resistance, and civic obedience particular to the space of East Austin (3). Thus, while Juneteenth is produced within the black community, it also reverberates with the larger political and cultural forces shaping the city.

Importantly, in conceiving of Juneteenth as both as theatrical event and a way of knowing, Juneteenth must be read as more than a simplistic and mimetic reproduction of similar live events in Austin during that period, for instance Fourth of July celebrations. In his discussion of circum-Atlantic societies, Joseph Roach points out that collective memory allows some social events to survive not only a relocation of space but a transformation of structure: “Displaced transmission constitutes the adaptation of historic practices to changing conditions, in which popular behaviors are resituated in new locales” (28). Undoubtedly Juneteenth adapts performative traditions utilized within the celebration of the Fourth of July. In this case, the shift in locale is less a completely new geography and more a shift to a new form of spatial practice—a popular white ritual resituated in a culturally-specific spatial practice. To read Juneteenth as simply a reiteration of the Fourth of July would ignore the celebration’s purposeful subversion of patriotic practice in the United States. In the celebration of Juneteenth, its creators utilize what is arguably the most revered “freedom” celebration in the U.S. to instead unearth the hidden and barbaric social and economic systems that allowed for the production of a mythic notion of freedom in the United States. Through this process of displaced transmission, black citizens of East Austin transmuted a celebratory structure particular to the United States in order to name their own unacknowledged histories. Performance practices related to Juneteenth both tactically and overtly allude to the ways in which

black life had been subjugated to and involuntarily shaped by hegemonic systems of power. Accordingly, the various structures alive within an early Juneteenth celebration must be examined in order to better understand how Juneteenth created a counter-cultural performance by appropriating and surrogating hegemonic systems.

The Parade Route

My structural examination of Juneteenth begins with the celebration's movement through the city. The placement of Juneteenth celebrations across the city, as opposed to just within freedmen communities, signals the willingness of the black community to tactically cross the everyday social boundaries dividing and organizing the city. Taking place only a short distance from the state's capitol, the majority of the annual celebration happened in the city's freedmen communities, including East Austin. While most of Juneteenth revelries took place inside East Austin's boundaries, celebrants also traversed invisible social boundaries as they crossed the city.

By moving across these social boundaries, the celebrations overtly brought attention to the ways in which neighborhood organizations reflected shifting social relations in Austin after emancipation. In his analysis of the Alamo as a master symbol of the processes of modernity in the Texas Modern, Richard Flores notes that modernity is a "transformational process" through which complex social relations are "broken up, disembedded, or removed" from the hyper-local conditions in which they are first created. Instead, these complex social relations are "reconstituted and relocated" by new economic and social orders that create "new, spatial-temporal domains," unreflective of local histories and local practices (155). In Austin after emancipation, East Austin became a new spatial-temporal domain in a city-wide social order that continued to rely

upon black labor to make bricks, work fields, and serve Anglo bodies (for little wages and no social benefits) even after the black population was “freed.” Austin industries did not shift or fall apart as a result of emancipation. Rather many black folks made homes away from the places where they labored. Slaves were freed, but they continued to slave away, even if they had to walk a ways to work. Accordingly, Austin’s “new” industries were celebrated in part because by removing black communities away from the places they labored, the city no longer had to acknowledge the established local histories and local practices that supported “new” industries.

The establishment of new black social domains, like freedmen communities such as East Austin, served to disguise how “new” industrial systems were, in fact, still built upon the foundation of slave labor. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman notes that in the years immediately following emancipation, freed black men and women still experienced a “double bind of freedom”: newly freed blacks were free and yet still subordinate; possessing sovereignty but still subject to rule; autonomous and yet still compelled to work for their former masters (115). Accordingly, East Austin was a free, sovereign, and autonomous black community, even as it remained under the subordination and rule of those in Austin who had historically held power. The avant garde nature of Juneteenth grows from its ability to surface this “double bind.”

Even as a traditional black labor systems continued to fuel Austin’s industries after emancipation, black folks living in East Austin, no longer tied to their places of enslavement, began to create their own ideological and everyday life practices that upended racist notions of black life. The black community quickly established their own sites and practices of worship, commerce, self-protection, and education despite the ways

in which they continued to be subjected to an economy based in slave labor. After 1865, the establishment of freedman communities allowed for a new production of space in East Austin: one specific to black life and that rubbed up against and challenged the production of space within the city proper. Early Juneteenth celebrations surfaced the tensions alive within the new and shifting productions of space in Austin. Juneteenth celebrations created a spatial dialectic between established city order and an emerging, culturally-specific production of space. When the Juneteenth parades crossed into white Austin and headed down the avenue towards the state capitol, these shifts across the productions of space were surfaced via the mechanism of performance. When white governors and judges joined Juneteenth celebrations in East Austin, shifting productions of space were surfaced via the mechanism of performance. The performances of Juneteenth celebrations allowed for radical proclamations of identity that upset and perturbed Austin's social order. Evidence of the early structure of Juneteenth celebrations and of the social discomfort they catalyzed were well-documented in Austin newspapers.

A plethora of Austin newspapers reported on the event. Even this reporting, whose publication was controlled by white citizens, reveal Juneteenth's ability to disrupt both the social orders and everyday practices of Austin. Though white Austinites rarely wandered into East Austin, the newspapers they published documented the earliest years of the celebration: "The colored people, on Friday last, celebrated the day of their emancipation with a Barbecue, not far from the city. Large numbers on horseback went through the Avenue with music and flags. We learn that Governor Hamilton, the Hon. Rigby [a local judge] and others addressed the meeting" ("Colored People").

Reports like this from 1868, just three years after emancipation in Texas, illuminate a number of remarkable characteristics of Juneteenth celebrations. Though brief, both the matter-of-fact tone of the report and the information purposefully absented from the report suggest the unsettling characteristics of Juneteenth for the greater Austin community. “We learn” indicates the second-hand nature of the reporting. While the event made the paper, the 1868 celebration of Juneteenth was not deemed remarkable enough, or socially acceptable enough, for reporters themselves to cover the event as notable Austin news. Consequently, “we learn” reads as gossip or hearsay.

Like the source of material for the report, the story’s description of the celebration’s location also reads as decidedly ambiguous. Though the paper places the barbecue outside of the city, the horseback riders first paraded down the “Avenue.” In 1868, any mention of the “Avenue” in Austin referred to the main thoroughfare in the city, the street (today known as Congress Avenue) that led to the steps of the capitol building (Humphrey 38). The article then implies that the parade moved participants from the Avenue to a space outside of the city proper—or rather into a black neighborhood. Though the paper works to position the celebration of Juneteenth as a second-hand story about a piecemeal ritual fashioned at the edges of the modern city, the location of the parade and the names of white governmental officials who participated forced readers to acknowledge the presence of a developing freed black community in the capital. These sites along the parade would have spoken to not only the development of the community, but how that community grew despite a lack of resources.

As participants moved along the parade route from East Austin to the Avenue, the landscape of the city changed. In East Austin’s freedmen community, situated in a low-

lying area prone to flooding, the June heat shimmered across a hot rolling prairie strewn with groves of Live Oak trees. Juneteenth participants rode past their own four-walled log cabins, which featured just a few windows and wooden shingle roofs (Mears 85; Rivera and Rivera 12, 22-25). The typically two-room cabins of board-and-batten construction sat on foundations of limestones quarried from the very properties on which the cabins sat. In this semi-rural area, twisted cedar log fences marked the boundaries of small yards or corrals and gardens, homes to hogs and chickens. Footpaths marked the way to water sources, streams and creeks, or communal wells (Mears 85). Using roof tops and natural landmarks as directional guides, black residents' horses, mules, and buggies, signs of increasing wealth within the community, rumbled across the uneven landscape headed toward downtown. Infrastructure like roads had yet to reach East Austin.² Paths to town were marked by deep wagon ruts or breaks in the tall brown grass (Rivera and Rivera 12, 22-25).

As a Juneteenth parade approached downtown, the landscape it encountered shifted from a rambling prairie to a clearly delineated grid of houses, shops, and government buildings, whose front edifices were all politely marked with only the tallest of trees and hitching posts. Atop a hill in downtown sat the first permanent capitol building for Texas: a large, rectangular, white, three-storied Greek revival monument replete with a small dome roof and four columns marking the portico. (In photos, it sort of looks like a large granary with a pumpkin for a dome.) The Avenue, which ran between the capitol and the waters of the Colorado, itself stretched out like a wide river upon whose banks perched more brick and stone Greek Rival edifices. These businesses sat side-by-side along the Avenue, like stalwart soldiers protecting this new pathway to

democracy. Horses and buggies were hitched in front of stores or in front of other important building in the capitol's vicinity: the Treasury Building, the Land Office, and the Governor's Mansion (Humphrey *Austin* 8-10). By 1871, the Avenue boasted gas lights and mule-drawn streetcars that all eventually connected to the Northern Railroad line, which reached Austin in 1876 (20-21).

The movement of the Juneteenth parade from east to west across the city marked not only a ritual celebration, but also the history of black life in the city. As Austin took shape on the prairie, slave labor not only helped realize Edwin Waller's construction of the city plan in 1839, but by the 1850s, slaves played "a critical role in the economy of the town and the surrounding countryside" (Humphrey and Crawford 46). The nature of slave labor in Austin varied in terms of both the kind of labor slaves performed as well as how and if they were compensated for their work. While twenty to forty percent of Austin's slaves worked on farms and ranches, a number worked in homes or as skilled laborers. In the city proper, slaves worked for hotels, merchants, brick masons, wagon makers, butchers, carpenters, and blacksmiths. For those with skills in high demand, like carpenters and blacksmiths, slaves were hired out and earned wages (47). By 1860, of Austin's 3500 residents, about 1000 were slaves. In terms of their location in the city, during the 1800s blacks were located throughout Austin, "living in virtually every city neighborhood" (174). The Juneteenth parade route wove through the remnants of this history. The parade began on the open prairie amidst a cluster of modest log homes, similar to the structures erected by the first Anglo settlers, and the parade then arrived at the capitol building, literally built with the slave labor of the very people who celebrated their new-found freedom with the Juneteenth procession. In establishing a parade route

that ran directly through the heart of downtown, freedmen were defiantly proclaiming their own Austin history, even as they struggled to survive at the city's edge. This reclamation of history through the performative act of a parade boldly surfaced the role of slave labor in initially ordering the space of Austin.

Juneteenth's Message

The same *Tri-Weekly* that mentioned the parade route article goes on to describe a series of speeches that took place during the Juneteenth celebration. Much like the location of the event, the naming of speakers in the reporting must also be examined for shadows of the unmentionable. The article lists speakers including the Governor of Texas, a local judge, and "others." In mentioning the governor and the judge, the reporting implies that the discourses shaping the meaning of the event are presumably sanctioned and controlled by local and state governments. In her analysis of different articulations of freedom developed after emancipation, Saidiya Hartman notes that a long-standing practice of "liberty and bondage" underscored the fight for black independence in the United States. Hartman argues that after emancipation, even as freedmen strove to establish their own subjectivity, the practice of liberty and bondage remained at play. To underscore this dichotomy, she points out the manner in which post-Civil War texts and performances offered new methodologies for maintaining the disciplining of black bodies (115-117; 134). Though no reporting directly accounts for the presence of white government officials at Juneteenth celebrations, building upon Hartman's argument, one can imagine that government officials' presence at a Juneteenth celebration served as a mechanism of control, a reminder of that movement between liberty and bondage. The officials were there as much to remind black celebrants of the

ways in which they still controlled and disciplined black lives as much as the officials were there to observe the event. Thus, even as the black community celebrated its new-found liberty, they were also reminded of the perpetual acts of bondage that existed alongside their new-found freedom.

As the paper notes, despite the presence of these officials, “others” also spoke at Juneteenth celebrations. Though “others” holds a dismissive connotation, in newspaper reporting “others” signals the presence of voices capable of naming the movement between liberty and bondage in Austin, and so to prevent those voices from establishing individual subjectivities, black speakers were labeled as “other.” By examining a series of newspaper articles from the late 1860s to the turn of the century, “others” slowly begins to reveal itself as the voices that represented self-determination in the black community.

Details from an 1874 story in the *Daily Statesman* illuminate who these “others” might be. By 1874, at least two different Juneteenth celebrations took place because of the black community’s differing attitudes, grounded in religious beliefs, about the presence of alcohol at the event. Consistent with prior years’ reporting across a variety of local newspapers, the *Statesman* in 1874 first detailed the names of white politicians who spoke at one Juneteenth event, though the paper did not note which particular gathering. However, when referring to a Juneteenth celebration not attended by white politicians, the paper wrote, “The speakers at the other picnic were all colored men” (“The Picnics”). A year later in 1875, the *Statesman* repeated this same pattern of listing Juneteenth speakers as white men and “other”: “Governor Davis, Frank Britton, two or three colored preachers, and other colored men were the orators” (“The Celebration”). In his

study of circum-Atlantic societies, scholar Joseph Roach explains that black cultures in the United States have “invented themselves by performing their pasts in the presence of others [and that] they could not perform themselves, however, unless they also performed what and who they thought they were not” (5). The inclusion of white leaders at Juneteenth celebrations speaks to just this invention of self in front of others. Newspaper reporting in Austin indicates that black citizens used Juneteenth to create a space whereby they performed an unacknowledged history for state and local leaders. The black community in East Austin used the holiday to express culturally-specific self-images and offer testimony that directly countered both the portrayal the black community in the city at-large and the interpretation of slavery in Texas, and they did so in front of the very city officials who had once participated in the slave system.

The series of differing cultural portrayals alive within early Juneteenth celebrations echoes contemporary thinking about the field of avant garde studies. In arguing for a reconception of the avant garde as not a theory of the “cutting edge” but as a space of “the rough edges of contestation, struggle, and negotiation,” Mike Sell turns to border theory to broaden the cultural exchanges analyzed within the field of avant garde studies. Sell points out that border theory “reminds us that in culture(s) there is no such thing as a jagged edge protruding into an empty space” (24). The empty space is instead full and rich, but rarely acknowledged by those who wield the power to cut. The multiple discourses operating within Juneteenth celebrations demonstrated the “rough edges of contestation.” Differing notions of racial identity within Austin in the late nineteenth century overlap and intersect in such a celebration, each overtly and covertly shaping the other.

Evidence of these rough borders and of the tactical manipulation of the performance of black self-identity and history becomes clearer in newspaper reporting closer to the end of the century. By the 1880s, over a decade after the ritual began, local newspaper coverage of Juneteenth had expanded to include more detailed accounts of the program for the day. On June 19th, 1884, the *Austin Daily Statesman* described the different associations and wagons involved in the parade. The newspaper listed fourteen different parade floats or participant organizations from the black community, including the Austin City Rifles, The Pen is Mightier than the Sword company, the Children's Wagon, Colored People [before], Colored People [after], and the Dramatical Festival Wagon ("Emancipation"). The reporting of fourteen different parade floats that represent not only the development of black organizations since emancipation in 1865 but also colored people "before" slavery and colored people "after" slavery indicates that the parade repertoire of Juneteenth had developed to such an extent that it was consciously and purposefully conveying a sense of black American history via dramatic representation. Though Austin newspapers at the time never directly report on the nature of "before," scholars have noted that former slaves played a large role in early Juneteenth celebrations. They not only had their own position in the parade, over the course of the day they also testified about life during slave times (Riles, "Juneteenth" 1; Grey 9). Diana Taylor writes that "forms handed down as past are experienced as present" in the transmission of repertoires that move beyond the written word and into spoken and embodied performances (24). The parade floats spoke to raising young children whose futures were finally nourished by practices driven by their own community, to the right of the black community to bear arms, to the right of the black community to keep the peace,

and to the conditions of black lives before and after slavery. Thus as citizens of Austin, like those reporting on the event or viewing the parade as it moved down the Avenue, watched black citizens portray their own self-conceptions and interpretations of their own history in the present, the Juneteenth parade began to function as an embodied archive that transmitted heretical histories to the wider public. The parade floats presented a heretofore unacknowledged past. Through a dramatic representation that skillfully co-opted a cherished cultural ritual, this minoritarian community overtly challenged the ways in which an authoritarian regime had delineated its past and present.

Besides floats, the expanded coverage of Juneteenth speakers also included the names of black community leaders. In this same article, the *Statesman* gave a precise description of all the speakers for the event as well as all the community organizers for the event. In 1884, black orators included “Rev. A. Grant” and “Prof. E. L. Blackshear.” The Austin City Directory reveals that Reverend Abraham Grant was the pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Professor E.L. Blackshear was a black teacher who not only ran one of the earliest schools in East Austin, but in 1897, he became the head of what is now referred to as Prairie View A&M, the first state-supported college for African Americans in Texas (“Principals”). Of course, the *Statesman* did not explain how these men functioned as leaders in the black community, but the acknowledgement of their presence beyond a simplified “other” indicates that, at least in terms of Juneteenth, black men in East Austin had reached such a social standing in the larger Austin community that their names had become reportable. Moreover, titles like “reverend” and “professor” speak to the community’s infrastructure, indicating the development of churches and schools inside East Austin. No record of these early

Juneteenth speeches exist, in primary sources or in newspaper reporting; however, mentions of such titles point to a growing, self-sustained black community in East Austin. Such mentions also directly counter the city's larger narrative of black life, which at that time was experiencing an increased pressure from groups like the KKK and from burgeoning Jim Crow practices. Near the end of the century, newspaper reporting reveals the struggle, the rough edges related to controlling the narrative of black history in Austin.

Even as black leaders gained status in Austin, a nostalgia for the "good old days" remained in the city at-large. An 1877 article from the *Austin Daily Statesman*, however, clarified how Juneteenth reflected the wider population's response to the event. On June 20th, 1877, the *Statesman* ran a lengthy editorial reflecting upon the nature of the holiday. As one of the city's most progressive newspapers with both its largest circulation and its largest advertising base, the *Statesman's* analysis of a Juneteenth celebration divulged both a portrayal of wider city politics and the inability of many white citizens to interpret the significance of Juneteenth. The article opened with a kind of self-congratulatory description of Austin's progressive politics: "It would have amazed a spectacled New Englander if he had encountered events of yesterday in this city. Whites and blacks, ex-slaves and ex-masters, comingled in celebrations and at barbecues and in wine drinking. They alike were happy and not a trace of unkindness was visible..." ("Emancipation Day in Austin"). The opening of the *Statesman's* article illuminates any number of political assumptions about the Austin, Texas, of 1877 in terms of both local imaginaries and the city's image in a national context. The "amazement" of a "spectacled New Englander" indicates that Austin, or rather the

Statesman, worried that the city was viewed as backward and racist by the standards of educated New Englanders. Moreover, the celebratory tone of the piece highlights that Austin not only allowed such celebrations, but that the city welcomed them to such an extent that any presumed unkindness on the part of local white citizens was a misread of Austin's open and warm hospitality. (This early self-congratulatory celebration of Austin's progressive image foreshadows a long practice of Austin's celebrating its exceptionality even as it enacts civic control of minoritarian communities.)

However, after this gracious opening, the editor went on to describe Austin before emancipation as a more romantic, more idyllic space:

How forcibly memories of the elden times are revived by incidents of yesterday!
Some one has said that while the old plantation days are gone forever and we have learned to abhor human slavery ... yet now and then in the heat and toil of the struggle for existence the thought involuntarily steals over us that we have seen better days. We think of the wild rides for the fox and the deer; of the lolling, rustic seat on the lawn; of the long sittings at meals; of the after dinner cigar; of the polished groups in easy but vivacious conversations in the parlor; of the chivalric devotions to beautiful women; of the pleasant evening drives; of the visits to the plantation, with its long, broad expanse of waving green, dotted here and there with groups of industrious slaves; of the long rows of negro cabins, with little pickaninies playing about them; of the old well, with its beam and pole for drawing, and of the women with pails of water on their heads; of the wild old field airs ringing out from the cabins at night... of the flattering foot scraping, clownish, knowing rascal whom you tossed a silver piece when he brought up

your boots; of the little darkies who scrambled for your rind after you had eaten your watermelon on the plaza in the afternoon—and as “As fond recollection presents them to view,” we feel the intrusive swelling of the tear of regret. And so it is with every Southerner; tears rise in his heart and gather in his eyes as he thinks of the days that are no more. The Southerners of old used to be perhaps the happiest of men. There was nothing to disturb them; nothing that they wished done that others were not on hand to do. Happiness was not only our being’s end and aim; but its enjoyment our one occupation. Now the cares of life, the struggle for a living, weigh us down. It often strikes us, when recurring to the intense enjoyment of the olden times, that perhaps just as the strongest force in physics is evolved from the greatest consumption of material, so it is ordered in human affairs that the most exquisite happiness will be founded on the woes of others.

(“Emancipation Day in Austin”)

Though the piece’s final contrite tone attempts to acknowledge that the writer’s nostalgia was paid for by forced labor, the rich descriptions surrounding “olden” times undoes the article’s earlier argument for Austin as a socially progressive space. Importantly, inside the almost dappled, water-colored imagery of fox and deer, black babies playing outside of quaint cabins, and the exotic bodies of black women with water jugs balanced upon their head, the article unknowingly reveals Juneteenth’s most radical critique of history in Texas and in the United States. The liquid words of the editor clearly disclose an analysis of labor practices. Each description of a black body in the article depicts a body at work: “industrious slaves,” women fetching water, bodies in the fields, and a man gratefully shining shoes. The writer then indicates that since the end of slavery, white

bodies struggled to make ends meet, struggled to put into place a labor system that could replace slavery: “Now the cares of life, the struggle for a living, weigh us down.” While the poetic nostalgia in the writing calls to ideas like “chivalric devotion,” time-and-again the writer describes a system of labor in which black bodies toiled and white bodies rested.

These descriptions of bodies resting and bodies working encapsulates what is perhaps Juneteenth’s most radical act of performance—black bodies at rest. In a city founded in part to spread the plantation system westward through the territory that would become Texas, black bodies performing rest, leisure, and the rituals of holiday celebration produced for “progressive” Austinites and progressive city-wide publications a distinct social discomfort and a sense of nostalgia for an outdated labor system. Time and again, newspaper articles describe Juneteenth, with a kind of wondrous disbelief, as a holiday of immoderation: from an 1875 *Austin Daily Statesman* article, “indulged in dancing, chatting, and speaking”; from an 1888 *Austin Daily Statesman* article, “It was murky overhead yesterday and the heavens were disposed to be leaky, marring the pleasure of the colored folks, who had, with commendable zeal, prepared to duly and elaborately celebrate Emancipation day”; from an 1895 *Austin Daily Tribune* article, subtitled “The Coons Have Rather a Rainy Day of it Yesterday,” “They sallied forth, however, early in the morning and managed to get in their parades between showers; and finally, from the *Austin Daily Tribune* in 1899, “chickens and watermelons stand a slim show on Emancipation day” (“The Celebration,” “Emancipation Day,” “Coons,” “Dis”). Phrases like “indulged,” “sallied forth,” and “commendable zeal” paired with overtly

racist language and stereotypical imagery positioned Juneteenth not as a welcome holiday in Austin, but as an event that disrupted the larger social order in the city.

A Holiday for the Avant Garde

The ability of Juneteenth to disrupt larger social and cultural frameworks in Austin via a performance that transgressed space, in the process creating radical re-imaginings of black communities, exemplifies how the holiday operated as a kind of avant garde performance unique to the United States. Scholar Raymond Williams ties the development of the western avant garde, which he primarily locates in Europe, to the space of developing urban landscapes. As cities expanded at the end of the 19th century, the social rules at play in these spaces led to the development of modern art:

... the preoccupying visual images and styles of particular cultures did not disappear, any more than the native languages, native tales, the native styles of music and dance, but all were now passed through this crucible of the metropolis, which was in the important cases no mere melting pot but an intense and visually and linguistically exciting process in its own right, from which remarkable new forms emerged. (“Emergence” 46)

For Williams, though, the distinct characteristics of avant garde art were and are its re-imagining of the future and its capacity to liberate: “The avant-garde, aggressively from the beginning, saw itself as the breakthrough to the future: its members were not the bearers of progress already repetitiously defined, but the militants of a creativity which would revive and liberate humanity” (“Politics” 51). Hence, according to Williams, to define a work as avant garde moves beyond simply an analysis of the forces alive within the crucible of the city. Taking into account an analysis of city space, the specific work

of art must then be studied in terms of *not* how it forwards an already established agenda, but instead how it works to reinvigorate and unfetter the populace to which it responds.

My analysis of Juneteenth reads the productions of space in Austin as not simply reiterations of western social codes, but as spaces that grappled with ideas and issues particular to life in the United States: the development of black identity as it moved through everyday life processes, the systems of knowledge governing a cityscape built by black labor, and finally the production of symbolic images responding to the everyday and to the systems controlling the everyday. Through this kind of close reading of the production of culturally-specific space, Juneteenth begins to reverberate not simply as a unique holiday but as a performance event that creatively repositioned and reimagined black citizens within the larger cityscape in order to promote their history, their humanity, their rights of citizenship, and their futures inside an environment intent upon retaining social orders established during the United States' long and painful relationship with the practice of slavery. From parade routes that transgressed neighborhood boundaries to parade wagons that boldly acknowledged the culturally-specific history of black citizens, from the inclusion of city politicians in rituals overtly intended to redefine black citizenship to the endorsement of black bodies moving outside a system of labor intended to benefit the white community, Juneteenth's development of avant garde performance demands that scholars rethink where and how avant garde performance is positioned in the United States.

Lottie Stotts: Fiend, Dynamo, Ghost

While events like late nineteenth century Juneteenth parades offer the advantage of rich archival histories, not every figure associated with avant garde performance in

East Austin during this period enjoys the privilege of a detailed historical record. Moreover, nor do all avant garde practices developed in East Austin during the late nineteenth-century present a singular discourse on black life. Case in point, Lottie Stotts. Lottie Stotts was a light-skinned, mixed-race working woman of color whose fitful public protests and general cussedness appear erratically across late nineteenth-century newspaper reporting—a figure whose legend looms large for contemporary East Side community members and historians. In many ways, Stotts is an apparition outside of her own world of East Austin. Like so many subaltern figures, Stotts exists as a figure alive in cultural memory and yet incomplete in material archives. Via an analysis of her fragmented archival record buttressed by local cultural memory, I argue that the ghost of Lottie Stotts serves as an example of a woman of color utilizing avant garde performance practices to protest the disciplining of raced bodies in Texas during the late nineteenth century.

A limited amount of archival information exists related to Stotts' life, and yet when asked about figures in East Austin's history who might be considered avant garde performance artists, Danny Camacho and Karen Riles offered Lottie Stotts as a prime candidate. To interpret the behaviors of Lottie Stotts, I relied upon the insider knowledges of these two local East Austin historians who intimately understand the everyday life practices of East Austin. As community historians, Danny Camacho and Karen Riles operate outside of the practices of academia. Their studies of East Austin primarily take the form of stories, and for little or no financial compensation, they speak their stories to artists, government workers, scholars, students, community members, researchers, and family. Their stories are shared at places like community gatherings,

restaurant tables, the occasional TV/newspaper/radio interview, family reunions, and library lectures. Their histories are not created at arm's length from East Austin; both Camacho and Riles have lived many years inside the neighborhood. Currently, the insights and cultural histories of local historians like Riles and Camacho play a miniscule role in the study of the avant garde. In more current conceptions of the avant garde that take up its transnational identities and roots, analyses remains firmly tied to secondary source material and textual analysis. Even in analyses of contemporary avant gardes that take a "sociological approach" to study, scholars almost strictly rely upon source material that never directly dialogues with local productions of space or with artists themselves. If avant garde research methodologies were to move beyond their heavy reliance on archival analysis and secondary source material and begin to think in dialogue with local cultural memories, do then additional avant garde figures emerge, figures with economic, gender, and racial statuses (or the intersection therein) that the field typically does not address?

Unquestionably, such analyses that engage with what might have been are speculative and overtly colored by contemporary ideologies. However, as James Harding points out in his study of feminist artists and the avant-garde, the very historiography of the field has always subjectively worked via "unspoken expectations," via shifting academic research practices. Historically, these unspoken expectations have sought to define and protect the avant garde "as a nexus of radical art and radical politics." However in doing so, the field has not always addressed questions related to "concerns with privilege and exclusion that ultimately have a direct bearing upon feminist

historiographies because women have frequently found themselves the victims of those exclusions” (*Cutting* 5).

As a case in point, in his study of Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhagen, Harding advocates for considering the Baroness’s artistic production, most often recognized in terms of her poetry and graphic art, also as an example of avant garde *performance*. In order to position the Baroness’s performances in this manner, Harding relies upon a consideration of the everyday spatial practices to which these performances respond: “Indeed, it is only when her performative transformation of everyday experience is taken into account that the full scope of von Freytag-Loringhagen’s work emerges and that the radical social challenge that the work poses begins to take shape” (*Cutting* 37). In building his argument, Harding relies first upon the considerable archival record related to the Baroness: the private holdings of poetry and letters belonging to Djuna Barnes; commentary on the Baroness’s work in publications like *Little Review*; and the accolades of fellow artists like William Carlos Williams, Marcel Duchamps, Man Ray, Ezra Pounds, and Wallace Stevens (36-37). Utilizing the rich record of performance within these different documents, Harding then considers the Baroness’s performances in relationship to the social contexts shaping the field of avant garde studies in the U.S.: We can only speculate about whether the Baroness’s limited influence is the result of the vehement resistance to conventional notions of gender and sexuality that characterizes her performance aesthetics, but one thing that a closer examination of her work can substantiate: the contours of her aesthetics were structured in a critical resistance to the governing patriarchal assumptions that the first American avant-garde, however critical it

might have been of society in other respects, nonetheless carried over from the American social mainstream. (39)

Even given the rich archival record that surrounds the Baroness's artful critiques of the patriarchy, Harding still only "speculates" that she is often left out of conversations about the avant garde because of the field's gender biases. As a field of study, how do we theorize the performance aesthetics and critical resistance of those whose lives were never so rigorously archived, and how do we hold the field of study accountable for such lacuna?

Unlike the Baroness, Lottie Stotts did not have the privilege of operating as a wealthy white woman capable of moving between New York City and continental Europe during the advent of the Western avant garde. As is the case for many women of color in the south, no one carefully saved and tended records related to Stotts' life. Her movements about Austin were only deemed remarkable when they were also cast as infamous. The intersection of her races, gender, and class make Lottie's positionality much less stable than the Baroness's. Thus, explications of Stotts' life and street performances require different methodological approaches than those utilized for studying work like that of the Baroness. Accordingly, the amount of informed speculation on the part of myself, as well as Camacho and Riles, employed in the following analysis of Stotts' street performances is necessarily much greater. But since first hearing the story of Lottie Stotts from Riles in 2005, I have been struck by how Stotts' public protests operated as "critical resistance to governing patriarchal assumptions" that disciplined the bodies of black women in late nineteenth century Texas.

For me, Stotts stands as the manifestation of Artaud's call to action: a singular figure that intrepidly makes herself "master of what does not exist, and brings it into being" through the realm of performance (13). In the 1880s, Stotts used disruptive public protest to voice the inequities and racist policies suffered by East Austin residents, who as a people were intimately tied to the practice of slavery in Texas and thereby the state's economy. By repetitively bringing her body and her opinions into the public sphere, Stotts attempted to master, to bring into being, what had rarely been allowed to appear within it—a bold, opinionated, and rebellious black woman. Like the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhaven, Stotts offers critical resistance to the governing patriarch, albeit a much different kind of patriarchy than the baroness challenged.

Importantly, as I pursued Stotts through the material archive and into cultural memory, I learned my own lesson about taking what does not exist and bringing it into being. The story of Stotts perhaps stands less as an example par excellence of a dramatic unveiling of a lost history, and more as study of the ways in which non-traditional avant garde performance histories teach the value of productive failure within both methodology and memory. While Stotts' life and public protests can never be teased apart to the same extent of the Baroness's, the following research narrative examines the relationship between memory and the archive in parsing culturally-specific avant garde performance. In order to surface the twisted paths and dead-ends that come with studying such a subaltern figure, I organize the following study of Stotts via a series of failed and/or incomplete understandings; first, through my initial, very-faulty memory of Stotts; next, through a series of archival mishaps; and finally, through a communal conversation with Camacho and Riles.

Slippages in a Scholar's Memory

My very first conception of Lottie Stotts was shaped less by academic considerations and more by personal artistic practice and my own habituated patterns of thought as a Latina who grew up in Texas. These two modes of thinking, heavily influenced by own spatial practices in East Austin, reveal the ways in which racialized spatial codes dialogue with one another across time.

When I first heard the story of Lottie Stotts in 2005, I belonged to a multi-disciplinary performance collective that was gathering oral histories about cultural performance on the East Side of Austin. As part of this work, we visited locations ranging from the neighborhood's only surviving juke joint to the row of piñata shops that at that time ran down Cesar Chavez Street. Our interviews took us from the East Austin streets just north of the river to East 12th Street, an area not only historically situated as black and Latino but also one, in 2005, still rich in black and Latino businesses. During a visit to one establishment, a community member mentioned to Ron Berry, the Artist Director of the Fusebox Festival and the now defunct Refraction Arts Project, that Karen Riles, an associate of the Austin History Center, was an expert in the local history of East Austin. The community member urged us to seek out Riles as not only a resource for the community's history but as an interlocutor with personal and intimate knowledge of the East Side.

After arranging a meeting, we met Riles in a parking lot at the corner of East 11th and Interstate 35, and for some reason that I can't remember, we walked over to an open, grassy lot that sat atop a hill along the feeder road to I35. The lot is now covered in condos. Before the condos though, visitors in pursuit of a view stepped over chunks of

cement belonging to long-forgotten parking lots, discarded beer cans, and the detritus of drug deals past. From atop the hill, one could gaze across downtown to the pink dome of the State Capitol, atop which sits the statue, the Goddess of Liberty. The Goddess of Liberty, a lone star raised in one hand and a sword gripped in the other, was placed atop the capital in 1888, around the same time that Stotts roamed the streets of Austin. The Goddess is perhaps best known for her exaggerated and grotesque features—heavy brow, protruding eyes, and sharp cheek bones—which read as proportional from below. Her fierce visage and her decidedly pagan origins have watched over Austin’s streets for more than 120 years. I was staring across the city at the Goddess of Liberty the first time I heard the name Lottie Stotts—another pagan, another exaggeration, an altogether different sort of goddess of liberty.

My initial memories of Stotts’ story are more than a tad inaccurate. Here is a brief outline of what I remember from my first exposure to Stotts: Lottie Stotts was a black prostitute who lived on the East Side of Austin in the late 1800s. Importantly, Stotts read as white. Though she was labeled a “mulatto” in official records, Stotts’ light skin tone allowed her to move through neighborhoods in Austin typically designated as “white only.” Stotts became famous, or rather perhaps infamous, when she married the French Ambassador to the state of Texas, Francois. Though miscegenation was not illegal, authorities discovered and took exception to the fact that Stotts was, in fact, black. State officials then threw Francois into the capitol’s jail. While he was imprisoned, Stotts would regularly stage elaborate public protests on the capitol’s grounds—in the process challenging both state law and the role of a black woman’s voice in the public sphere. Eventually the U.S. Marshalls came to Austin to free Francois, after all he was the

ambassador. The Marshalls were promptly run-off by the Texas Rangers, Francois-less. Eventually Francois served his sentence, and eventually Stotts disappeared into history. In wrestling with this version of Stotts' story for the past ten years, my memory's failure has been brought to light on numerous occasions. For example, Stotts never married the French ambassador to Texas. She also did not protest on the capitol's lawn. She never even lived on the East Side.

However, the miscues in my memory are themselves rich in rules that govern spatial practice in East Austin and Texas. At the time I first heard about Stotts' public protests, I had only a basic understanding of the ways that racialized spatial codes directed the movement of bodies in the city. At that time, I understood that bodies of color lived east of I35. I rarely encountered minorities as I worked as a public school teacher in west Austin, nor would I characterize the Austin theatre community in 2005 as particularly diverse. I was one of a handful of minority performers regularly working in the East Side's different warehouse theatres. To engage with an artistic project that actually focused upon the neighborhood's rich diversity was something of a unique experience for me. With this history project, we theatre-makers were less simply tenants whose theatre was housed in a crumbling warehouse deep on the East Side (a warehouse now converted to an upscale office space for besomebody.com³). Instead, we were attempting to think through our own relationship to the history of spatial practices that built the neighborhood. We were overtly attempting to engage with the spatial practices and histories of places like the juke joint, Victory Grill, which sometimes hosted our annual experimental arts festival.

All this goes to say, my first exposure to Stotts was framed by a particular, personal spatial practice within East Austin that was grounded in an artistic practice not necessarily related to the neighborhood's history. This spatial practice included an awareness of the ways in which bodies of color did or did not move through theatres in the neighborhood but no true understanding of how that practice was produced by regulatory systems. To no small extent, Stotts was the direct antithesis of my understanding of theatrical practice in East Austin: Stotts was a woman of color who explicitly shaped her performative protests to address color, and in doing so, she challenged and critiqued color lines by purposefully crossing them. Like Juneteenth celebrations or Baudelaire's flâneur, Stotts' movement through the city reveals the ways in which systems of governmentality developed within Austin and Texas, but it took a number of cycles of research and rethinking of not only Stotts but of the production of space in East Austin for me to gain this understanding. .

Some parts of my first memory of Stotts' story, though, were accurate. In particular, Riles's description of Stotts' body—a black female body that read as white—and of how Stotts used her coloring to her advantage proved to be true. My own life experience, in a body half Latino and half white, had long since taught me the necessities of racial code meshing. Though my hair is black, my skin is, what my father calls, “absurdly pale,” and that paleness has consistently allowed me to operate in places where “brown” might make others uncomfortable. To no small extent, my integration into white spaces in Austin and beyond, including the high school where I taught for many years, are made possible because I am not “too brown.” My last name is a boon for any organization seeking to increase its minority representation, but my face, well my face

offers only a minor challenge to homogenized spaces. I pass. Passing not only offers one a kind of physical and emotional safety (or perhaps a false sense of safety), it also allows one to access spaces which offer richer resources—housing, food, education, job opportunities. In Stotts, I recognized an extraordinary performance of passing. In my first memory of her story, Stotts used passing as a tool to secure marital rights and to gain entrance into places, like the capitol grounds, inhabited by only those with socially acceptable phenotypical markers. Stotts' ability to pass allowed her to transgress the rules of space: a black woman who did not read as black was speaking her opinion outside of a black neighborhood. In this early memory, Stotts' behavior stood as a model whereby a minority woman from East Austin might reimagine her role in society and herself name the terms of her future despite the realities of racial injustice. Of course, my first experience of the story was not grounded by a deep understanding of the early spatial practices of city of Austin, and so the scenario my memory created for Stotts largely remained free from the historical materialities that the “real” Lottie Stotts so determinedly countered.

Beyond my own understanding of how race works in Texas, I also brought to Stotts' story a deep love for the state and its myth, a love imprinted from birth. In *Branding Texas*, Leigh Clemons theorizes the myth of the Texas narrative—the heroic Wild West in which lone cowboys (never cowgirls) carved a young nation out of native territory with limited resources besides their trusty steeds and trustier guns. Clemons describes how this narrative works as a pedagogical force practiced upon the state's citizens:

This façade [the myth] allows Texans of a certain historical background (direct descendants of original settlers or revolutionary soldiers), ethnic heritage (primarily Anglo), or gender (primarily male) to engage with and profit from the pedagogical national narrative of the Texan and Texas' cultural heritage while consigning those outside of this narrative, for whatever reason, to outsider "tourist" status. (5)

Interestingly, over the course of my dissertation project in all the oral histories I gathered and read as well as in all the interviews I conducted, not one Texan—brown, black, white, queer, and/or straight—took exception to the mythic glory of the idea of Texas. While each person could easily identify the ways in which the state and even the city of Austin sought to reinforce the systems of privilege in place since its colonization, each person also identified as a proud Texan. What accounts for this embrace of the grandiose myth of Texas and the rejection of the forces that created that myth? Why would the very people the myth disenfranchises—the outsider tourist—so readily embrace the state with a sense of pride and awe?

Perhaps the answer lies in the very nature of the avant garde. Mike Sell and James Harding offer careful studies of the role of race, religion, war, and globalism in the development of avant garde art, including the overtly racist sentiments of Henri de Saint-Simon, who coined the very phrase "avant garde." Their scholarship seeks to complicate the historiography surrounding the role identity plays within the development of avant garde artistic practices, typically centered within Europe. In particular, their studies focus on how the avant garde explicitly creates a structure by which to question the flow of power within societies. Both Sell and Harding explicate the ways in which that

process created and creates art that was and is overtly racist, elitist, and homophobic as well as art that overtly challenged and challenges racism, homophobia, and classicism. Within their analysis, avant garde artistic practice directly dialogues with the formation of identity. They theorize this dialogue as sociological in nature and responding to specific productions of space, as opposed to corresponding with canonized genealogies of avant garde performance.

Following the logic of Harding and Sell, the mythic idea of Texas itself might stand as a kind of problematic avant guard narrative—independent and charismatic adventurers setting out into a wide “open” territory so as to create new systems of government and self-rule that overtly harness and reshape the forces of modernity in the Wild West. Perhaps the myth of Texas can produce citizens who not only embrace the vanguard energy of a Texan identity but then use that energy to challenge the systems that shore up the very institution of Texas. In this way, the myth of Texas can both produce the branding that Clemons describes as well as catalyze a radical rethinking of the space of Texas. My first memory of Stotts works in this fashion. In misremembering her story, I undoubtedly called upon my own distorted understandings of the state’s mythology. In my first memory, Lottie Stotts is grand and dramatic and bold, much how the state markets itself. She symbolizes a woman of color taking charge of her own life’s journey. Within this tangle of branding, naiveté, and memory, I bend Stotts to create a figure as radical and mythic as the grand narrative of Texas.

I focus upon my memory here, and my personal interaction with the space of Texas to point out the ways in which formations of knowledge and history determine how we recognize (or fail to recognize) avant garde performances. In *Ghosts of the Avant*

Garde, James Harding addresses the patterns of discourse that seemingly produce an invulnerable front within the study of avant garde performance. Namely, established discourses about the avant garde—especially etymological obsessions with the very origins of the word—lead to “questionable logocentrism” and the inevitable death of the movement (2). If one cannot think beyond the very construction of the term and how the formation of the term delimits the movement—centered in decidedly European and Western modalities—then the death of the movement is inevitable and avant garde performances that operate far away from the movement’s so-called “origins” can never be recognized. Harding instead calls for theorizing beyond established rhetoric about the movement by seeking out “instances of those moments of interruption that unsettle the seemingly established theoretical paradigms of avant-garde expression and open them to the pluralities of current and multiple significations” (22).

With my theorization of my first memory of Lottie Stotts, I exemplify the possible pluralities at play in the rethinking of the avant garde beyond traditional discursive forms, and I name the inherent subjectivity within my own research. Entering graduate school, I dismissed, shelved, and buried the story of Lottie Stotts because I could not find a way to think through my construction of her story. I dismissed her because I could not fluidly align her story with the great narrative of the avant garde. However, by theorizing the processes of myth building and branding alive within my own memory of Stotts, I began to understand that reconceptualizing the avant garde involves not only rethinking the local spatial practices associated with avant garde performance, but also rethinking the way memory and culture code historiographers’ ability to interact with and interpret that performance.

The Formation of Lottie Stotts in Archives, Public and Private

Much like coping with my own memory's failures, my attempts to locate Lottie Stotts within the material archive also led to frustrating and seemingly unproductive encounters. While oral histories of Stotts, even those that are misremembered, create a more linear narrative for her life, the city's archive itself holds only a smattering of newspaper articles, arrest records, and church records upon which the oral history of Stotts is built. My multiple attempts to engage with Stotts' archival record exemplify the ways in which the archival process itself shapes what we come to know. In *Archive Stories*, Antoinette Burton points out that "rematerializing history" is not a matter of simply reconsidering the narratives within history but also considering the contingencies that shape that writing. In particular, Burton argues that this reconsideration must include "interrogating how archive logics work, what subjects they produce, and which they silence in specific historical and cultural contexts" (9). Lottie Stotts' archival record serves as an example of how counter-histories live within the archive, but are often silenced by the very structures that support the development of the institution. In the end, locating Lottie Stotts' archival record was a matter of employing the skills of Riles and Camacho, researchers who understood the intersection of the archive and the production of space within Austin, particularly that of East Austin.

My First Attempt to Locate Lottie within the Archive

My first attempt to find Lottie Stotts at the Austin History Center archives exemplifies the ways in which systems of knowledge formation often fail to recognize those who exist outside of hegemonic power structures. Having been fascinated by my mis-remembrance Stotts for any number of years, I contacted Riles again in the fall of

2009 in order to learn more about Stotts. At that point, Riles was no longer living in Austin.⁴ As a first step in investigating Stotts, she suggested that I visit the Austin History Center where she and Danny Camacho had created a file that focused upon Lottie Stotts; she also suggested that I spend time with microfilm from the 1880s to familiarize myself with how the papers wrote about prostitutes and people of color during that period. Finally, Riles encouraged me to contact Danny Camacho, who I had yet to meet (Riles).

Riles's insights immediately proved prophetic upon my first visit to the History Center: Stotts did not live easily within its systems. Riles was correct in assuming that her and Camacho's research into Stotts had not made it into the system that disciplined researchers' general exploration of the archive. While "prostitution" or "1880s" are subtopics within the History Center's research guides, "Lottie Stotts" does not easily fall into line within an archive with an express intent to "preserve information about local governments, businesses, residents, and neighborhoods so that generations to come will have access to our history" (Austin Public Library). Clearly, records of Stotts existed within this call to "preserve information," but within the dictates of the early recorded history of Austin, Lottie Stotts' social status as a black woman of ill-repute made her remarkable only in instances when her body moved beyond the systems intended to regulate such a citizen, as in the case of her arrest records. Stotts did not fall in line with the rules of local governments, businesses, and neighborhoods; thus, locating a complete picture of Stotts in an archive organized around such rules proved challenging. Instead, Stotts' very archival record operated more like the collages and assemblages so popular with avant garde artists.

In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida questions the inherent rift between the monumentalizing power of the archive and the silenced narratives contained within a “single” history: “The technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future” (17). While the Austin History Center exists to monumentalize and preserve “our” history, its sense of existence is based upon records that could not account for the intersection between class, gender, and race that marked Lottie’s life. Lottie is not easily “archivable content.” Though the History Center’s archivable content contains copious amounts of information on black life in early Austin, accounting for a black prostitute who read as white moves beyond the scope of the library’s organizational system. In her study of intragroup differences as they related to violence against women, Kimberlee Crenshaw remarks, “Because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both [author’s emphasis]” (124). Crenshaw’s late twentieth century analysis of intersectionality aptly frames part of the problem in researching Stotts within the archive: she is a woman of color. Moreover, Stotts’ chosen profession and the nature of segregation in Texas further complicate locating and interpreting material.

That fall, in my first visit to the Austin History Center, my attempt to locate Stotts proved less than fruitful. Using a guide that listed names frequently noted in newspapers in the 1800s, I found mentions of Lottie Stotts and her daughters, Ida and Sallie. According to the *Daily Democratic Statesman*, in 1880 Sallie Stotts was arrested for robbery (“Robbery”). In 1882, Ida was arrested for disorderly conduct and prostitution (“Disorderly Conduct”; “Prostitution”). In terms of Lottie Stotts herself, I located seven

articles from 1880-1882 with illustrious titles like “Nuisances,” “Disorderly Conduct,” and “Crime and Criminals.” The articles generally involve discussions of Stotts’ court fines and are marked with colorful phrases describing her behavior, like “general cussedness” or “set up a howl” (“Disorderly Conduct” June 17, 1882; “Disorderly Conduct” June 18, 1882). A June first article from 1882 gives not only a description of Lottie’s behavior but also her appearance: “Lottie Stotts, whose reputation for general cussedness is as black as her dark complected skin, is in jail again. She got on a drunk yesterday and kicked up a raucous, for which the police took her in” (“Disorderly Conduct”).

These were the only records I found of Lottie Stotts in my first archival research attempt. They indicate any number of problematics related to an archival research process intent upon unearthing a little-known avant garde figure who was also a member of a subaltern population. First and foremost, as a researcher with little archival experience, I did not yet understand how to move beyond the rhetorical guideposts of the archive itself in order to locate Stotts in places that researchers like Camacho and Riles, more familiar with Austin’s production of space in the 1800s, might find resources. Next, there was little or no context given around Stotts’ behavior in these short articles. How could I possibly understand her public disturbances as political, more or less avant garde, in nature? Finally, one article describes Stotts as “black complected,” a direct contradiction to Riles’s and Camacho’s stories. If the archive itself failed to yield a Stotts even remotely familiar to the first oral history I heard, how could I proceed with an analysis of Lottie Stotts as a performative figure intentionally acting to challenge the forces of modernization in Texas?

The Archive, Again

In my next attempt to engage with archival material related to Lottie Stotts, I not only stumbled upon rich records by gaining access to Danny Camacho's own archive, kept within files at his home, but I began to understand how Lottie Stotts rises to the surface of emergence within the archive because of the very ways in which she disturbed typical patterns of spatial practice in late nineteenth-century Austin.

I stepped away from researching Lottie Stotts for several months, and then finally contacted Danny Camacho when I could no longer accept the dead-end I had reached. In a series of phone conversations and emails, I explained that neither I nor the archivists at the Austin History Center could find his and Riles's file on Stotts. The archivists at the History Center believed that the file had never been fully processed, thereby making it inaccessible to library patrons, nor could the archivists locate where the unprocessed file was located. In effect, Riles and Camacho's research was lost. Though Riles continued to insist that the file was at the History Center, "the technical structure of the archiving archive" had rendered the files on Lottie Stotts untouchable through traditional research channels (Derrida 17). However, through email, Danny not only provided me with archival documents, he began to explain how and why he and Riles first became interested in Stotts.

Lottie Stotts—often remarked upon in relationship to her race, occupation, and marriage to a white man—appeared within seemingly random newspaper articles often enough to create a pattern of disturbance. Camacho and Riles detected this pattern because Lottie Stotts was an anomaly. Mentions of black prostitutes within local papers during the late 1800s were infrequent, to say the least, but Stotts was mentioned for

prostitution, brawling with men, public hullabaloo, and bathing in the nude in city creeks. Their interests peaked by this ruckus, Karen Riles and Danny Camacho began to look for Stotts in other kinds of records, like those related to marriage licenses and court documents. Like many subaltern research subjects, Stotts was officially archived via numerous court documents, housing records, and marriage records. From these disparate documents, Riles and Camacho began to piece together the image of woman of color who moved to Austin with her white husband. Initially, Austinites believed that she was white. She had several daughters and a son. When her husband was jailed, she virulently protested his arrest, and she raised hell during the subsequent court proceedings. She began to work as a prostitute, and because of this work and because of her fondness for drink, she was frequently arrested for unseemly behavior in downtown. Stotts also took care of the sick and the homeless. And in the late 1900s, she left Austin. In sum, these records gathered by Camacho and Riles signaled how Lottie moved through and interacted with the city: her housing, her family members, the streets she traveled, her interaction with religion, and even her interactions with neighbors (Riles). For Riles and Camacho, Lottie Stotts was a kind of pet archival research project. They then publicly shared her life's story through storytelling.

Awareness of Stotts as an anomaly, as well as their determination to find her in additional records, signals that Riles and Camacho had developed a sense of social practice related to the production of space in the 1880s. Importantly, this research does not only reflect a *past* production of space. Stotts was a history discovered lost in the present moment—a historical example of an audacious woman of color challenging the forces that structured modernity in the state of Texas. Lottie Stotts is a kind of character

almost wiped away from most historical records in Texas. As they conducted research, Camacho and Riles read the archive through the lens of the present, thus creating a dialectic between past and present formations of history. Derrida writes, “And the word and the notion of the archive seem at first, admittedly, to point toward the past, to refer to the signs of consigned memory, to recall faithfulness to tradition...As much as and more than a thing of the past, before such a thing, the archive should *call into question* the coming of the future [authors emphasis]” (33). While Derrida specifically ties his analysis of the archive’s futurity to Freudian psychoanalysis, his thinking frames the archive as a space susceptible to multiple constructions of time and memory, including those of the present and the future. The archive’s dialogue between past and present exemplifies the ways the narrative of Lottie Stotts arises from the past via channels of understanding developed more than a hundred years after she last appeared in Austin records.

Fortunately, Camacho understood that, if left solely to the Austin History Center, Stotts’ narrative might never dialogue with the present. As Camacho and Riles researched Lottie, Danny Camacho began to compile his own private file on Stotts, including verbatim manuscripts of any report related to her. In early 2010, Camacho shared with me not only the manuscripts of most of the available records he had located, but also the original location of each separate piece of documentation within the History Center.

In effect, Danny had taken it upon himself to become a depository for the history of East Austin. A 2010 *Austin American Statesman* article that features Danny Camacho’s work at the Austin History Center notes that for over twenty years Camacho

“dedicated himself to reading Austin History Center documents that piece together the story of Austin and Central Texas through ordinary events. The comings and goings found in birth and death certificates are supplemented by the in-betweens that record businesses opening and closing or even something as common as an arrest for disturbing the peace.” In the article, Camacho is asked to identify the biggest surprise he has located in the archive. Camacho’s response: “‘That we were here,’ he says softly. ‘We’ means Latinos, whose contributions are overlooked, ignored or outright misrepresented when the region’s history is told.” In describing his research methodology, the article explains that Camacho takes the information he locates and creates a story, especially for those “overlooked, ignored or outright misrepresented,” and then presents that information through stories to his own community (Garcia). Camacho’s fascination with birth and death certificates and business comings and goings signals an understanding that space within the city of Austin was and is produced not only according to popular narratives of the city’s history but by the everyday life practices of citizens who rarely make appearances in these popular narratives. This everyday includes how citizens utilize the city and its resources as they go about their daily lives. Traces of their paths are located in seemingly insignificant documents, like business records and marriage licenses. These everyday records become vital information when researching the lives of citizens that mainstream narratives frequently dismiss, as in the lives of women and people of color in the late 1800s.

Henri Lefebvre’s analysis of the production of space speaks to Camacho’s approach to archival research. Lefebvre argues that “a particular ‘theoretical practice’ produces a mental space...this mental space then becomes the locus of a ‘theoretical

practice' which is separated from social practice and which sets itself up as the axis, pivot or central reference point of Knowledge." Thus, a theory captures the life of the mind and not only lives separated from everyday life but becomes the primary filter of knowledge production. Lefebvre also explains the power behind controlling the production of theoretical practice: "The established 'culture' reaps a double benefit from this maneuver: in the first place, the impression is given that the truth is tolerated, or even promoted, by that 'culture'; secondly a multitude of small events occur within this mental space which can be exploited for useful or polemical ends" (6). Instead of accepting a narrative or "mental space" of Texas that forwards the idea of a state populated by free-willing cowboys ready to tame the west, Camacho's dedication to utilizing everyday records to supplement and challenge established cultural history perturbs the theoretical idea of the state. His approach to archival research tactically circumvents the ways in which the archive inadvertently tolerates and promotes homogeneous notions of the state's history.

In the case of the records he shared about Stotts' life, Danny Camacho included some newspaper articles that portrayed Lottie Stotts as expected. An *Austin Daily Statesman* article from 1884, entitled "A Female Fiend" described Stotts as a "lioness thirsting for gore." The sensational account of Stotts' history in Austin and her bout of outrageous behavior not only mentions the jailing of Stotts' husband in Huntsville (a small town 150 miles northeast of Austin), but it ends with a description of Lottie Stotts' attack on one of her jailers with a reference to *Hamlet*: "Maybe Francois' place at Huntsville will yet be occupied by his former wife—a consummation devoutly to be wished." The article goes to great lengths to describe Stotts' violent behavior against

both white and Mexican residents as she resisted arrest. However, even as the article theatricalizes Stotts' actions with terms like "outcries and racket," her "savage stroke" to an officer's head, her "horrible imprecations and curses," the article never mentions Stotts' own race or that her husband who was unlawfully jailed for marrying Lottie Stotts, or rather prosecuted for miscegeny (Camacho "A Female Fiend"). The article, though, does state that Stotts and Francois were no longer married but does so without explaining the state's role in that split. Only by studying an *Austin Daily Statesman* article from five years earlier entitled "District Court" does the role of race in Lottie Stotts and Emile Francois's split become apparent. This article details the court proceedings during Francois's trial for marrying Lottie Stotts, a woman of color: "The devoted wife of Francois was present during the trial, and when the jury pronounced the verdict, she fell upon his shoulder, and wept forth streams of love, and made more noise than a colored camp meeting. Francois will appeal, if for nothing else than to encourage his darling to love him... In the colored marriage code confinement in the penitentiary is accepted as a decree of divorce" (Camacho "Emil and Lottie").

By cross-referencing newspaper articles from different years, a more complex picture of Lottie Stotts begins to take shape. In a District Court report from 1879, she is no fiend but a devoted wife and an emotionally expressive black woman. As in the 1884, the 1879 article utilizes almost absurdly vivid and racially-charged imagery, including phrases like "more noise than a colored camp meeting." However this 1879 article does not portray Stotts as a fiend or a lioness. The shift in the portrayals of Lottie Stotts from the 1879 District Court report to the 1884 "Female Fiend" begs any number of questions. What happened in Stotts' life between 1879 and 1884? And how does a consideration of

Lottie Stotts' shifting spatial practices allow for a theorization of Stotts as an avant garde figure?

While Danny Camacho's emails included the spectacular "Female Fiend," he also collected everyday information about Stotts' life. These documents include information from sources like The Austin City Directory; the City of Austin, Marriage Book; and Records of Arrest (Camacho "Emil and Lottie"; Camacho "Insane Black Woman"; Camacho "Lottie Stotts"). In one email Danny Camacho wrote to me, "In looking back one can see that there were limited options within which all these people moved and function. Facts of gender, age, physical appearance, education, wealth, skills, family connections, time period and just plain luck; when taken together makes the idea of 'free will' laughable" (Camacho "Lottie Stotts").

Camacho's analysis of the social structures impacting "free will" and spatial practices points to how documents like the City Directory or the Marriage Book prove useful for unearthing contradictions within archival records. For instance, the City of Austin Marriage Book, regulated by the state, makes no mention of Stotts' race in her marriage decree from April of 1879. A mixed race marriage was almost unthinkable at the time, not to mention dangerous and "illegal." Thus at that time, authorities read Lottie Stotts as white. Yet by July 11th of that same year in the article "State v. Emile Francois," the *Austin Daily Statesman* reports that Emile was "charged with marrying a negress; convicted and punishment assessed at five years hard labor in the penitentiary" (Camacho "Emil and Lottie"). Because Camacho and Riles were aware of how race functioned within the spatial practice of late nineteenth century Austin, they sought out the record of Lottie Stotts' marriage and were able to infer that Stotts' skin color was

initially considered white. However when Lottie was revealed to be a “negress,” her marriage was promptly dissolved by the same state that had initially sanctioned it. Placing such quotidian records into conversation with one another reveals how Lottie Stotts and Emile Francois used her ability to pass in order to circumvent state law.

The archival records of Lottie Stotts require a researcher to not only move within the accepted pathways of an archive, but also to overtly move against them. The researcher must make bold with what Derrida calls “the commencement and the commandment” of the archive. The Austin History Center seeks to record the commencement of Texas history, its “physical, historical, and ontological principles,” but even as it does so, it reflects the commandments inherent in shaping that commencement, “where authority, social order are exercised” (1). Because researchers like Camacho and Riles understand spatial practice in Austin that moves beyond the ontology of the archive, they have learned to recognize within its principles homogenized notions of both Austin’s history and the social and political forces shaping that history.

Of course even with these additional archival resources related to Lottie Stotts, my first memory of her story still seemed somehow more complete, more rich in detail with the very life of Stotts, more closely an example of how the everyday drives avant garde performance. To explain the lacuna, I turn to yet another storytelling session with Camacho and Riles and also to the possibility of avant garde ghosts.

Lottie Stotts in Communal Memory

Even with the additional archival material, I still did not feel entirely confident in labeling Lottie Stotts as an example of an avant garde performer. I was uncomfortable with the disparities between the archive and how she existed within East Austin

storytelling. However, via a lengthy interview with Riles and Camacho, I began to become more comfortable theorizing the fragmented apparition that is Lottie Stotts when I began to understand how Riles's and Camacho's storytelling operated as a dialogue between culturally-specific past and present spatial practices.

What follows is a summation of a detailed story of Lottie Stotts told by Danny Camacho and Karen Riles in the summer of 2013. In voicing this story at an East Side library, Riles and Camacho worked together to describe Stotts. As a result, a kind of choral effect occurs within their oral history: their speech patterns affirm each other's thoughts and fill in each other's pauses. However at times, each separately spoke different pieces of Stotts' story. This historical choir of sorts lasted for quite a length of time. For these reasons, here I record this version of the narrative using two methods. First, direct quotations indicate moments when Camacho or Riles spoke individually and at length to make distinct points. Between these direct quotations, I summarize communal conversation to provide the interstitial text necessary for creating the larger narrative:

To understand Lottie,⁵ you have to know how the city of Austin was laid out. Take San Antonio, it's different. Camacho says, "There's a joke about San Antonio: The streets of San Antonio were laid out by two drunken Mexicans on a donkey, and the donkey was probably drunk too." Austin, though, was laid out in 1839 by Edwin Waller, the first mayor of Austin. Congress Avenue was designed to be a performative, processional avenue, a path to performance. Even during the era of segregation, Congress was a common area. You could commingle there. A lot of Lottie was public performance. She lived in Guy Town [an earlier

white Austin neighborhood known for its prostitutes], which was next to Mexico [an early, primarily Mexican neighborhood right next to Guy Town].

Camacho says, “Lottie, she was on the street. She was this very strong person. Notable. I’m sure a lot of people knew her by sight. Lottie! Don’t look the wrong way! I think she was conscious of this. One of the first things in her arrest record: they saw her as a drunken, mad woman. At first they thought she had escaped from the state hospital. On the streets, howling. She acted out in the street.”

Riles replies, “Oh she was terrible for acting out. Talk about performance. I think a lot of her stuff was performance.”

Danny says, “That’s how that society would see her, as a crazy woman. Because you could not do this...even in Guy Town. If you were a drunkard, or a woman or a prostitute, they did not get the notoriety that Lottie did. She took it to a whole new level of intensity. A lot of this has to do with this individual level of talent. And I think a part of this has to do with—she could not contain herself. She had to have an audience.”

Lottie was living, at least for a while, on the west side of town [near Clarksville, a freedman community]. Proof is in an arrest report involving her and two young girls and indecent exposure in Shoal Creek, probably bathing and such. She marries a Frenchman, Francois. Francois was a Union soldier and a mattress maker. He was probably from Louisiana. He moved to Texas when he was stationed there during Reconstruction. They get married in the African American Episcopal Church. Riles theorizes, “This is what got her started on her

trail of falling down in society, spiraling out of control, is when somebody told that she was married, that she was black and married to the Frenchman.”

Francois is arrested because of his marriage to Lottie. His defense attorney is Mr. Garland, whose wife helped set up schools on the East Side. Francois is convicted and sentenced to five years in prison in Huntsville, Texas. Because there is no federal law against miscegenation at the time, Francois, taking a moral stand, rejects a partial pardon offered by the governor of Texas. Instead, Mr. Garland charges the governor and the warden with illegally holding Francois a prisoner. A U.S. Marshall comes from Houston to free Francois from prison. The powers that be laugh off the U.S. Marshall, and Francois remains in prison.

There is no record of Lottie acting up before Francois goes to prison. Lottie is under social stress, and she acts out against it. Riles notes, “A person of mixed color, abandoned by her husband. Her and Francois have a child together. He goes to prison.”

So in the 1880s, Lottie begins to appear in the paper and in arrest records. She goes to San Antonio in the early 1890s and dies there. Riles mentions that before she left for San Antonio “her perception by the public was changing.” Building on this point, Camacho says, “There was a white woman living down by the railroad tracks and circumstances... She was dying. And Lottie took it upon herself to care for her. And the newspaper was asking for contributions for the care of this woman. And it was Lottie Stotts [to whom the newspaper was giving the money for the prostitute’s care]. Lottie Stotts used to fight other girls on the

streets, and now she's taking it upon herself to be Florence Nightingale." We all laugh.

Camacho says, "It's a Greek tragedy. What she went through are universal themes. Which is the one where she murders her children?" I answer, "*Medea*?" Camacho replies, "*Medea*, yes. It's this kind of epic quality to it. It's a character. We were struck in researching by just how explosive [she is]. Just to read the arrest record books: Lottie, Lottie, Lottie."

Riles chimes in, "It is really funny in documentation to see how she intersects history, the different parts of Austin history. There she is on the poor farm. There she is in jail. There she is in Guy Town. There she is in Mexico."

Danny Camacho concludes the conversation on Lottie with these thoughts: "And there she is a party to the governor being charged. She is just this larger than life kind of figure. And there are the holes you just don't know. What is this dynamo? On an epic scale?"

With their story, their spoken history and communal storytelling, Riles and Camacho take information—bits and pieces—gleaned from archival documents and begin to fill in the story of Lottie Stotts using their historical knowledge of the period as well as their personal understandings of how performance speaks to different spatial codes in Austin society.

When putting this story into conversation with the relationship between avant garde performance and the forces of modernity, Karen Riles and Danny Camacho's story of Lottie Stotts illuminates a kind of avant garde persona heretofore unconsidered by the field. However, to breathe life into this kind of analysis, one must consider not only

official records of Stotts' behavior but also the culturally specific mechanisms that shape this story of her. In particular with this most recent story, I want to attend to the ways in which this story places bits and pieces of archival record into conversation with Riles's and Camacho's knowledges of the production of space in Austin. Rather than Riles and Camacho adapting their own cultural practices to satisfy hegemonic understandings of Austin's history, they utilize their own research and their own spatial practices to adapt and theorize the remnants of a historical figure. In this version of her story, Stotts never resides in the space of East Austin, yet it is the very spatial practices of East Austin, those shaping Camacho's and Riles's navigations of the city, that give Lottie legibility as well encapsulate her behavior as performative and avant garde in nature.

Here Camacho and Riles create history in reverse. They attach Stotts to the historical traditions of East Austin via her race, her willingness to perturb white society, and their own local spatial practices. In doing so, Riles and Camacho primarily describe Stotts as a performer of color capable of utilizing theatrical tactics to comment upon the governance of her body by local systems of power. For example, in Stotts' story, Camacho and Riles consistently compare her behavior to the social norms of the 1880s, thereby defining Stotts in opposition to others. Phrases like "on the streets, howling," "don't look [at her] the wrong way," and "terrible for acting out" describe Stotts' behavior as well as allude to behavioral norms. Namely, a proper black woman of Lottie Stotts' era should be quiet, unassuming, and passive in her response to all social interactions.

While Stotts' outrageous behavior perhaps begs for comparison to those who moved along the street in more sedate manners at that time, Riles and Camacho's

descriptions also express their own contemporary spatial practices in Austin. To give meaning to Stotts' actions within written accounts, Riles and Camacho employ the ways they themselves understand bodies of color to move through Austin's different spaces. For instance, in his description of racial interaction on Congress Avenue in the 1880s, Camacho uses the word "co-mingle." While the archive labels the places Lottie visited, Camacho's description of Congress Avenue moves beyond official labels. His description notes the actual manner in which raced bodies moved: "Even during the era of segregation, Congress was a common area. You could commingle there." Camacho's language reveals social codes. With phrases like "even during the era of segregation," he brings to light that the streets of Austin ostensibly organize bodies differently within different time periods. Stotts could move down congress during segregation because Congress was coded as a multiracial space. "Could commingle" signals permission, tacitly clarifying that other spaces in the city did not allow for "common" interaction. Archival sources, however, do not mention such subtle details as they trace the movement of Lottie Stotts in Austin streets.

Rather, Camacho's own spatial practice structures the choreography of Stotts' movements in the story. In interviews, Camacho has described how he himself, as a young Latino in the 1950s, learned to avoid eye contact with white citizens as he walked through the city center.⁶ In parsing Stotts' movement, Camacho undoubtedly utilizes personal lessons learned seventy years after Stotts' time in Austin. Thus in this story, Lottie Stotts reflects the historical production of space in Austin as well as Karen Riles's and Danny Camacho's personal and contemporary spatial practices, the practices of a Latino man and a black woman who identify with the neighborhood of East Austin.

Through this act of interpolation, Lottie Stotts becomes intertwined with East Austin's history.

In linking this act of interpolation to avant garde performance, I turn again to Artaud's manifesto for avant garde performance. Artaud writes, "THE LANGUAGE OF THE STAGE: It is not a question of suppressing the spoken language, but of giving words approximately the importance they have in dreams" (94). Camacho's and Riles's description of Lottie Stotts works much like a dream. None of Stotts' own language remains, only opaque interpretations of her actions and behaviors. Unlike Artaud, who frequently borrowed from others (like the Balinese) the specificities that dotted his *mise en scene*, Riles and Camacho create a kind of ghosted *mise en scene* for Stotts using their own understanding of the materialities of Austin. Their knowledge of city streets, city policies, and typical behavioral patterns for black women living in Austin in the late 1800s combined with their own personal experience form the visual picture within this piece of performance.

Importantly, their history never seeks to stand in for the language of Lottie Stotts herself. Instead, through this process, they create an intertextual performance. Their story of Stotts is grounded in the literature of newspaper articles, but it also takes up what is cultural, personal, and quotidian. In this mash of archival resources and the local historians' first-hand knowledge of the neighborhood, Lottie Stotts' story picks up echoes of the past as well as realities of the present moment as Camacho and Riles together sculpt the narrative. Della Pollock's discussion of agency within performance, including performance within oral histories, illuminates the ways in which stories like that of Camacho and Riles indicate less the grammar of a singular discursive form and instead

exemplify a relational conversation about the multiple powers that construct discourse: “Displacing both narrowly idealistic (intentional) and deterministic models of act-agency with the affective, sensual, multi-voiced, and multiperspectival activity of discursive exchange, performance figures agency as embodied action as that which is generated in and as performance” (22).

In Riles’s and Camacho’s hands, Stotts is a phantasm. They ask her to perform beyond the parameters of dialogue or diary. Lottie Stotts is a persona, a response, and a passionate symbol but never a singular perspective. In Artaud’s “First Manifesto,” he calls for avant garde theatre that acts in just this fashion, with embodied action that mutates beyond sequential development grounded in written language: “And what the theater can still take over from speech are its possibilities for extension beyond words, for development in space, for dissociative and vibratory action upon the sensibility” (89). In many ways, Camacho and Riles’s Lottie Stotts is a manifestation of Artaud’s call to theatrical action. Upon suffering a great personal injustice fueled by the state’s disciplining of black females, Stotts takes to the street to enact her rage, to howl her displeasure, to use her voice and body to counter spatial practice. Lottie Stotts becomes “larger than life,” a “dynamo,” an “epic,” a “Medea.” She presents to Austin society a vibratory persona, disassociated from typical performances of black womanhood. She offends the sensibilities of Austin proper. However, to see her as such one must take into account how Camacho’s and Riles’s own spatial practices perform in tandem with the archival record of Lottie Stotts’ life and the production of space in late nineteenth century Austin.

Danny Camacho's and Karen Riles's descriptions of Stotts' performances illuminate the ways in which her antics were direct products of modernizing forces in Austin. Of course, some of these same forces operate on the historians' lives as well, and so their story of Lottie Stotts also stands as a kind of spatialized dialectic of modernity in Austin. The contradictions and conflicts at work in Lottie Stotts' story may seem far removed from the materialities creating Camacho's and Riles's own spatial practices. However, that distance is an illusion of time. Camacho and Riles can create a history of Stotts because they themselves recognize and at times practice "ingenious schemes"—similar to those of Stotts—in tactically negotiating the production of space in the city. The story of Lottie Stotts does exist *in* the history of Austin, but Camacho and Riles's history is very much a product *of* history and the forces that shape how history is noted and recorded.

In these two local historians' hands, the story of Lottie Stotts is an unstable moment. They pluck up Lottie Stotts from history, from stories crafted in newspaper articles written by those in charge of writing and erasing history, and they use the frame of their everyday life practices to give these bits and pieces new weight and new meaning. Undoubtedly different historians with different spatial practices would have never noticed Stotts in the archive or interpolated her behaviors in the fashion of Camacho and Riles. And undoubtedly some would say that an abundance of fiction mars any reading of Lottie Stotts, making her impossible to historicize and unlikely to stand as an example of an early avant garde performer in the style of Artaud. But to theorize the avant garde beyond its central frame of Europe or beyond U.S. cities like New York requires that scholars not only look for the avant garde within different spatial practices

but approach that looking with methodologies and cultural understandings that resonate with these different spatial practices.

In *The Ghosts of the Avant Garde*, James Harding issues a call for avant garde scholarship to move beyond a nostalgia for its own historiography:

I would suggest here that the call to avoid a debilitating nostalgia is ultimately a call for cultural historians not only to develop a more dynamic understanding of how the avant-gardes reconstitute themselves and evolve in new contexts but also to develop a more dynamic understanding of the ever-evolving cultural and political contexts to which avant-gardes respond. (160)

The story of Lottie Stotts represents not only a kind of avant garde figure rarely acknowledged within the current field of study, but this analysis of Stotts requires a kind of methodological approach that does not rely solely on the close readings of archival documents and theatrical texts via the field's canonical theories. Analysis must take into account culturally-specific productions of space which then place performances into productive and disruptive dialogue with more traditional notions of avant garde performance.

And Yet Still More Ghosts

By no means does this consideration of Juneteenth celebrations and Lottie Stotts speak to the entirety of the black community's avant garde art in East Austin. For example, black religious encampments, or what Karen Riles refers to as black chautauquas, might also produce a spatial practice in which avant garde performance might thrive. Moreover, I have selected the sites of study in this chapter based upon local

historian's intimate knowledge of the neighborhood. Undoubtedly, further research and the gathering of more local histories would reveal additional ghost vanguards.

This chapter, though, does exemplify the necessity of moving the field of avant garde performance beyond genealogical inheritance and a reliance on aesthetic analysis. Analyzing an avant garde performance via its response to local productions of space allows for the recognition of Lottie Stotts and Juneteenth celebrations as avant garde performance while simultaneously supporting a continued dialogue between late nineteenth century avant garde performance practices and the forces of modernity.

While Juneteenth celebrations and the public protests of Lottie Stotts signify the ways in which avant garde performance created a raucous dialogue between the past and the present and between differing city-wide spatial practices in late nineteenth-century Austin, the spatial practices and theatrical productions of the Brown Berets of East Austin, which I take up in the next chapter, utilize a different tact in expressing dissatisfaction with the ways in which bodies of color are policed by the city and state and even at times by their own neighbors.

¹ Though much of southern Texas was Catholic, the first churches in Austin were Protestant: Episcopalian, Baptist, and Presbyterian. In a city founded by the Spanish and Mexican, like San Antonio, most residents practiced Catholicism. Austin, however, was founded primarily by Anglos moving in from the southern parts of the U.S., giving rise to the popularity of Protestant churches in Austin. Practicing their own version of Protestantism, former slaves established churches all over East Austin. The tenets of some of these churches, especially the Baptist, included abstaining from all consumption of alcohol. Thus, the end-fighting about the shape of Juneteenth celebrations, including the consumption of alcohol, directly relates to differing religious practices within the black community in East Austin. A newspaper article in the *Austin Daily Statesman* from July 19, 1887, makes clear that both black and white community leaders visited both kinds of Juneteenth celebrations.

² Large parts of East Austin remained unpaved until the early 1980s.

³ For real, that's the name of the company: besomebody.com

⁴ At the time of my first attempt to locate Lottie, Karen Riles was living in Atlanta, Georgia. After receiving her contact email address from the Austin History Center (Ron Berry, Artistic Director of Fusebox Festival, reminded me that the Austin History Center first put him in touch with Karen), Karen and I renewed our acquaintance and once again began to discuss Lottie Stotts through phone conversations.

⁵ For this story, I refer to Stotts as “Lottie,” following how Riles and Camacho refer to her.

⁶ Later in this same interview, Danny Camacho went into detail about how he learned to discipline his body while in downtown by observing and then copying the behavior of black citizens. While Danny was quick to note that the treatment of black and Latino citizens in Austin has been built upon different prejudices and the resulting public policies, he also noted that Latinos were wise to take into consideration how black citizens behaved in the public sphere when considering the social choreographies of their own interactions with whites.

Vida Fuerte/Strong Life: The Avant Garde Performance Practice of the 1970s Austin Brown Berets

At that time there was a lot of police brutality. There was inequity in education. (It seems like we've gone full circle.) But we were pretty much in a police state. An anti-Mexican environment. A lot of backlash going on at that time. The whole integration of schools...people wanted the right to vote for who they wanted too. People of color were pretty much fed up with what was happening. We were pretty much at the height of the whole Chicano Movement...We were in a period of real enlightenment for our community and self-identifying and wanting self-determination in terms of what was going on.

---Susana Almanza, former *jefa* of the East Austin Brown Berets¹

While black performances of emancipation surfaced in Austin in the late 1800s, not until the 1970s did the Latino community in East Austin develop its own culturally-specific iteration of avant garde performance. Since 1950, the population of Latinos living in East Austin had steadily grown, and private businesses run by Latinos were thriving in East Austin. During this same period, the city began to invest in East Austin public spaces, like outdoor parks and amphitheaters, and community advocacy organizations helmed by people of color developed in East Austin. As the ideological structures and everyday life practices of East Austinites changed, so too did their representational spaces, allowing for the development of theatrical performances that operated beyond paratheatrical practices and individual protest. In the Latino community, these new theatrical practices not only included language, song, and movement particular to Latinos, theatrical practice also served as a means to contest the community's own construction of self-identity.

Working in concert with the tenets of the national Brown Beret Organization, in the 1970s the Brown Berets of East Austin sought to directly address city-sanctioned systemic violence against their community, inequities in Chicano education, a lack of acknowledgement of their indigenous roots, and a general lack of respect for their culture and their East Austin neighborhood.² In an effort to create dialogue around these inequities, the young Brown Berets of East Austin took action. They created organizational hierarchies and a centralized meeting space. They educated themselves on

subjects far and wide: from Marxism to techniques for operating non-profits. They put on uniforms, and they picked up guns. They painted murals. They wrote poems. They made theatre. In East Austin, the avant garde theatre of the Brown Berets built upon the tropes of *la carpa*, a form of traditional, working-class Mexican performance, to question and challenge political structures impacting the Latino community of East Austin. In doing so, the Berets not only contested city-wide policies, they critiqued the very cultural ideologies alive within the Latino community.

In this chapter, I argue that the *Teatro Chicano* of the East Austin Brown Berets represents an unconsidered, culturally-specific construction of avant garde performance particular to the United States. In the short play *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*, the Brown Berets adapted culturally-specific modes of performance, rooted in the Latino community, to confront and alter relational dynamics both within and without their own community. With this play, the Brown Berets were not seeking to initiate peaceful conversations brimming with productive dissonance between themselves, the city government, and their local community. Rather, I argue that the East Austin Brown Berets hoped to fire the righteous indignation of local Latinos—Chicanos and otherwise—against the governing bodies of the City of Austin. With their plays, the Brown Berets hoped to incite within the Latino community the same social insurrection and insubordination that their production of *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* portrayed on the stage. This righteous awakening was driven by a staunch set of beliefs regarding the production of space in East Austin: white school systems (and most white folks in general) were actively undermining Latino families; white city systems were actively working against Latino political and economic interests; and at times Latinos themselves

were also actively working against the Latino community. *Vida Fuerte* demonstrates that the advancement of Latino neighborhoods depended upon Latinos themselves recognizing these unjust and corrupt systems and also actively working to tear them down via participation in the Chicano Movement and in organizations like the East Austin Brown Berets.

An analysis of the development and performance of the Brown Berets' *teatro*, *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*, offers new understandings of the cultural politics that produce avant garde performance in the U.S. Moreover, a study of the spatial practices of the Latino communities in East Austin nuances the historiographic tradition of portraying avant garde performance as an intercultural "exchange" fueled by the inequitable policies of imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Rather, the creation and performance of *Vida Fuerte* offers an example of Chicanos tactically manipulating their own culturally-specific modes of theatre to create an *intracultural* exchange intended to critique the racist policies of governance organizing Latino life as well as the political apathy of Latinos living in East Austin. By carefully attending to the cultural and artistic mechanisms creating and controlling this intracultural exchange, a consideration of *Vida Fuerte* as avant garde performance not only illuminates the complexities alive within the play's political message but places this subaltern performance into conversation with the larger field of social logics examining where and how hegemonic systems of power are questioned.

Ostensibly, the Brown Berets and *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* more clearly link to traditional notions of the avant garde than other examples considered in this study of East Austin radical performance. Following the much-critiqued etymological analysis created

in part by Renato Poggioli,³ which portrays the avant garde as a kind of militaristic “literary or artistic advanced guard,” the militaristic Brown Berets’ levying of *teatros* in order to critique the ways in which U.S. and Texas policy shaped Latino lives ostensibly falls within the domain of Poggioli’s definition of the avant garde (7). However, beyond their uniforms and their guns, the Berets’ creation of avant garde performance has little to do with Poggioli’s theorization of a new iteration of the European Romantic movements. As noted in the introduction, more recent studies of the avant garde have called into question genealogical and etymological-based studies of avant garde performance for being too narrowly focused on Eurocentric understandings of the practice and too focused on creating clear genealogical pathways of growth across the movement. Instead, scholars like James M. Harding advocate for spatial considerations of the avant garde as a kind of “rough edge of contestation, struggle, and negotiation” (*Ghosts* 24). In the case of the Brown Berets’ *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*, this rough edge of contestation marks not only the unrest between the Latino culture and the primarily white Anglo culture that governed Austin at the time, but *Vida Fuerte* also marks the edges of contestation within the Latino community itself. Like in the short plays of the early European avant garde, the impact of the play lives not only in the text but in the dialectic between the text and the everyday reality surrounding it.

Beyond a historiographic approach to the study of the avant garde, this chapter also examines at length *how* scholarship accesses and makes meaning of avant garde performances that live within these “rough edges.” As much attention is given to the process of studying *Vida Fuerte* as I give to the short play itself. This chapter seeks to explore not only where an avant garde performance is located and how it compares to

already recognized works, but the chapter also theorizes the very mechanisms by which these performances are brought into the field's larger discourses. To no small extent, my methodological approach, including ethnographic practices and art-making (which I detail later), were determined by the Brown Berets themselves. In translation from Spanish to English, the phrase *vida fuerte* means strong life. For the Brown Berets of East Austin, *vida fuerte* operates not just as a metaphor but a life practice. *Vida fuerte* speaks to East Austin Chicanos not only studying and promoting their cultural history but also actively preventing those traditions from being wiped away by economic, governmental, and social forces. *Vida fuerte* includes considerations of the symbols, ideologies, and everyday life practices organizing life for Chicanos in East Austin. Thus, *vida fuerte* is not simply a metaphor but a spatial practice particular to East Austin. Until I could to speak of *vida fuerte* in terms of the community's hyper-local production of space, my research for this chapter did not progress. For years, it did not progress. Accordingly, this study of *Vida Fuerte* and *vida fuerte* at times reads like a personal journal focused on research methodologies. But to parse the materialities alive within the rough edges of the Brown Berets' avant garde performance traditions, I first learned to engage this community through labor that moved well-beyond the research methodologies more commonly associated with studies of avant garde performance. While this chapter does include archival research and textual analysis in its examination of the Brown Berets and *Vida Fuerte*, other methodological approaches include participatory community engagement and my own creation of art that commented upon the history of East Austin. Contemporary studies of the avant garde challenge scholars to rethink where and how the avant garde develops. In order to meet this challenge,

however, scholars must also rethink where and how their own research methodologies develop. To present a close-reading of *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* might illuminate an overlooked avant garde performance, but that approach would not offer insight into why so many culturally-specific performances are overlooked by the current field of study.

The organization of this chapter follows a more circuitous path than that of the other chapters, and in many ways, its circuitous nature reflects my own scholarly journey and the development of my relationship with the Brown Berets. To place my study of the Brown Berets into conversation with not only avant garde performance studies but with culturally-specific histories, the chapter opens with a consideration of broader studies of Latino life in Austin and Texas as well as a discussion of literature that addresses the history of the Brown Berets in Texas. This history provides a frame for understanding the complexities shaping the detailed discussion of the research methodology that follows. The challenges of researching the East Austin Brown Berets in many ways directly speak to these tensions within the complexities of Latino racial formation in East Austin. Following this developed discussion of methodology, I engage in a close reading of *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*. This close reading opens not with the text itself but with a close-reading of personal narratives that overtly shaped the text. These life experiences capture the inner-workings of the production of space in East Austin to which *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* directly responds. The final moments of the chapter include a more traditional close-reading of the play and thoughts about the continued practice of *vida fuerte* in East Austin.

Conceptions of Chicano Identity in the U.S.

Currently, beyond this study, little scholarship exists addressing the use of *Teatro Chicano* by the Brown Berets. Nor does there exist a broad analysis of the Brown Berets

of East Austin, Texas. Fortunately, a few histories do mention the practice of *Teatro Chicano* in East Austin. *Teatro Chicano* de Austin, as an organization solely focused on this culturally-specific style, is briefly mentioned in several articles that detail a genealogical study of *Teatro Chicano*. In *Theatre Survey*, Jorge Huerta offers a broad study of Chicano theatre in the 1960s. Primarily a history of Teatro Campesino, Huerta does note that several *Teatro Chicanos* in Texas formed in response to the impact of Teatro Campesino. Huerte explains that in 1969, El Teatro de Austin, composed of college and university students, created *actos* that dramatized “issues of police brutality, the need for bilingual education, and the importance of voter-registration drives” (31).⁴ Other than Huerta’s short history, mentions of *Teatro Chicano* in Austin are included in unpublished dissertations.

Though scholarly studies have not fully explored the relationship between *Teatro Chicano* and the Brown Berets, a rich body of scholarship does exist surrounding the general history of the Brown Berets. Much of the academic writing involving the Brown Berets falls into the fields of U.S. history, American Studies, or Chicana/o History, a large portion of which occurs within the 1970s.

Often in the 1970s, as ethnic studies programs in universities began to burgeon, the Brown Berets were presented in scholarship as an example of “ethnic polarization.” For example, Bilinia Ambrecht and Harry Pachon take up the Berets’ articulation of “ethnic political goals” (507). In an effort to point out the “lacunae” of scholarship focused on Latinos within the wider system of ethnic studies, Ambrecht and Pachon’s examination places the Berets into patterns of ethnic mobilization occurring throughout the U.S. during that time. To model the “lacunae” in the field, they draw comparisons

between the Berets' work and that of the Black Power Movement, particularly the Black Panthers. Their argument focuses on how the field of ethnic studies differently responds to the two social movements. Like many studies of the Berets during the 1970s, Ambrecht and Pachon's work addresses the history of the organization while also offering a critique of the academy's structuring of ethnic studies.

After the 1970s, scholarship began to place the Berets within larger systemic patterns in the U.S.: patterns within Latino life across the United States and patterns within social justice struggles across the U.S. In her 1985 article "Isolation and Stigmatization in the Development of an Underclass," Joan Moore considers the intersection of race and class in the development of Chicano youth gangs. In this study, Moore describes the Brown Berets as another kind of youth gang developing within the underclass, "as a sort of fighting branch of the Chicano movement" (7). Moore presents the Berets as one of a number of youth gangs responding to economic conditions in their neighborhoods.

In the twenty-first century, many academics reconsidered the relationship between the Brown Berets and cultures of violence. For example, in 2008 Arturo Aldama's theorization of violence on the border and the struggle for Latino subjectivity explicitly connects aggressive police violence against the Brown Berets to a lengthy pattern of dangerous racist practices along the border with Mexico. In a timeline, Aldama denotes a "hegemonic pattern of demonization" within historical portrayals of Chicana/o youth, including portrayals of the Berets (47). Also with a focus on youth culture, scholar Ernesto Chavez digs into how gender politics informed dynamics within the Berets. His examination considers how the Berets represent a specific kind of "Chicano nationalism"

that “proliferated a highly masculinized view of what it meant to be a Chicano” (206). Though Moore, Aldama, and Chavez each focus upon a different aspect of the Brown Berets, as a whole their scholarship seeks to incorporate the Berets into larger conversations about cultural equity in the United States.

In terms of analyses of the Brown Berets that are particular to Texas, David Montejano authored two book-length studies of the Chicano Movement in San Antonio, occasionally mentioning the Austin chapter of the Brown Berets in the process. While *Quixote's Soldiers* presents a history of the broad landscape of the Chicano Movement in South Texas, which includes the Brown Berets, *Sancho's Journal* singularly focuses upon the San Antonio chapter of the Berets. An ethnography written from the perspective of a “participant-observer,” *Sancho's Journal* reads like a study that is part journal and part memoir. Montejano builds the book on notes he took from 1974-1975 when he was “hanging out” with a dozen or so Brown Berets in San Antonio; however, he does not publish research specifically focusing on this chapter of the Brown Berets until 2012. Montejano describes the book as “an intellectual autobiography” that he collated together over three decades of study (ix). With *Sancho's Journal*, Montejano questions how one reaches political consciousness and then how that very process impacts one's behavior. In doing so, Montejano positions the birth of the Brown Berets' political consciousness squarely within the timeline of the organization: “Within this network, they [Brown Berets] learned to discuss politics, participated in local action, and acquired a civic reputation. The young men began to learn how the larger society beyond their barrio was constructed” (8). For Montejano, the beginning of members' political consciousness was marked by entrance into the Berets. In this chapter, I discuss in detail

the Austin Brown Berets' impassioned critique of Montejano's study. However within the academy, Montejano's work most readily offers a detailed account of the Brown Berets in Texas.

Taken together, these differing accounts of Latino life and history in the U.S. provide insight into how Latino identities and Latino politics take shape in response to political, social, and economic pressures. However, a further investigation of Latino life and history that is particular to Austin not only expands the historical record but surfaces the ways in which *Vida Fuerte* acts as both a critique of Austin history and the East Austin Latino community at-large.

Vida Fuerte as a Response to Latino Racial Formation in Austin

In order to understand *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* as a piece of radical theatre with an overt political message for both wider Austin and the Latino community, the play must be placed into dialogue with the material conditions that shaped Latino life in Austin over the course of the city's history. While this community's growth reflects histories that include imperialism and nation-building, the development of the Latino community in East Austin is also a response to a production of Latino space unique to that neighborhood. To understand *Vida Fuerte* within its local context, requires a consideration of how the Latino community developed in Austin—a development quite unlike that of much of the rest of the state.

As I began my research into the Brown Berets' use of *Teatro Chicano*, the different Latino community members I encountered quickly made it known to me that East Austin was populated by a diversity of Latino identities. As I will discuss later in the chapter, even my own use of the word "Latino" at times proved problematic as I

worked in the community. To date, identity markers like Tejano, Latin, Latino, Mexican or *Mexicano*, and Mexican-American remain within colloquial language circulation in Austin, as does Chicana/o. For the purpose of this study, I use Latino as a general term referring to people of Mexican and Spanish descent living in the United States. In the case of individual Latinos who self-identify using other terms, I will refer to their race and culture in terms of the language those individuals use to describe themselves.

Understanding how and why Latinos in East Austin self-identify requires knowledge of the differing everyday life practices and histories of Latinos living in East Austin. Consideration of how identity markers speak to everyday realities helps to flush out the connection between the development of avant garde performance by the East Austin Brown Berets and the play's exploration of Latino life in East Austin. Thus, illuminating patterns in self-identification makes more visible the critique of Latino politics in East Austin levied by *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*.

The Formation of Latino Identity in Austin

The spatial practices of Latinos in Austin developed within a governmental system that consistently portrayed Latinos as a singular group of outsiders within a city founded upon Anglo values, despite the multiple histories and self-identities of Latinos in Austin. Latino history in East Austin encompasses multiple waves of Latino migration to Austin, numerous religious practices, and the development of different economic and educational realities. The multiple identities of Latinos living in Austin grow from differing intersections of race, economy, settlement, and nationhood spread across roughly 175 years. However, not until the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, did the practice of self-identification and self-definition become a self-regulated life practice for

many Latinos living in East Austin. This process of self-definition and self-regulation helped give rise to the formation of the Brown Berets of East Austin, and unquestionably the Berets' fight for self-determination fueled the organization's spatial practice and its related artistic practice.

Prior to the Chicano Movement and the work of organizations like the Brown Berets, Latino identity in Austin was systemically regulated by Austin's government. A large body of histories focused on Latino life in earliest Austin does not exist, but historians David Humphrey and William Crawford offer small glimpses into Latino life in early Austin. According to Humphrey and Crawford, while parts of the state of Texas experienced a longer history of settlement by Latinos of Spanish and Mexican descent, Austin did not have a stable population of Latinos until well into the nineteenth century. While the population of Latinos in Texas grew along the coast and in southern portions of the territory, in 1839 Austin was still very much a frontier town, boasting a total of two streets. In fact, when the capital of the Republic of Texas was established, Austin's geographical location was explicitly selected to thwart any northward expansion of the Mexican government into Texas as well as carve into a part of Native territory, particularly that of the Comanche. The city's location was appealing to Republic of Texas leaders exactly because of its confrontational position.

Early in the city's history, its residents, primarily Anglo, were wary of roaming even a few miles from the settlement for fear of attack by the Comanche or by agents of the Mexican government (Humphrey and Crawford 23-26; Humphrey 1-8). Despite Mexican defeat at the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836 and the signing of the Treaties of Velasco, Mexico never recognized the Republic of Texas and hostile relations between

the governments of the Republic of Texas and Mexico persisted until after Texas was annexed by the United States in 1845.⁵ Unlike in coastal and southern parts of Texas, Latinos in Austin were consistently seen by white settlers as potential enemies as opposed to potential comrade-in-arms in the war against Mexico. Moreover, whereas numerous iterations of *mestizo* identity organized *Mexicanos* in relationship to their Spanish descent in south Texas, the Anglos who founded Austin did not view *Mexicanos* as *indios* (especially in comparison to local native peoples like the Comanche), nor did a system of *mestizo* identity ever develop within early Austin (Humphrey and Crawford 31).

In Austin, according to Humphrey and Crawford, the next shift in Latino identity developed at the end of the Mexican-American War. Although the Mexican-American War effectively forced all Latinos in Texas into U.S. citizenship, Anglo Austinites continued to view local Latinos as a threat. However rather than a perceived threat to Texas's political sovereignty, Latinos in Austin were viewed as a threat to the city's economy. Though Austin experienced a building boom in the 1850s, in which its population grew to a whopping 3,000 (not including slaves), residents of the city remained highly suspicious of Latinos. Not only had Mexico threatened the city's welfare only a few years prior, but as the state's slave population grew, many slave owners feared that their property would run away to Mexico. In Texas, slaves regularly fled to Mexico to the freedom promised upon crossing the Rio Grande. Slave owners in Austin blamed the city's small Latino population, numbering less than 100 at that time, for encouraging insubordination in slaves and facilitating escapes. By 1854, the city's mayor not only advocated for removing all "dangerous privileges" enjoyed by slaves in

Austin, but he also advocated for expelling the city's Latinos. Though some Latinos remained in Austin for the rest of the decade despite such prejudice and racism, the overall population dwindled, and those that remained were continually treated with suspicion (Humphrey and Crawford 50-52). Not until after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, did Latino life in Austin see a population shift, along with which came a change in social status.

In interviews, Danny Camacho and Karen Riles offered similar accounts to that of Humphrey's and Crawford's of Latino life in the early twentieth century. Prior to 1900, Latinos accounted for only two percent of Austin's population; however by 1930, as many Mexicans fled the revolutionary turmoil of Mexico, the Latino population in Austin grew to ten percent.⁶ Through most of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the majority of Latinos in Austin lived on the southeast edge of downtown in the "Mexico" neighborhood, full of cheap rental property. Similar to poorer Anglo neighborhoods and freedmen communities, "Mexico" received few city services and the living conditions were crowded. However after the Revolution, as the businesses of Latinos grew and the community had more liquid income with which to buy property, the majority of the population of Latinos resettled in East Austin, where land prices were much cheaper because of the area's lack of city services and its close proximity to black neighbors (Humphrey and Crawford 178-181; Camacho and Riles). With this shift eastward, the Latino community began to establish its own businesses, churches, and schools.

Historian Jason McDonald, whose *Racial Dynamics in Early Twentieth-Century Austin, Texas* delves into the dynamics between race and modernity in the city, notes that

the expansion in the population of Latinos in Austin was welcomed because of the increased agricultural and industrial production in the area. However, contributions to the labor pool by Latinos did not result in an improved social status within the city: “...local whites were generally unwilling to perform tasks that they associated with lower caste groups [Mexicans and blacks]” (22-23). McDonald goes on to explain that though Latinos and blacks were both seen as “lower caste,” they occupied different social statuses in the city. Latinos moved about the city more freely than did blacks, and the growing body of Jim Crow laws were not overtly applied to the Latino community.

McDonald specifically marks the years around World War I as a shifting point in the development of racial identities for Latinos in Austin. During this period, newspaper editorials reveal that Latinos had become a somewhat more accepted part of the local scene for white Austinites. However, acceptance hinged upon when Latinos had arrived in Austin. Though still seen as citizens of a lower caste, white Austinites differentiated between “Tejanos” and more recent immigrants from Mexico. Tejanos were portrayed as an “integral part of the state’s population” while immigrants were seen as “dirty, un-Christian [i.e. Catholic], unruly, violent, and unassimilable” (47). In interviews, Danny Camacho confirmed this pattern. Camacho’s family, which arrived in Austin in the late 1800s, was much more readily accepted across the city than neighbors who had recently arrived from Mexico. His family spoke English and Spanish, operated their own businesses, lived in less Mexican-styled homes, and were educated within the Texas school system. Thus, Camacho’s family held a higher social status than that of recent migrants (Camacho 2015). Though written roughly 50 years later, *Vida Fuerte Goes to*

School grapples with tensions surrounding Latino self-identity in Austin that were established in the early twentieth century.

Early local census offers only a surface understanding of this processes that led to differing self-identities within the Latino community. Prior to 1930, Latinos in Austin were categorized as “native white” or “foreign-born white.” After 1930, Austin’s Latino population was assigned the “other races” category, officially racializing Latinos for the first time. Though no laws explicitly sanctioned the separation of whites and Latinos, throughout the 1920s and 1930s the developing racialization of Latinos in Austin led to a system of de facto segregation. Latinos were not allowed use of the state-run asylum or other local health facilities. Latinos were not allowed in downtown theatres, restaurants, cemeteries, public parks, or hotels (McDonald 71-76). As a result of this de facto process, Latinos developed their own system of restaurants, entertainment, healthcare, and religious practice that centered in East Austin. To no small extent, the Brown Berets of East Austin explicitly worked to surface these long-standing, de facto practices of disciplining Latino bodies within the city. However, by no means did the ideologies and practices of the East Austin Brown Berets categorically fall in line with those of other Texas Brown Beret chapters.

The Chicano Movement in Austin

Scholar David Montejano, a sociologist and historian, describes the Chicano Movement in south Texas (in which he includes Austin) as a series of social movements intended to de-ghettoize the barrio and attain greater social justice for Latinos trapped in inequitable systems of education, economy, and governance. Moreover, the movement emphasized the indigenous identity of Latinos living in the Southwest. The Chicano

Movement sought to directly challenge the leadership and policies of both Anglo Texans and assimilated “Mexican Americans,” whom the Berets understood as willing participants in such policies. On a nationwide level, the Chicano Movement was spurred on by the activism of the United Farmworkers Movement and the leadership of César Chávez (*Quixote’s Soldiers* 1-7). While the broader Chicano Movement often labeled this ethnic identity as “mestizo,” a person of both indigenous and Spanish descent who was usually working-class, in my research I found that in Austin not all members of the Chicano Movement identified as “mestizo.” Many could name the exact native tribes to which their families belonged and so used those cultures as markers of ethnic identity.

According to Montejano, the Brown Berets formed as a kind of “community defense group” wing of the Chicano Movement. The Berets focused on upholding and protecting everyday life practices within the barrio, as opposed to “the missions or details of building a political party.” In south Texas, the Berets particularly focused on local issues like police brutality, community drug abuse, and unsafe working conditions (*Quixote’s Soldiers* 173). These “community guards” operated under an organized system of rules, or manifestos, that mandated compulsory attendance at meetings, dress codes, daily communication requirements, prohibitions against alcohol and drugs, and mutual respect (178). While later in the chapter I provide specific detail as to how the Austin chapter of the Brown Berets was born and how it operated in the community, the organization followed the lead of other south Texas Beret organizations: promoting political activism that directly responded to the hyper-local needs of the neighborhood.

Importantly, Austin’s local causes were somewhat different from those of other south Texas Beret organizations. The entanglement of frontier settlement, war with

Mexico, and a perceived threat to the city's economy placed Latinos in Austin within a social and political dynamic completely different than that of the city's other primary populations, Anglo settlers and black slaves. The growth in Latino population after World War further nuanced Latino identity in the city through the creation of insider/outsider statuses among Latinos themselves. Thus, understanding the political machinations within a text like *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* relies upon not simply a broad understanding of Chicano politics in the 1970s, but a nuanced consideration of the differing formations of Latino identity in Austin since the early 1800s. As a researcher, understanding the intricacies of these histories and identity formations not only builds a historical framework for close-reading *Vida Fuerte*, but this complex framework also helps illuminate how my own research methodology developed.

A Research Methodology as a Spatial Practice

In her study of her own ethnographic processes, Elaine Lawless argues, “A reflexive stance should illuminate the biases and preconceptions that inform our interpretations (where we are) and move us forward, then, in the direction of collectivity in interpretation and a new authentication of a multivocal kind of ethnography, which includes, as well where *others* are, but which does not privilege one interpretation over another” (302). Here Lawless points to the ways in which ethnography potentially grows not just from a singular perspective or a singular voice but from a position that is “multivocal.” Lawless relates the “multivocal” to variances within the production of space. Namely, the biases and perspectives shaping the ethnographic process are not simply “academic” and “non-academic,” but instead, they develop in relationship to spatial practices. Interpretation is itself a production of space—influenced by the ideologies, symbols, and systems producing and governing a site of study. In the case of

Lawless's own work, she discusses how an ethnographic process might reverberate with the ideas and opinions of all those involved. Like scholar Yutian Wong, whose work I draw upon in my study of the Rude Mechs, Lawless approaches ethnography as a narrative overtly structured by forms of discourse that move beyond the writer's control and in response to the writer's presence. Lawless's practice, however, explicitly elicits communal conversation and critique about her own insights with the very people she is studying.

In the case of this chapter, I work to reflexively note how my ethnographic process is directly reflective of multivocal systems of knowledge production. These systems include the Austin History Center Archive, former members of the Brown Berets, Fusebox Festival, thinkEAST, PODER (People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources), and even the most recent City Council elections. Unlike Lawless's project, my access to the history of the Brown Berets did not occur through a steady study of the practices and histories associated with their day-to-day life, but rather this chapter developed in a series of fits and starts catalyzed by unexpected agents, each operating within East Austin. Thus in terms of explicating my own methodological process, I consider the ways in which differing spatial relationships produce a multivocal ethnography. Like Lawless, when possible, I asked community members to not only share their own interpretations of material but to also reflect upon my analyses. In sum, this multivalent approach was driven by a series of queries intended to probe how a researcher develops relationships across a community. How is an ethnographic process influenced by different systems of labor and of community? How does community

advocacy open up pathways to new scholarship about the avant garde? How is ethnographic practice a study of spatial relationships?

For example, in terms of the links between labor, community advocacy, and ethnography, much of the research conducted in this chapter occurred in “non-official” capacities. Working as the Artist and Scholar-in-Residence for Fusebox Festival, a contemporary arts festival that I will discuss in detail later, I constantly interacted with local East Austinites. However, when I did so, I was primarily framed as a festival producer and artist, as opposed to a researcher. As I worked in East Austin for Fusebox, I always shared with community members that beyond my work at Fusebox I was also conducting academic research on East Austin. Within my day-to-day interactions though, when community members and I talked about art installations, community needs, gentrifications issues, ethical development processes, and documentary films, I was never primarily framed as researcher, though I often mentioned my own research. The community saw me first as an advocate in relationship with them and their local causes. During my work at Fusebox, like in much traditional fieldwork, I took detailed notes, made maps of networks, participated in endless email chains, and conducted follow-up meetings. Though I never used terms like ethnography, methodology, or even field while working at Fusebox, inevitably my academic training colored how I processed the job. As my relationship to the East Austin community strengthened over the months I worked at Fusebox, as I grew to know the community (local activists, artists, and residents) and they grew to know me, local community members would sometimes unexpectedly say something like, “Oh for your dissertation, *mija*, I’ve got someone you should talk with!” In these moments, spatial productions were colliding. I was primarily functioning as a

festival producer and artist, but because community members understood my dual purpose in Austin, they too recognized overlaps between my job and my research, and then used their own insights to further my academic project.

In moments where I interacted with the community strictly as a scholar, my ethnographic work especially took on multivocal characteristics. Having already established a working methodology at Fusebox in which community members openly commented on the progress and future of the thinkEAST project, community members continued to offer their insights and opinions about my research project. They corrected assumptions I made. They pointed me toward new directions of study. They commented on the body of research already addressing the East Austin Brown Berets. For example, former Brown Berets were adamant that I question the research of scholar David Montejano. For Berets Susana Almanza and Gilbert Rivera, Montejano's work drew critique in terms of both its theorizations and in terms of Montejano's research methodology. Their critique was especially pointed in terms of how Montejano described his own positionality as an insider within the community. Rivera describes Montejano, however, as an outsider: "He was looking at us from his elitist, scholarly way of looking at things. And that really pisses me off, how people can disassociate themselves from reality when they want to do scholarly stuff" (Rivera and Rivera). Susana Almanza offered similar insights: "It's a different story for the people who are really battling at the local level and in poverty with all the other dilemmas that are going on in their life. He [Montejano] couldn't relate in that. It was obvious to me that he could not relate and could not open himself because he saw himself as so intelligent. To him it was like everybody was like these nobodies" (Almanza and Herrera). Rivera's and

Almanza's interpretations of Montejano's study focus less on whether or not Montejano got his facts correct and more on how class dynamics informed Montejano's interpretations. With phrases like "disassociate themselves from reality" and "he could not relate and could not open himself," Rivera and Almanza point towards Montejano's lack of economic awareness and lack of consideration for the everyday contexts surrounding the San Antonio Brown Berets. That is Montejano did not correctly parse the relationship between the Brown Berets and local productions of space. While undoubtedly Almanza and Rivera offered these insights in the spirit of critical study, I think they were also offering advice about my own research process.

Their advice did not go unheard. In this chapter, I go to great lengths to describe how I was positioned in the community, how that position impacted my access to source material, and how that mountain of material relates to a single short play, *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*. Thus the very structure of this chapter is in some ways a multivocal construction. Moreover, much of the rest of the chapter calls upon the mechanism of storytelling—personal narratives full of metaphors and allegories that illuminate larger systems of economy and culture. Often as I questioned the Berets, the answer to questions arrived in the form of story. For Almanza and Rivera, their stories theorize life in East Austin as effectively as any other means of analysis. Storytelling as a way of meaning-making and theorization shapes much of the rest of this chapter: the story of Gloria Espitia and the archive, the story of waiting, the story of working at Fusebox, the story of La Raza Roundtable, the story of an art installation and a short documentary film, and the story of listening to stories. Together these narratives thread together the variances within East Austin's Latino community. Hopefully, these stories evoke nuance

and complexity—a multivocal response to the systems creating East Austin—rather than a singular perspective and interpretation.

Learning the Spatial Practices within the Archive: The Story of Gloria Espitia and Archival Inheritances

Gloria Espitia, former curator at the Austin History Center, introduced me to the idea of exploring how the Brown Berets used performance as part of my research into the avant garde of East Austin. I had been digging into Latino cultural performances in Austin, like *Dies y Seis* celebrations and *Pastorelas*,⁷ with little success—in terms of finding source material or in connecting those performances to local spatial practices. As I worked fruitlessly in the archive, Espitia mentioned that I might consider researching how the Brown Berets utilized *Teatro Chicano*. Initially, I was excited by the concept of the Brown Berets because their moniker seemed to clearly line-up with early definitions of the avant garde as a militaristic formation, an early vanguard. A group that wore berets intended to reflect the revolutionary ideas of Che Guevara and who readily confronted disciplining forces like the police and City Hall seemed an ideal place to find an avant garde performance history that harkened back to early academic definitions of the practice. By no means, however, was my new focus on the Berets an exciting “new” find. Espitia’s suggestion highlights the dynamic discourse between an archivist and a researcher. I did not “discover” the history of the East Austin Brown Berets’ use of *Teatro Chicano*. Instead, Espitia’s insights and suggestions catalyzed my initial research process.

Early in my research process, as I dug into archival files related to the Brown Berets, I struggled to access source material. During Espitia’s tenure at the archive, the Brown Beret files, as well as the general Latino collection, expanded and became more

robust in terms of both citywide documents and documents that pertained to everyday life for Latinos, particularly those living in East Austin. However, at times those collections were not accessible to the public because Espitia and other curators were using the material for large-scale public installations at the History Center. In the early days of researching the Berets at the Austin History Center, absences and dead-ends most marked my time in the archive. Many files—audio recordings, newspaper collections, transcribed interviews—were not available. Luckily, in developing a conversational relationship with the archivist Espitia, new pathways through the archive emerged. These pathways took shape via Espitia's understanding of Texas history, via Espitia's awareness of operational structures within the archive, and via the very conversations Espitia and I had as we worked.

First and foremost, Espitia more readily understood how information about the Brown Berets intersected with my research project than I myself did. This greater understanding happened at two levels. Espitia flat out knew more about the history of *Mexicanos*, to use her term, in Texas and Austin. She had worked in multiple libraries and archives around Texas, often gathering and cataloguing Latino history in the state. Moreover, Espitia also better understood how inaccessible archival files might enrich my understanding of the both the Berets' use of *Teatro Chicano* as well as the Berets' position in the city's production of space. Initially however, Espitia did not offer a means for accessing these unreachable documents.

As the early part of this research process passed, I worked through material that very loosely related to the Brown Berets. However a second, perhaps less traditional, pathway through the archive soon emerged: a pathway based in communal conversation.

Espitia and I began to talk about what drove our research interests. She told stories about her life along the Texas coast, and she waxed poetic about her passion for *Tejana* music. Together Espitia and I discussed what it meant to be Latinas in Texas. I told stories about why my father refused to teach his children to speak Spanish, even though he himself was a Spanish teacher. Across those days, Espitia and I were building a kind of personal archive within the Austin History Center through our mutual research interests and our own life experiences. With time, this personal archive, built upon communal memory and remembering, directly impacted how I interacted with official records. I believe these casual conversations—unofficialiated by call slips and file boxes—sparked a deeper trust for Espitia in the tone and purpose of my research project.

With time, Espitia began to share with me documents from files located in inaccessible collections, including copies of material Espitia made for me of articles and oral histories that directly pertained to the Brown Berets and Latinos in East Austin. Although it was well within the practices of the archive for Espitia to share this material, she was by no means beholden to do so. This sharing made her job harder. These out-of-bounds documents lived in offices and rooms well beyond the reading room. They were part of on-going research projects, which meant that Espitia had to develop a different system for tracking what she allowed me to use. Furthermore, when Espitia shared these documents with me, she often did so in a clandestine manner. It was not unusual for her to say, “Meet me by your locker. I have some special material for you.”

In effect, Espitia was circumventing the normalized rules of the archive in order to further my research project. Rather than holding records in an organizational structure that spoke to past uses of the archive, Espitia let the records answer to a potential future.

As Derrida illuminates in his explanation of the impact of the archive, “It [the archive] is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and a responsibility of tomorrow” (36). Derrida’s analysis points to how the archive might be judged in times to come; for Derrida, an archive’s impact lives in how it is processed and utilized in the future. I wonder, though, how Derrida’s analysis might also clarify the active forces within the archive itself purposefully working to shape these potential futures. In the case of Espitia, from within the archive she circumnavigated its regular operations in the hopes of supporting a future production of knowledge. She could not know for sure the outcomes of my research, but regardless, in the present moment, she acted on “a promise and responsibility” towards the future. Thus, in this case, the archivist herself acted on a hunch, a possibility, that will play out in the future. Espitia’s support of my research, of a future promise, begs another question: Why?

As I spent time at the Austin History Center with folks like Gloria Espitia and Danny Camacho, I began to develop a sense of how rare their knowledge base is. Espitia and Camacho both hold deep wells of knowledge about Latino life in Texas, particularly that of Austin. In trips to the archive after Camacho and Espitia were less present in the building,⁸ I continually had trouble accessing material I had previously used for my research. I found myself saying to archivists with less specialization in the area of Latino history, “Gloria kept the records in x and y location.” Their well-intentioned responses were then often something like, “Gloria isn’t here anymore, and I just don’t know what you are talking about. I wish I could help more.” On my own, while I would find bits and pieces of the collections Espitia had so readily gathered for me, I could no longer capture a clear sense of how those pieces were interrelated or how they spoke to longer

histories of Latinos in East Austin. As Peter Fritzsche writes in his essay *The Archive and the Case of the German Nation*, “The archive is the production of the heirs who must work to find connections from one generation to the next and thereby acknowledge the ongoing disintegration of the past. The heirs must also distinguish themselves as such: they are a cultural group that cultivates a particular historical trajectory” (185). While Fritzsche’s analysis explores the relationship between Pascal’s and Walter Benjamin’s notions of the archive and the idea of German nationhood, his ideas help frame the relationships I developed during my time researching at the Austin History.

My work at the History Center focused on less recognized histories within traditional academic frameworks or within typical research processes at the History Center. If histories like that of the Brown Berets were not expressly passed “from one generation to the next,” then even within the archive they might disappear, especially without folks like Espitia attending to them. Given this possibility, I believe that Espitia treated me as an “heir” with a responsibility to “cultivate a particular historical trajectory.” My interest in the Brown Berets offered a potential new outlet for a course of information that elucidated a history that has rarely been studied within academia; furthermore, with Espitia’s tutelage, this official archive was also placed into conversation with the everyday lives of Chicanos living in East Austin. In this way, a kind of familial system of relationships was governing Espitia’s care of the archive, and much like what I would experience working with the Brown Berets, her vetting process of me involved my successfully negotiating that familial system.

Throughout the time of my formal and informal research at the History Center, Espitia emphasized time-and-again that I should not solely rely upon the archives of the

Austin History Center for my research. For Espitia, a stronger understanding of the Brown Berets' work with *Teatro Chicano* could be gleaned from conversations with those who led that practice. As I found out over the eighteen months following my initial research into the Brown Berets at the Austin History Center, serving as "an heir" to this history proved much more difficult than I could ever imagine as I attempted to conduct research beyond the archive.

A Failed Negotiation of Spatial Practice: The Story of Not Connecting to the Vanguard

As it became clear to Gloria that I wanted to pursue researching the Brown Berets, she offered to contact a few local Berets for me. Not wanting to cause her more work, I asked if I might email them directly. Gloria quickly responded with something like, "I don't think that will work." She then suggested that I compose an email, and she would then forward that message to the local Brown Berets she knew. In the text of that original email, I presented myself as a scholar, gave an overview of my still-developing project, and provided my contact information. Here are pieces of that message:

I am researching a dissertation project which focuses on radical performance in East Austin. Having worked as an artist for many years with companies like the Rude Mechanicals, a company that receives a remarkable amount of national media attention, I am now interested in thinking through histories of undocumented performance traditions on the East Side...performances that did not necessarily receive the same kind of media attention but did do remarkable jobs of creating social commentary and spurring social change in their communities... interested in speaking with people connected with or who remember the cultural arts programming coming out of the Brown Berets ... I've

already met with Rupert Reyes, who I knew from performing in a Teatro

Humanidad play, but I would like to speak with more community members.

In this email, I attempted to name how I had worked in the community in the past and to highlight an established pattern of communication with local East Austinites. But I also made any number of tactless errors in this email. I opened my email by mentioning obscure subject matter. I state what I *need from* my potential subject, but I *offer them nothing* in return. I also use this phrase, which makes me cringe now: “undocumented performance traditions.” The final portion of the chapter makes clear how well this performance tradition was documented, but of course, most of that archive lives with the people who undertook this work, as opposed to within institutional archives.

Unsurprisingly, I did not receive a response to my query. The following year, when I returned to the archives to do more research on other parts of this project, I asked Gloria to send out a second request. Again, no response. Unlike my work with the Rude Mechs or with local East Austin historians, I entered into my early research of the Brown Berets firmly as a community outsider. In retrospect, I now understand that this “outsider” position had to shift in order to locate primary source material and to more rigorously critique the material I eventually received.

Three years later, once I had come to know Gilbert Rivera, I asked about the lack of responses to Espitia’s emails. Gilbert Rivera, his wife, Jane Rivera, and I were sitting in the Rivera’s study drinking iced tea, petting their dogs, and having a conversation that flowed freely between my research project, the Riveras’ history together, academic etiquette, and my work at Fusebox Festival when I brought up those unanswered emails. I explained to the Riveras my theory about their silence, wanting to promote a

conversation in which my theorizations were open to discussion and critique. The Riveras clarified that they receive about three requests a week from researchers to talk about their activism and/or the history of the Brown Berets. They do not respond to all the requests, usually only answering requests from people they know. I then asked Gilbert Rivera why he might not have responded to an early request Espitia made on my behalf. While Rivera was unnecessarily apologetic about his lack of response, he eventually said, “People have been burned by academics. Montejano being one—where they take stuff and use it for their own purposes. I can’t tell you how many calls and emails [we receive] from people at universities wanting to do interviews... You know the ones I answer are the ones from people I already know” (Rivera and Rivera). This statement evokes a series of simple questions: How did my behavior as a researcher change so that local Berets like Gilbert Rivera could come to know me? What systems promoted these new behaviors, and how did those systems relate to the Riveras’ community? What does my shifting position—from outsider to insider—teach about methodologies for conducting research into the U.S.-based avant garde?

Beginning Again, a Community-Informed Approach to Research

This conversation with the Riveras happened relatively late in this study. To fully understand the research process that led up to my receiving a copy of *Vida Fuerte*, I have to go back a few years. After my first trip to the archive focusing on the Brown Berets, I then worked on-and-off for a year and-a-half writing other bits and pieces of the chapter based on secondary source material. The long, silent months stacking up, I could no longer deny that perhaps I would never be able to speak with the Brown Berets. Around this same time, I moved back to Austin, Texas, to complete my research and to work as

the Artist and Scholar-in-Residence for Fusebox Festival, a contemporary arts festival. For Fusebox, my work particularly centered upon a developing project called thinkEAST.⁹ To give a broad overview, the thinkEAST project involved Fusebox facilitating an 18-month conversation focused on reimagining the site of a former environmental brownfield in East Austin, called the East Austin Tank Farm. At the end of 2015, this reimagining process culminated in a site plan and financial plan both focused on providing space and amenities for the local arts community and the local neighborhood: affordable live/work space, performance/rehearsal/work space for arts organizations and the community, connectivity to an adjacent park, large swathes of communal open space, affordable public housing, a holistic health clinic, permanent art installations featuring local histories, a repository for local history, and a series of services and businesses championed by the local community.

Halfway through the 18-month planning process, Fusebox planned to bring its festival platform to the local neighborhood via the creation of a charrette, or a public gathering in which all project stakeholders attempt to resolve conflicts and map solutions. For Fusebox, the thinkEAST Living Charrette involved not only activating the arts-based development of a charette—a large, vibrant, public living room developed as part of Fusebox Festival—but also questioning and exploring how arts-based development engages with the history and cultures of East Austin. My part-time role in this overwhelming project involved writing about the process, helping to plan community engagements, helping facilitate community engagements, serving on planning committees, and helping execute a number of art projects. Ron Berry, Executive Artistic Director of Fusebox and a long-time artistic collaborator of mine, offered me the job in

part because he understood the nature of my academic research. Berry believed that my background in the arts and education combined with my research into the local spatial practices and performance histories of East Austin might aid Fusebox in its mission to engage and involve a local community primarily composed of working-class people of color who had historically been shut out of the decision-making processes directly impacting the development and governance of their neighborhoods.

Undoubtedly, all the primary source material I gathered for this chapter was made possible because of my work at Fusebox. Hence in the next few sections, I theorize how community advocacy work led to gathering primary source material for research into the U.S.-based avant garde. In particular, I attend to three sites that allowed me to not only access new pathways for research, but these sites also explicitly developed how I understand the relationship between avant garde performance practice and the production of space in East Austin.

The Communal Practice of Forming Latino Identities in Austin: Visiting La Raza Roundtable

In my research process, La Raza Roundtable developed into a touchstone for how I came to understand the diversity of ideas and identities within the Latino community of East Austin, and it complicated how I understood conflict within a minority population. My time at La Raza Roundtable also directly led to obtaining much of the primary source material for this chapter. My first official community meeting as Artist and Scholar-in-Residence for Fusebox took place in October of 2015 at a La Raza Roundtable meeting. La Raza Roundtable is comprised of about eighty members. In general, members are older Latinos with long histories of activism in their immediate neighborhoods. For the

past three years, this coalition has met in East Austin every Saturday morning from 10 am to noon in order to discuss issues impacting the local Latino community (Rivera and Rivera). All the meetings I attended took place at the very pink Lucky Lady Bingo Parlor on the access road to Interstate 35.¹⁰ (Now torn down to make room for condos.) Members include business owners, University of Texas professors, local scholars, neighborhood organizers, nurses, newspaper columnists for local Spanish publications, and former members of the Brown Berets. Political candidates, school board members, developers, artists, and news reporters all occasionally visit La Raza Roundtable in attempts to advance their work with the group's support. University students, particularly from the University of Texas, also visit weekly.¹¹ Depending upon member's schedules and the cultural capital of roundtable visitors, some meetings might include ten folks total were others might include fifty or more total participants.

In my experience, the Roundtable works like this. First, members and experienced visitors come on in and immediately go to ordering coffee and tacos. At about that same time, a Roundtable member announces that she will be purchasing tacos for any student present, which sets off a happy frenzy of taco ordering. With tacos, students not only receive a delicious flavor treat, they also gain a sense of the importance of young voices at the Roundtable. Next, Jane Rivera, the Roundtable moderator, details out the day's agenda. Formal presentations then follow: stump speeches, reports, updates on projects, or oral histories about Latino life in East Austin. At any point in any presentation, members may ask questions. If many members want to pose questions, Jane keeps a running list of whose hand went up first, and then she works through the list. After presentations, announcements are made about local gatherings: notices for events

like marches or local council meetings as well as notices for special events like a visit from the caravan of Mexican parents whose college-aged children were disappeared, the Ayotzinapa Case.¹² Lots of long, intense goodbyes then follow the announcements. Roundtable members call goodbyes “the meeting after the meeting.” In an interview, Jane Rivera explained that “a meeting after the meeting” is often the catalyst for new projects and new activism. With minds fueled by the discussions during the Roundtable, the meeting after the meeting offers the space of intimate conversation and reflection.

On some occasions, the Roundtable gathering is small, and in these cases, the organizational structure is quite different. At one small gathering I attended, only about five members, four students from UT, and myself were present. In this case, the meeting was organized around points of inquiry personal to those present. For example, I asked how folks at the meeting self-identified. Answers included Chicano, Tejano, Mexican, Mexican American, Texan, and “I don’t like labels because labels screw people.” As a group, we then talked about this diversity in self-identification, and the social structures that produced those identity markers. The older members of the Roundtable went into great detail as to why they have selected different racial identity markers: economic differences, generational differences, different hometowns, etc. Connected to this discussion of racial formation, we also spent time talking about the role of Spanish in Latino homes, and how the language has shifted in Texas since the Roundtable members were young. Case in point, we spent about ten minutes talking about curse words or “bad” language in Spanish. The different generations compared how cursing and inappropriate language had shifted over time, especially terms with a sexual flavor. Much of this ten minutes was spent in laughter.

Be it a small meeting or a large meeting, discussions about dirty word or self-identity, at La Raza Roundtable an abundance of diversity structures the conversation surrounding Latino life in Austin. Members do not self-identify in the same fashions. They do not profess to have similar economic or educational backgrounds. Nor do they necessarily politically align. Instead, community is perhaps most overtly created by a tacit agreement to engage in productive dissonance. This dissonance might occur over a topic like the development of East Austin. For example, during my first visit representing Fusebox, members aggressively questioned Berry and Managing Director Brad Carlin about Fusebox's relationship to the local developers who own thinkEAST. Responses to Berry and Carlin's presentation ranged from statements like "you're two hipster white men standing there telling us what should happen to our community" to "we need to listen to these two and see how we might use them to help our community." Members peppered Ron and Brad with questions—both during and after their presentation. Interestingly, the questions did not necessarily "piggy back" or build on the same thread. Instead, members consistently expressed their unique points of view about thinkEAST and about the role white men play in gentrifying East Austin.

Dissonance at Roundtable meetings also occurs within the very structure of the discourse. For instance, during a later meeting focused around an oral history presentation from Brown Berets, one member of the Roundtable was worried that I was not getting everything I needed for my dissertation research. (By the time of this presentation, many Roundtable members knew that I was researching the Brown Berets' use of *Teatro Chicano*.) Acting on her concerns, this Roundtable member would interrupt the presenter in support of my needs: "Did you get that down, *mija*?"; "Who has

photos for her? She's gonna need photos.”; “You need to slow down. You're talking too fast. Carra can't keep up with you.”¹³ While the primary focus was the presenter's oral history, the overall functioning of the discourse at the Roundtable, in fact, supported a multivalent approach to creating and sharing knowledge. No one chastised this member for interrupting the presenter. During the presentation, some members asked to see my notes. Others said to the UT students, “Look how she takes notes. Learn from that.” In effect, the Roundtable creates a space in which members contest not only East Austin's history and its future but also the very mechanisms and modes by which those histories enter wider discourses, including those related to academic research. Unquestionably, this mode of contestation has a formal process and a political aim.

Though La Raza Roundtable does not function as a formal operative in the politics of the City of Austin, undoubtedly its production of space is political in nature. In her theorization of democratic politics, Chantal Mouffe explores the formation of adversarial political spaces, with a particular focus on the differences between antagonism and agonism:

Introducing the category of the “adversary” requires complexifying the notion of antagonism and distinguishing it from agonism. Antagonism is struggle between enemies, while agonism is struggle between adversaries... the aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism into agonism. This requires providing channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues, which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary. (16)

Part of my attending meetings at La Raza Roundtable involved learning to parse the dissonance, or agonism, alive in the meetings. At times, the collective passions in the room run in the same current, and at other times, they are sharply divergent. In effect, the Roundtable produces a communal conversation that acknowledges the diversity of spatial practices—especially the diversity within Latino spatial practices—structuring the intersection of social and economic policies and race in Austin. Initially, I viewed aggressive questioning, like that of Berry and Carlin, as antagonistic. I came to understand, however, that the Roundtable provides “channels” for locals who identify with *la raza* to express their collective passions, and for members, collectivity signals not an ideological agreement but an agreement to engage in a sometimes adversarial political process. I shared my thinking about the antagonism/agonism, politics/political nature of the Round Table with Jane and Gilbert Rivera. In response, they offered both a story that spoke to my theorization as well as more fodder for thought.

First the Riveras told a story involving Mike Martinez, a former City Council Member and Mayor Pro Tem of Austin. During his time in office, Martinez had made decisions with which many in the Round Table did not agree. Though the Riveras could not remember the exact nature of Martinez’s “wrongdoing,” they readily explained how different factions within the Roundtable responded to Martinez’s politics. For instance, some at the Roundtable so loathed Mike Martinez’s policy that they decided to hold a night-time candlelight vigil outside of Martinez’s home where the group would then “pray for his soul.” At the Roundtable, there was vigorous discussion about this potential soul-saving vigil. While some members believed that such a move would be disrespectful, others felt that Martinez’s plans “were destroying the neighborhood,” (ie,

he would get what he deserved). Before the vigil could occur, a member of the Roundtable “ratted out” the candlelight plan to Martinez, and so Martinez himself attended the Roundtable meeting just prior to the planned vigil in an attempt to halt it. In the end, despite differences as to how to approach the Mike Martinez problem, the Roundtable got what it wanted: Mike Martinez’s attention. Martinez attended one of their meetings and received a lesson about the political nature of Latinos in East Austin. From the Roundtable’s point of view, its mission was accomplished: many voices were heard. Gilbert Rivera describes this candlelight vigil incident as “a discussion amongst people who had totally different opinions.” Rather than such virulent differences and political stratagems rendering the Roundtable forum inoperable, the coalition instead embraces its adversarial nature. The Riveras shared this story as a model that supported my theorization of the Roundtable as a political, adversarial space capable of producing change via productive dissonance. Their inability to remember what Martinez did to spark conflict within the coalition juxtaposed against the Riveras’ ability to explain how the conflict played speaks to a political *process* that supersedes politics.

Jane Rivera, however, went on to theorize that, in fact, what most often sparks dissonance among the coalition at the Roundtable are economic differences. Building specifically on Saul Alinsky’s definition of the “have nots,” Jane explained: “One of the reasons that we do have as much conflict as we have is because we have people who are still have nots, others who have a little, and others who are successful. And because they [members of the Roundtable] have those different class barriers now, [what] we have to keep reminding ourselves is that what we’re all about is the have nots.” Jane explicitly connected this explanation to the history of the Brown Berets. She explained that many

Brown Berets, who are now members of the Roundtable, were some of the original “have nots” who fought for their community in the 1960s and 1970s. Jane’s theorization framed for me z genealogy alive within Latino activist organizations in East Austin. For the Riveras, there is a direct link between La Raza Roundtable and the Brown Berets. Not only do and did many of the same activists belong to both organizations, but both organizations explicitly formed to respond to the intersection of race and economy in East Austin—to protect the welfare of the brown “have nots.”

In many ways, my analysis of the Brown Berets’ use of Teatro Chicano moves not simply through a lens of that particular historical moment but also through the lens of a theorization of La Raza Roundtable. In this case, La Raza Roundtable acts in a kind of dialectical relationship with the history of the Brown Berets. Many of the same means to control the production of space in East Austin—spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces—remain unaltered over the 45-year span between the two organizations. Material conditions are similar, and yet the two groups employ(ed) different systems of strategies and tactics to address their community’s welfare. As I analyze the *Teatro Chicano* of the Brown Berets, my reading of their work is necessarily put into a dialectical relationship with my reading of La Raza Roundtable: many of the same players are involved; many of the same places are involved; many of the same issues are being addressed. And yet, the differences in the day-to-day operations between the groups reveal particularities about spatial practices of the Brown Berets in the 1970s and prompts a series of inquiries. How do spatial practices shift between the Brown Berets and La Raza Roundtable? How do the spatial practices particular to the Brown Berets shape an understandings of the group’s use of *Teatro Chicano*? How also do these

practices relate to the production of space in East Austin in the 1970s? Conversely, do the avant garde theatrical productions of Brown Berets in the 1970s provide insights into the current production of space in East Austin?

At La Raza Roundtable I began to not only better understand the diversity within the Latino community in East Austin, but after eighteen months of silence, I finally began to meet former Brown Berets. During my first visit to the Roundtable in October 2014, I met brothers Gilbert and Pete Rivera. Gilbert Rivera, a former *jefe* and *General* for the Berets, spoke briefly with me about the Berets and *Teatro Chicano* after my first Roundtable meeting. While Gilbert did not share a wealth of information about how *Teatro Chicano* functioned for Austin Brown Berets, at this first in-person meeting, he welcomed my questions and my presence.

Navigating a Different Latino Family: (Dis)connections with Susana Almanza

Very different in tone than that initial community meeting at the Roundtable, my first Artist and Scholar-in-Residence meeting with Susana Almanza did not yield an immediate sense of camaraderie nor a clearly accessible path to furthering my research. During my encounter with Susana Almanza, I learned about her history as a community advocate and activist and as a former *jefa* of the Brown Berets—not only the *jefa* but the person in charge of the organization's development of *Teatro Chicano*.

Fusebox's interest in Almanza stemmed from her environmental advocacy work. thinkEAST sits on the site of the former East Austin Tank Farm. At the roughly 100-acre Tank Farm site, from the 1950s to 1995 six major oil manufacturing corporations—Mobil Oil Company, Star Enterprise (Texaco), Chevron U.S.A. Products Co., Coastal States Crude Gathering Company, Citgo Petroleum Corporation, and Exxon Company U.S.A—

operated a series of bulk fuel storage tanks. The Tank Farm effectively formed an industrial area that was completely surrounded by Latino and African American neighborhoods. During its operational years, the Tank Farm contaminated the ground water, soil, air, and local people with chemicals like gasoline, diesel, benzene, oxides of nitrogen, and carbon monoxide. In 1991, residents of East Austin, led by PODER, initiated a grassroots legal campaign, operating with a budget of \$2500, to shut down the Tank Farm. Due to PODER's and the local community's efforts, the final fuel tank was removed from the property in 1996. The closing of the Tank Farm marked the first occasion in Texas history in which a grassroots level campaign, led by people of color, defeated the state's petroleum industry in a court of law. Remediation of the Tank Farm was completed in 2007 (deVarga; Wilde). New owners Richard deVarga and Robert Summers bought the farm in 2012. Since then, the property owners have worked closely with PODER and the neighborhood contact team in the rezoning process and in developing the property's master plan. Thus when Fusebox began to plan the festival at thinkEAST, meeting Almanza was a top priority.

One might think, "Oh great, Carra, this is your in! You've got your source," which is admittedly what I thought at that time as well. During the first meeting with Almanza, my dissertation research on East Austin was mentioned, and I talked briefly to her about the Brown Berets and *Teatro Chicano*. After months of failing to connect in person with a Beret, when Susana responded to my comments with something like "Yes, I led the *Teatro Chicano* for the Berets," I thought research heaven had opened up and smiled down upon me. While my enthusiasm for finally meeting a member of the Brown Berets was undoubtedly just this side of spastic, Almanza's response to my enthusiasm

was a little different: primarily polite and contained, not nearly as energized (or as twitchy) as my own. Little did I know then that my research surrounding Almanza's work would not progress for many months.

From October to April, I spoke in-person with Almanza about my research project on three or four occasions that coincided with meetings about the festival at thinkEAST. She always responded politely but never initiated those conversations, nor did she respond to my subtle hints: "We should meet up just to talk about the Berets" or "I would love to buy you a coffee talk with you some time about the Berets." Though slightly confused by her reticence, I remained undaunted. From October to April, I also emailed Susana at least five times about meeting to talk about *Teatro Chicano* and the Berets. Almanza never responded to these requests, but she would respond to any queries I directly related to thinkEAST. I was befuddled by her contained, polite denial. Almanza and I were working together on the same project, the festival at thinkEAST. She was affable and welcoming in that environment. Why then would she not talk to me about my research project?

Initially, I developed a series of excuses to explain the silences. The first: Almanza was running for City Council. For the 2014 elections, Austin city government overhauled its process for electing the City Council. *The Texas Tribune* explained the potential ramifications of this shift: "Observers say geographic representation is likely to open the door for a more racially and ideologically diverse city government. Austin has not had geographic districts in more than 100 years, and was the largest city in the country not to have them." When I arrived in Austin in October of 2014, Almanza was embroiled in that process of rethinking how the government at City Hall might not only

look more like folks actually living in Austin, but also more clearly dialogue with the various ideological threads shaping the city. When I first met with Almanza in October, she was deep in the race against eleven other candidates for the position. By November, the conversation surrounding the district three race was no longer focused just on greater diversity but also on familial drama. In November, Almanza entered a run-off for the district seat—a run-off against her brother (Ayala and Edgars). From October through December’s run-off election, which Almanza lost, I did not entirely expect her to answer my queries, though I sent them nonetheless.

As a new year rolled around however, I hoped that I would receive a response from Almanza as I sent new requests to meet. But nothing from Almanza. Again, I created narratives for her silence. These included the lethargy she must have experienced after the election, her planning for the upcoming César Chávez March, her planning for the upcoming *Si Se Puede* Awards, etc. However, none of my narratives included the obvious: Susana Almanza did not want to talk to me about her days with the Brown Berets.

Having built a relationship with Gloria Espitia at the History Center and then Gilbert Rivera through La Raza Roundtable, I mistakenly believed that I would as easily engage in conversation with Susana Almanza. As I worked on the thinkEAST festival however, I began to realize that I had created a narrative around Almanza’s silence that spoke more to my own biases and preconceptions than to any actual reasoning on her part. Clearly, Almanza was happy to meet and work together on issues surrounding the history and development of the old Tank Farm, and clearly she was not interested in

talking about the Brown Berets. Any suppositions beyond noting those two patterns were exactly that—suppositions.

Many months later, in an interview I asked Susana Almanza why she was reluctant to meet with me. Without hesitation Almanza explained her opinion of other scholars' work on the Brown Berets: "People can be there but they can't really see... they haven't opened their mind to what's really happening at the grassroots struggle level. It can't be at the academia stage that you're in or that you're very comfortable at. It's a different story for the people who are really battling at the local level and in poverty with all the other dilemmas that are going on in their life." For many months, Almanza had clearly marked me as an academic who could not see, who had not opened her mind, and who did not understand the everyday impact of local struggles. It took a series of art projects for Almanza to change her mind about how I operated in relationship to her community.

Representational Spatial Practices in East Austin: The Art of Tanks and Trails

As my final meeting with Almanza confirmed, her opening up to me was directly related to my work on the Fusebox Festival at thinkEAST. In particular, my intentions toward the community became clearer via two channels: facilitating projects that directly related to the history of the Tank Farm and neighborhood and then producing and writing a documentary that told the story of how students from a nearby high school walked to school. The production process surrounding these art projects highlights how my position in the community shifted from an unknown outsider to that of a person engaged in the day-to-day life and history of the neighborhood.

An analysis of one particular art installation at the Fusebox Festival at thinkEAST explains how I helped produce art work that directly related to the Tank Farm and neighborhood history. As festival goers first entered the site at thinkEAST, they encountered a large-scale installation that represented the former presence of the tanks on the land. Designed by the East Austin design studio Thoughtbarn, this circular sculpture, composed of vertical green one-by-fours spaced ten inches apart, evoked the history of the Tank Farm and the size and scope of the tanks themselves. The installation was purposefully placed at the entrance to the festival so that visitors would have to encounter the history of the site before passing on to a community celebration featuring local music like Tejano and hip-hop, community workshops, pop-up stores, community planning stations, and delicious local eats. However, the tank installation first forced visitors to engage with the history of the land and neighborhood. As festival goers passed through the tank, they viewed a collaged historical display. Inside, wheat-pasted upon small plaques placed at random heights between the vertical slats, hung an assortment of documents and images that spoke to the grassroots effort to shut down the farm: photos from protests and community meetings, legal documents from citizens as well as the oil companies, sign-in sheets from neighborhood meetings, EPA reports, etc. During the festival, neighborhood folks like the Riveras and Almanza spent long swathes of time inside the tank installation. They pointed to photos of themselves. They laughed at the sayings on their old protest posters—“wake up and smell the benzene” and “pipelines have quacks.” Many community members who entered the tank installations shed tears. Perhaps most importantly, those who helped to shut down the Tank Farm used the

display as a tool to teach family members about the history of the land, and the efforts they themselves undertook to save the health of the neighborhood.

In terms of my work on Thoughtbarn's installation, I helped facilitate the ways in which it told the story of the neighborhood. Initially, Elise Sibley, the documentarian of the thinkEAST project, and I selected the documents for display from the PODER files at the Austin History Center. I then talked with Thoughtbarn about how different kinds of documents might elicit responses from local residents. A sign-in sheet with scrawling cursive signatures speaks to the role of the individual in shutting down the farm while EPA reports on Benzene levels directly spell out the toxicity once present on the site. As part of my work on this project, Susana Almanza put me in touch with Rene Renteria. At the time of the battle to shut down the Tank Farm, Renteria was a student at UT. He often filmed the protests and meetings surrounding the effort, and he eventually created a short documentary about PODER's fight against the Tank Farm. For the festival, Renteria agreed to print a selection of stills from the documentary that he felt best spoke to the history of the Tank Farm battle. I then communicated Renteria's insights to Thoughtbarn and also pointed out the images that featured local community members who would attend the festival at thinkEAST.

My final contribution to the installation involved writing a short memorial plaque that told the story of the Tank Farm. To do so, I used information from PODER's website and from the Austin History Center archives. I ran drafts of the history by Susana Almanza and Daniel Llanes, another member of PODER and a vigorous activist in the East Austin community. The plaque's narrative told the story in both Spanish and English. Daniel Llanes played a key role in translating the material to Spanish, and

Susana Almanza was key in parsing how my word choice might exclude community members. For instance, in an early draft of the history, I wrote, “In 1991, citizens of East Austin, led by PODER (People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources), initiated a grassroots campaign to shut down the Tank Farm.” Almanza changed one key word in this sentence; she replaced “citizens” with “residents.” In talking with Almanza about my first draft, we discussed how a word like “citizen” might exclude the labor of undocumented residents of the neighborhood. Prior to this conversation, the phrase “citizen of East Austin” signaled to me the idea of community membership, as opposed to the broader implication of a legal status regulated by the U.S. government. Almanza’s critique pointed to the ways in which residents of neighborhoods in Austin are never fully beyond the disciplining systems of the U.S. government, even those politically active within their local communities. Working with Llanes and Almanza on the images and texts for the tank installation allowed me to not only deeply engage with them around the history of the tank farm, it also broadened my understanding of the social dynamics that drove the community activism surrounding the fight against the Tank Farm. This new awareness of complex social dynamics then spilled over into how I approached my analysis of the Berets’ *Teatro Chicano*. While I was involved in producing a number of community history and cultural projects at the Fusebox Festival at thinkEAST, the other project that most solidified my connection to the local neighborhood—and thereby my access to the Berets’ history—involved a short documentary, *La Loma: Or the Place Sometimes Called Hungry Hill*.¹⁴

Throughout the fall as Ron Berry, Brad Carlin, and I held community engagement meetings and more intimate coffee talks addressing thinkEAST, the local residents of the

Johnston Terrace and Govalle neighborhoods asked if we might consider somehow addressing how some students walked to-and-from school. Johnston High School, which was later renamed Eastside Memorial High School, was constructed in the early 1960s to serve primarily students of color.¹⁵ At that time, many East Austin neighborhoods had very little infrastructure—no paved roads and no city sewer services. Gilbert Rivera explained that “in the capital of the fucking state of Texas” at times his family had to use the bathroom in the woods just behind their house because their septic tank system would fail. Not until the early 1980s were the roads paved in far East Austin, and when they were, the community was not consulted as to how its residents already moved through the neighborhood. Additionally, no one ever asked how students arrived at school.

Since the building of the high school, students from the Johnston Terrace neighborhood have struggled with finding safe and efficient paths to school: first because there were no paved roadways, and then the roadways that were made afforded no direct connectivity between the school and the neighborhood. As a result, for 55 years student have taken a quick path to school that the Rivera Family helped form in the early 1960s. This path involves cutting through large fields (which housed chop-shops when the Riveras were boys), skirting by electrical stations and crossing under huge power grids, walking down waterways that are at times flooded, crossing over and under railroad cars and railroad tracks, and then cutting through deep woods that house homeless encampments and wild animals. For 55 years, students of Johnston High School have taken this path twice a day at all hours of the day and in all kinds of weather conditions.

During the thinkEAST project, Pete Rivera, a former Brown Beret and a member of thinkEAST’s community stakeholder board, asked what Fusebox and thinkEAST

might do about this problem. In early December, Deb Esquenazi—a local Austin documentarian—and I were swapping stories about education. I had worked for many years as a public school teacher, and Esquenazi had worked on East Austin education initiatives via different arts advocacy organizations. We both love stories, and we both love education. One night Deb shared stories about her own teaching experience. Through both Texas Folk Life and Susana Almanza’s Young Scholars for Justice Program at PODER, Esquenazi had worked with students in East Austin on developing radio documentaries. I mentioned to Esquenazi the story of how Eastside Memorial students walk to school, and together she and I started to discuss how a student-driven documentary might address the issues surrounding the trail. Shortly thereafter, Esquenazi and I pitched the project to the thinkEAST/Fusebox team. They readily accepted our concept, and Esquenazi and I got to work.

In total, Esquenazi, Pete Rivera, and I worked on the documentary production process for about five months. Esquenazi and I wrote a curriculum, approved by Austin ISD, for an after-school class that would not only teach students how to film but also explore both the neighborhood history and the sculpting of documentary films. Gabriel Estrada, an education advocate with Austin Community Voices, introduced us to two students who agreed to take part in our project, Isaac Reyes and Joseph Sanchez. As part of the project’s budget, Isaac and Joseph both received cameras. Significant portions of the documentary feature their personal footage. Reyes and Sanchez then survived two-months of after school classes where together we analyzed different documentaries for theme, tone, form, and audience. We talked about the neighborhood’s history, driven by working class people of color. We wrote together. We drew maps. We talked about

story structures. We watched their footage and analyzed it together. We watched Esquenazi's footage and analyzed it together. We talked about Reyes's and Sanchez's futures and their dreams. Together, we created a film. Reyes and Sanchez engaged in the project despite their significant course loads and Reyes's forty-hour a week job at a local grocery store.

At the time of the Fusebox Festival at thinkEAST, *La Loma* was a 12-minute documentary that juxtaposed the everyday lives of Reyes and Sanchez against Pete Rivera's own memories of the neighborhood. While the five of us involved were happy with the final film, we were even happier with the attention it garnered. Multiple media outlets discussed the film, including a front page story on the *Austin American Statesman*, which helped spark city-wide conversations about connectivity, equity, and access. At the final community meeting I attended regarding the film, four AISD school board members, three representatives from Cap Metro (owners of the railroad), multiple representatives from Austin Energy (who operate the power station), at least five representatives from different departments within the City of Austin, Richard deVarga from thinkEAST, Berry from Fusebox, neighbor activists, teachers, parents, and Gilbert and Jane Rivera met together to discuss with Reyes and Sanchez how various interests might better serve the students at Eastside Memorial. In June of 2015, a committee formed from these constituents presented short-term and long-term fixes for the trail. That fall, various city service organizations got together to clean-up and widen the trails. And at the end of 2015, Cap Metro announced that it would create new bus routes that will carry students from Johnson Terrace directly to school. Pete Rivera updates me monthly about any progress surrounding the trail. In the spring of 2016, U.S.

Congressional representatives met with Rivera's neighborhood association to talk about the film and the neighborhood needs.

I detail the stories behind an art installation and behind the documentary for the festival to highlight how engagement with a community's representational practices also leads to insight about their everyday life practices and their conceptions of space. First, each project explicitly offered less traditional methods for learning community history. Both of these projects involved learning to listen to community. Scholar Kathleen Stewart writes of learning to read "signs" in communities that "everything depends on talk that is nothin' but just talk is all, and yet it makes things happen, sets things in motion, pushes people together and apart, catches them up in one situation and then another" (140). As both Almanza and Gilbert Rivera have mentioned, neither initially positioned my project as directly relating to their community, and therefore not worthy of much of their time or attention. However, both the installation and the documentary placed me, as an artist and a scholar, inside community talk. Sometimes this talk focused on the art project at hand, and sometimes the talk was just talk: the weather, tacos, the Spurs, trimming roses, creating sacred space, the best place to line-up in the César Chávez march, where to buy piñatas, who to avoid during community meetings. Eventually in the "talk" to which my work at Fusebox allowed me access, I began to hear stories of forces structuring the production of space in East Austin. Stories buttressed with details of economic histories, rich descriptions of everyday life practices, and cultural histories little-known outside of East Austin. Given that these stories are the primary source material for the community's history, "talk" became for me not only a space in which to conduct research but a mode of being in community. Through talk, I

began to understand how the development of avant garde performance by the Brown Berets directly relates to the production of space in East Austin.

Thus, as I began to learn the relationship between deficits in infrastructure, the segregation of communities of color, and the City of Austin's overt refusal to care for its East Austin's residents, I also began to understand the passions and histories that fueled organizations like the Brown Berets. In Gilbert Rivera's critique of Montejano's research into Brown Berets in Texas, Rivera notes that Montejano portrayed the Berets as "uneducated thugs" rather than fully exploring the systemic deficits in educational and economic support for the neighborhoods in which the Berets lived. As Rivera explained about abject poverty, "That's how we became activists. We were not thugs. We were not uneducated lower-class people. To be poor does not make you lower class. Poverty does not make you lower." Because the children in *Vida Fuerte* exactly reflect the class dynamics experienced by Beret members like Almanza and the Riveras in their own youths, the texts of their personal childhood stories live around *Vida Fuerte* like a kind of neighborhood Apocrypha. Though *Vida Fuerte* itself is very short, the unwritten, early acts of the play live in how Rivera and Almanza negotiated the production of space in East Austin in their youths. For the East Austin community watching *Vida Fuerte*, these unperformed prologues constructed the world of play as much as the script itself.

Early Dramaturgy of *Vida Fuerte*: Stories of East Austin Children

In analyzing the development of the Austin chapter of the Brown Berets' use of *Teatro Chicano*, I explicitly do not lead this undertaking with a "text." As any number of East Austin Latino and Chicano community members—Gilbert and Jane Rivera, Danny Camacho, Susana Almanza, Sylvia Herrera—have explained to me, the play is *not* the

thing. Rather, they urged me to consider how the play speaks to *cycles* within Latino life in East Austin. In *Not the Other Avant Gard*, Mike Sell and John Rouse call for a reconceptualization of the avant garde that is driven by embracing “a broad cultural understanding of performance and that recognizes the relevance to the conceptual paradigms that shape the avant garde itself” (2). By detailing the educational and childhood experiences of Rivera and Almanza, by putting those experiences into conversation with the formation of the Brown Berets, and by considering the role women played in the creation of *Teatro Chicano*, a paradigm—or rather the everyday life practices—surrounding the shaping of the avant grade in East Austin becomes clearer. These practices are particular to the neighborhood and residents of East Austin. Thus the source material driving this cultural understanding is mostly derived from the neighborhood: personal interviews, personal archival records, field notes from La Raza Roundtable meetings, and documents particular to the Brown Berets from the Austin History Center. A culturally-specific parsing of *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* that takes into account the everyday life practices of East Austin Latinos not only broadens the scope of avant garde performance in the U.S., but it also speaks to the divergent research methodologies necessary to make such a broadening possible.

The following analysis of Susana Almanza’s *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* follows the dramaturgy of the play across the childhood stories that form the basis of the play, moves into the ways in which the East Austin Brown Berets operated in concert with childhood life lessons as much as institutional manifestos, and concludes with an examination of the development and production of Susana Almanza’s play, *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*. All three readings, or scenarios of colonizing silences, reflect the

difference between education and schooling within the production of space in East Austin.

Education versus Schooling: Stories of Home Pedagogies

In talking with two former *jefes* of the Brown Berets, Gilbert Rivera and Susana Almanza, about the organization's use of *Teatro Chicano*, our conversations held two similar characteristics: the inclusion of other non-Brown Beret East Austin community members in the exchanges and the explicit linking of activist practice to education provided by the local community, as opposed to the local school. For a long talk with Rivera, we met at his home in the Rosewood area of East Austin, and his wife and fellow activist, Jane Rivera, joined in the discussion. I met Susana at the PODER offices in the Govalle subdivision of East Austin. Almanza invited Dr. Sylvia Herrera, a long-time community organizer and East Austinite, to join in our conversation. Neither Jane Rivera nor Sylvia Herrera were ever formal members of the Brown Berets, but both have long associations with East Austin and with Brown Beret members. Trusting in Jane Rivera and Sylvia Herrera's insider-knowledge, Gilbert Rivera and Susana Almanza folded them into their respective interviews about the East Austin chapter of the Berets. As we talked, both Gilbert Rivera and Almanza interpolated their respective interview partners into the Berets' story, positioning them as witnesses to a particular community history and valuing their insights and critiques. By including other community members and by detailing lessons learned via family structures within a conversation explicitly framed as a discussion about radical performance, Rivera and Almanza illuminate the connection of *Teatro Chicano* performance to everyday life practices in East Austin: performance is a process of interrelations that moves beyond the art object itself and out

into a web of trajectories that include cultural, political, and economic forces. Thus, to talk about *Teatro Chicano* first requires framing artistic practice within a longer history of political, cultural, and economic awareness. For all, that heightened awareness began in early childhood. Thus, political awareness took hold in their lives well before the days of formal relationships with groups like the Brown Berets. As these East Austinites shared stories of their youth, two thematic threads appeared time-and-again: abusive experiences within the public school system and the opening of political consciousness within the home environment. *Teatro Chicano* in East Austin inherits the pain, the pride, and tactical awareness associated with these stories.

Enculturation: Stories of Loud Silences

Gilbert Rivera and Sylvia Herrera both told what I found to be horrifying stories of their educational experiences in East Austin. Each story involves the physical silencing of cultural difference within school as a catalyst for later social activism.

For Herrera, her physical silencing began in first grade, at that time the starting point for elementary education in East Austin. Like so many Brown Berets, Herrera attended Govalle Elementary School in far East Austin. When Herrera began school, she only spoke Spanish, a language explicitly forbidden in Govalle Elementary, as it was within most Texas schools at the time.¹⁶ Aware of but yet not cowed by the school's disciplining of language, Herrera often spoke Spanish aloud in school. As a result, Herrera's teacher often took several pieces of scotch tape, and one-by-one, layered them across the young Chicana's mouth.¹⁷ Sylvia Herrera spent much of first grade with her mouth literally taped shut. Despite the horror of the situation, Herrera explains, "That

was a good experience for me because ever since them, I haven't stopped talking about injustices.”

Gilbert Rivera's experience in first grade, also at Govalle Elementary, was not completely unlike Sylvia Herrera's. Rivera's story, however, reveals a different reaction to the disciplining of language. While Herrera's experience produced more vigorous language, Rivera's resulted in silence. Gilbert Rivera spent three years in the first grade at Govalle. In his first year, he would only speak Spanish, which resulted in his being held back from second grade. In his second and third years of the first grade, Rivera simply would not speak. Rivera describes his early years in education as if school was a kind of fascist, English language-driven state. Monitors populated the hallways, the playground, the cafeteria, the gym, and the restrooms—all listening for Spanish. If a student was caught speaking Spanish, he or she was sent to the principal's office. Rivera remembers the principal's name as Mr. Moco, an earned title that plays on the Spanish word for buggers, *mocos*. Once in Mr. Moco's office, the principal would plant his index finger into Gilbert's shoulder and press firmly downward until Gilbert fell to his knees. All the while, Mr. Moco proclaimed, “Don't speak Spanish!”¹⁸ In response, Rivera eventually learned not to speak—in Spanish or otherwise. As a result of Gilbert's learned silence, he spent a total of three years in first grade and was “diagnosed” with a learning condition: “I spent three years [in first grade], and they had already labeled me retarded.”¹⁹

To theorize his years in the first grade, Rivera turned to “Overcoming a Childhood Trauma,” a poem by his dear friend and nationally acclaimed writer and poet, Raúl Salinas:

I must not speak Spanish in the classroom.
 I must not speak Spanish on the schoolgrounds.
 I must not speak Spanish.
 I must not speak.
 I must not

O' yesss I willllll,
 CHINGUEN A TODA SU MADRE!!!²⁰

Out of a sense of respect, when sharing the poem's application to his own life, Rivera never quotes the last two lines of the piece. However, the first movement in the poem reflects Rivera's early educational process. From a censoring of Spanish that moves from the classroom through the school building and out into the wider community, students are disciplined to not only halt their use of Spanish, but over time, to silence themselves in totality. Through his poetry, Salinas, who spent much of his life in East Austin and vigorously worked there alongside Rivera during the Chicano Movement, captures the process by which silence worked upon Rivera.

Unlike Herrera, Rivera's silencing did not immediately result in finding a voice for justice, and it was not until years later, and another traumatic event at the hands of authority, that Rivera found his political voice. In neither of these interviews, did I prompt Herrera or Rivera to share stories about their education. They did so of their own volition in order to explain how they became Chicana/o activist. For both, part of their political awakening began in first grade at the hands of silence. In *Borderlands*, Gloria Anzaldúa describes a similar process of silencing as that experienced by Rivera and Herrera. She writes, "So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity it twin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (81). Anzaldúa's insights point out the ways in which language informs personhood. For a school to take away and forbid a child's language is to take away the child herself—the two go hand-in-

hand. Conversely, to forcefully replace one language with another—Spanish for English—is to irrefutably alter identity. Rivera’s long silence speaks to the consequence of such erasure. However, neither Gilbert Rivera nor Sylvia Herrera equate language as strongly as Anzaldúa does to their “ethnic identity.”²¹ Rather, both theorize their fortitude as a direct reflection of a culturally-specific education gained through the labors of *familia*.

Ideological Labor: Stories of Lessons Learned in Translation and in the Field

For both Almanza and Rivera, lessons in tactically navigating a larger system bent upon silencing Latino children began while working with their families. Both Almanza and Rivera contributed to their family’s livelihoods with their labors. Almanza’s and Rivera’s respective stories of translation duties and migrant farming elucidate the connection between the labor that fueled their daily lives as adolescents and the ideas that fueled their work as Brown Berets.

Almanza’s parents, who identified as *Mexicanos*, did not speak English. Out of necessity, Almanza, who was born in Austin and learned to speak English at an early age, became the family translator for day-to-day and business transactions. Her role as translator not only gave Susana a sense of power and importance, but through translation, Almanza also learned how to navigate systems of labor, community, and education. Almanza explains that by the time she was five, she was the official family translator. Her parents took her all over the city to serve as the family voice. Almanza spent considerable time in her childhood talking to adults, never children. In transactions, she translated at the adult level. As she grew older and more adept with language and people, then Almanza learned to edit. She would comment upon and alter translations to better

benefit her family, a skill that requires a deft ability to read power relationships across multiple languages. Through this process of translation, Almanza notes her parents “were the ones preparing me and giving me a voice.” As Almanza explains of her years prior to serving as *jefa* of the Brown Berets, “I already had a real upbringing about not being afraid to speak.” Susana gives credit to her father, Miguel Renteria, for helping her establish a sense of empowered self from a very young age. Renteria would tell her, “Don’t ever let no one belittle you... I was even. I was even with the men and don’t let nobody treat me lower than what I am.”

Almanza’s story of translation reveals two patterns that reappear later within her work with Brown Berets. First, Almanza was continually placed within a position of leadership within her family structure. By the time she became a *jefa* for the Brown Berets, Almanza had already developed a strong sense of authority in negotiating social relationships. In *Sanchos’ Journal*, Montejano shares his own experience of interacting with Almanza in the 1970s. He notes Almanza’s leadership in organizing community as well as her ability to parse gender dynamics in the group (179-180). Though many local Berets I spoke to also noted Almanza’s confidence and adept language skills, Almanza herself explains that these abilities developed in childhood as a response to family and neighborhood conditions, as opposed to germinating within the realm of the Berets. I mark the inception of Almanza’s skill to note the ways in which the Berets of East Austin were a product of local spatial practices as much as they were reflective of the Brown Beret culture.

Prior to the Berets, Susana’s family had instilled within her an understanding of the negotiations of space in East Austin: a skill learned through the intersection of

everyday life practice with the ideological structures also producing space. In “Making Do,” de Certeau analyzes the behaviors of North Africans living in Paris and navigating “operational schemas.” De Certeau explains,

He superimposes them [different orders of living] and, by that combination, creates for himself a space in which he can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from the situation. (30)

In the case of Almanza, she took a potentially “constraining order,” serving as her family’s translator, and with the guidance of her parents, not only learned to operate within the established orders of language and economy, but she also creatively “superimposed” orders, in the process developing greater leadership and language skills and serving her family’s needs. This same tactical ability will eventually appear in the production of teatros by Almanza for the Brown Berets.

Gilbert Rivera describes similar instances of learning to negotiate constraining orders. In Rivera’s case, his lessons were often learned through the experience of farming. For most of his young life, Gilbert Rivera spent summers with his family farming: until he was school-aged, his family sharecropped and picked cotton in McFadden, Texas; from age 13, his family spent summers as migrant farmers in Michigan, where they lived in migrant labor camps. Once the family moved to Austin, Rivera’s father Ramon worked in construction, earning a dollar an hour. Migrant farming was necessary to supplement the family’s income. However, in Michigan, the

Rivera family—mother, father, six siblings, and Rivera’s grandfather—could *each* earn fifty cents an hour (which is about \$3.50 an hour for the whole family) by picking cucumbers, cherries, apples, and sugar beets. Though the conditions of migrant farming involved back-breaking labor, the Rivera family did not passively accept the “constraining orders” of migrant labor. For example, Rivera’s father knew that his family could make even more money if they were paid for performance—or rather by the five gallon bucket. In Michigan, Rivera’s father, along with other migrant family fathers, decided to go on strike in protest of their wages. As Rivera described the strike, he noted what it taught him about economies of labor: “You’re a kid checking it out. You really don’t know if you’re learning or not, but you’re observing.” In the case of the five-gallon-bucket-strike, knowing that each family member could pick numerous buckets over the course of an hour, the fathers negotiated for a wage of fifty cents per bucket. Once the bosses had agreed to this new wage system, the Rivera family developed systems for increasing picking production. For instance, his family would hold bucket-filling races. As a result of these races, the most a single individual ever pulled was \$25 dollars in a single day—a marked improvement over the dollar a day wage his father earned in Austin. After the bucket wage increase, multiple family members were each earning ten, fifteen, or twenty dollars a day. Given their ability to make money in Michigan, the Rivera family returned there year-after-year. Gilbert Rivera continued to work with his family in the fields until he graduated from high school. The day Rivera graduate, he walked across the stage, put on his class ring, and then got on a bus to join his family in Michigan.

Like Almanza's explanation of translation, Rivera's story of cucumber-picking highlights the ways in which Latino families in East Austin creatively developed mechanisms for drawing unexpected results from almost untenable conditions. Rather than passively accepting low wages, Rivera's father engaged in a form of protest that eventually led to a significant increase in his family's wages. Moreover, once the increase was established, the family creatively developed techniques to further negotiate the system of migrant labor. In doing so, the Riveras did not move beyond the constraining order of the migrant laborer system. Instead, the family tactically intervened in the system in order to improve their summer wages, and therefore their quality of life in Austin.

In both Rivera and Almanza's critiques of academic research about the Berets, critiques primarily based upon their reactions to Montejano's work, they spoke of the separation of the Berets' politics from the everyday spatial practices of life within neighborhoods like East Austin. In examining stories like Almanza's as family translator or the Rivera's cucumber protest, the education gained via the labor practices of *familia* illuminate the dramaturgical and thematic structures developed prior to the advent of the play *Vida Fuerte*. As the budding activists further developed a political consciousness that continued to expand their understanding of *vida fuerte*, they grounded that consciousness in the political and organizational structures of the Chicano Movement and the Brown Berets, and in doing so, developed a spatial practice distinct from other Latinos living in East Austin. As Latino audiences watched *Vida Fuerte*, they responded to how the *teatro* performed these well-rehearsed differences in East Austin Latino spatial practices as much as to the play itself.

Radical Chicanos: The Story of the Brown Berets in East Austin

To better understand how *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* fits into the spatial practice of the Brown Berets, I want to consider how the play is an outgrowth of the ways in which the Brown Berets organization negotiated the dominant conceptions of space in the city as well as their own everyday life practices within their neighborhood. My interpretation of these developments comes from combining oral histories told to me by Susana Almanza and Gilbert Rivera, an oral history presented by Ernesto Flaga and Gilbert Rivera at a La Raza Roundtable meeting, and archival documents from the Austin History Center and from Susana Almanza and Gilbert Rivera. Together, these sources surface the webbing between everyday life, ideological concerns, and artistic practice. These enmeshed concerns fuel the production of *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*. To read *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* outside of the dynamic strips the play of its radical intent.

In 1970, the first chapter of the Brown Berets in Austin was based in South Austin and led by Ernesto Flaga. Flaga's early organization built upon the tenets of the state and national Beret organizations and sought to create networks with other Brown Beret organizations throughout the state ("Brief Bio"). The Brown Berets in Austin, however, did not develop into a large, well-structured organization until after an act of police brutality, which took place in East Austin. Around 1971 or 1972, Gilbert Rivera (who at that time was *not* a Beret), his friends, and brothers were confronted by local police outside of an Austin nightclub. The police accused the young Latinos and Chicanos of disorderly conduct. When he questioned the police's behavior and accusations, Gilbert Rivera was beaten. Rivera was beaten outside the club; he was roughed up on the way to jail; and in his cell, he was also beaten three times over the course of the night. Beyond

disorderly conduct outside of the club, eventually Rivera was also charged with resisting arrest and attacking a police officer. All charges against Rivera were later dropped.

Important to the charges against Rivera being dismissed was his physical condition. Rivera was stricken with polio as a child, which impacts movement in his arms and legs. In 1971 or 72, though a young man, Rivera was not physically capable of causing the officers harm. Once charges were dropped, Rivera responded by filing a federal law suit against the Austin Police Department. Because the federal suit would have found in favor of Rivera, he was able to negotiate to have all charges against Chicanos and Latinos involved in the incident that night dropped. The city also paid Rivera \$100 in restitution for his multiple beatings and unlawful jailing. The larger impact of Gilbert Rivera's beating, however, grew through the community's response. Enraged by this injustice, East Austin Latino and Chicano residents were ready to protest police brutalities against minority citizens (Flaga; Rivera and Rivera; "Brown Berets Picket").

In an interview, Rivera explained that before his beating he was already involved with a number of social justice organizations in the city including MAYO (Mexican American Youth Organization), which was primarily populated with local college and university students. However after his beating, Rivera's organizational tactics shifted: "I was beaten into militancy. I was socially conscious but not socially activated in that sense. But when the beating came, then all of sudden, it was like Ferguson or Baltimore today. It was a spark that brought everybody out, and that's what created the Brown Berets in Austin" (Rivera and Rivera). East Austinites enraged by Rivera's beating combined forces with the South Austin Brown Berets lead by Flaga to form the East

Austin Brown Berets. Beyond Flaga's and Rivera's personal connections, they also recruited students out of the city's poorer high schools, including Johnston High School where Susana Almanza was a student. Gilbert Rivera was head—*jefe* or *General*—of the first combined Brown Beret organization in Austin.

The Brown Berets' operation grew within and was inspired by the production of space within the Latino community itself. Initial meetings of the organization took place at Santa Julia Catholic Church because the group found an unusual champion in the church's priest and because the Brown Berets saw the church as a haven for working-class Latinos. Eventually, the Berets found their own space, Centro Chicano, which over time was located in several different houses along First Street in East Austin.²² At that time, First Street was the social, political, and economic hub for Latinos in East Austin; hence, the Berets wanted Centro Chicano located within this nexus of ideological and social drivers. From Centro Chicano, East Austin Berets organized around community concerns about by the ways in which the city disciplined Latino bodies and invaded Latino neighborhoods: police brutality; loud and unruly boat races, on nearby Town Lake, that impacted the local Latino community living along the lake; the unfair labor practices of the Economy Furniture Company; a lack of community childcare; and a lack of food resources for local families (Almanza and Herrera; Flaga and Rivera; "Join Texas Farmworkers"; "Origin"; Rivera and Rivera).

Beyond addressing neighborhood issues within East Austin, in the early years of the East Austin Berets members worked to actualize their organization's mission through the development of a series of local non-profits run by Beret members. These explorations into non-profit economies also led to self-discovery through artistic practice.

The Berets, well aware of their lack of formal education in setting-up non-profit organizations, sought out connections with federal and state associations that could aid in building their knowledge base. For example, early in the organization's history the Berets landed a \$5000 grant from the Department of Labor. The grant allowed the Berets to attend a two-week Dude Ranch retreat in Hondo, Texas. At the retreat, which aimed to teach activists how to write funding proposals and how to develop organizational structures, the Berets also spent considerable time assessing and exploring their own self-identities: the retreat "worked with us about where we were in our heads" (Rivera and Rivera).

Rivera explained that part of the explicit mission of the retreat was to connect the development of emotional well-being to the development of economic well-being. Self-actualization exercises frequently involved accessing emotions through arts activities like sculpture and theatre. For example, with one sculpture activity, the activists were asked to use clay to shape answers to the question "What is in your life, in your community, in your personal feelings that you care about?" Once the figure was formed, the facilitator dramatically destroyed that of one participant, and then proposed this question to the group: "What are you going to do about defending it?" Rivera explained that this somewhat brutal activity was effective because it connected activists' passions to the realities of having to defend what they loved. With theatre exercises, organizers led participants through the development of *actos*. Gilbert describes the East Austin group's devised theatre piece as a rip-off of Teatro Campesino: "We basically stole Valdez's play, *Los Vendidos*...and then used local things happening in our state." Though the structure was borrowed, the East Austin participants filled the parts with character types

particular to their neighborhood. Rivera explains that this theatre exercises “let you think” about the economic and racial dynamics fueling local life (Rivera and Rivera). Experiences like the retreat in Hondo reaffirmed for the Berets the necessity of actively examining their own organization as well as the production of space in East Austin: How do political organizing, community life, federal funding, leadership training, education, economic hardship, and the production of art interrelate? How do these constraints give rise to creative voices?

The inception of the Brown Berets in East Austin and the organization’s ties to their local community speak to the ways in which the group was powered by their own theorization of production of space in East Austin: by studying the ways in which city and state ideologies overtly and covertly influenced their own everyday life practices, the Berets then developed new ideological structures to obstruct and combat those governing their neighborhood. Organizing inside local churches, rallying local high school students, addressing hyper-local social justice issues, and attending Dude Ranch retreats were not principles within the national mission of the Brown Berets. Instead, the East Austin Brown Berets interpolated local concerns within a wide organizational structure determined at a national level. In this way, when the Berets began to produce their own *Teatro Chicano*, the themes and ideas at play within the pieces were reflective of both the mission of the national Beret organization and reflective of grassroots concerns and efforts within East Austin, or Latino spatial practice particular to East Austin. To better comprehend the balance between national interests and hyper-local concerns, one need look no further than an examination of the role women played within the East Austin

chapter of the Brown Berets. *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* was built by the women within the East Austin Brown Beret chapter.

The Role of Woman in the East Austin Brown Berets: The Story of Women's Leadership

To understand the conditions that shaped how *Vida Fuerte* was produced by the East Austin Brown Berets and received by the East Austin community requires not simply a close reading of the text, but also an exploration of how the production of *Vida Fuerte* spoke to gender dynamics within the Brown Berets in East Austin and within the wider Latino community. The role of women within the East Austin Chapter of the Brown Berets was dynamic, complex, and overtly grounded within the local spatial practices informing the Berets. *Vida Fuerte* was not only a radical play in its message, but it also showcased the work of women in the Berets, a labor often dismissed by both scholars of the Berets and men within the Brown Beret community.

In *Sancho's Journal*, David Montejano briefly queries the role of “heroic masculinity” within Beret organizations. In doing so, Montejano points out that Beret organizations were plagued by “machismo” to the extent that only a limited number of chapters admitted women as members (179). Montejano holds up Susana Almanza’s work in the East Austin Beret Chapter, which admitted any number of women, as an example of how female leadership was interpolated into a local Beret organization. In detailing the work of the Berets in East Austin, Montejano asked Susana to reflect upon her role within the Berets:

Many years later, Ana, the leader of the Chicana Berets, would recall that she had many good memories from her time with the Austin Berets but that “sexism hurt.”

Although the women did much of the work, “the guys took the credit.” At local protests there was no problem with being inclusive. The women would be given time to speak. “But at big events, the women were pushed to the side.” (179-180) Here Montejano names Almanza (Ana) as a leader of the Berets and then uses Almanza’s testimony to question the ways in which female labor was credited within the East Austin Berets. Montejano’s description of Almanza’s reflection prompts a questioning of gender dynamics within both academic scholarship surrounding the Berets and the Beret organization itself.

Montejano positions Almanza as not a chapter leader, but a “leader of the Chicana Berets.” This phrasing—“Chicana Berets’—signals that Almanza’s influence did not spread beyond those of her own gender. However, never once in any of my discussions with former East Austin Brown Berets did a member describe Susana as only a leader of the women within the group. Gilbert Rivera, Pete Rivera, Ernesto Flaga, and Susana Almanza herself all described this *jefa* as a leader of all the Berets—both the men and the women within the organization. As I have mentioned before, in *Sancho’s Journal* Montejano describes the political philosophy of the Berets as one “with no coherent ideology beyond cultural nationalism” (179). Because Montejano places importance on the philosophy of the Berets at a national level, he misses opportunities to consider how strong local philosophies developed within some chapters, including philosophies about the role of gender. Thus, he arrives at assumptions about the role of women in the East Austin Berets: women led women, not men. His labeling of Almanza as leader of the “Chicana Berets’ represents the misapplication of a national philosophy upon a local chapter.

In my formal and informal talks with Almanza, time-and-again Almanza described the importance of *familia* as a structuring device for the East Austin Berets. To explain the concept of “*familia*” within the East Austin Berets, Almanza told stories about her experiences within the Berets, and then she and Sylvia Herrera together theorized how gender roles functioned within their own families. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Almanza’s critique of Montejano’s work and that of so many scholars who study the Berets derives from their inattention to placing the Berets’ practice into conversation with local neighborhood practices, thereby giving rise to over-simplified interpretation of the Berets’ work. Instead, Almanza calls for complex interpretation in discussions of gender dynamics within the Beret organizations. Namely, gender dynamics within the East Austin Berets were not fixed, and they developed within the continuum of everyday life practices.

In calling for complexity, Almanza does not refute her earlier feelings that men often took credit for women’s work and loved to hog media attention. She readily confirmed these opinions with me. In our discussion, however, Almanza also discussed how she then addressed such dismals of women within her local organization. When Almanza joined the Berets, the organization was already well-established. As she explains, “I had already been organizing most my life anyways, so when I went [to my first meeting], I fit right in.” Eventually, Almanza became a *jefa*, one of the chapter leaders or bosses. She describes the position as acting as a “co-chair” with fellow Beret Paul Hernandez. Susana’s role as leader within the Berets, however, did not necessarily mean that she was treated as an equal to male leadership:

During that time, I had to really, again challenging the male dominance that was there. That was a real big challenge. And so I had to always be the one and challenge and say, “No, Paul couldn’t just be the spokesperson.” If we’re talking about *familia*—because the whole thing was about family and stuff—so if it was really going to be about *familia*, we needed to have a woman there speaking all the time. We needed to have a man and a woman speaking.

For Almanza, the East Austin Chapter’s emphasis of on operating as *familia*—a goal stated within the group’s Manifesto—required that the organization actually operate with a family-like dynamic: all family members worked to make decisions, to speak for the Berets, and to operate within the local community. All family members, men and women, were important to maintaining balance within the organization. In moments when women’s voices were not included, Almanza and her sister Berets readily spoke up about imbalances and worked to steer the organization back to a healthier *familia* structure. Thus, the mission for Almanza was not to avoid conflict around gender dynamics, but rather to name that conflict and then work to rectify the associated inequality. Importantly, Almanza’s ability to tactically negotiate within seemingly male-dominated structure is not without precedent within Latino culture nor within Latino family structures in East Austin.

Undoubtedly, within Latino history in Mexico and the Southwest there are any number of historical models in which female leadership worked to explicitly perturb patriarchal culture. With her analysis of the *soldaderas*, or female soldiers, during the Mexican Revolution, Norma Cantú offers an interesting point of comparison for the militaristic Brown Berets. Cantú explains that *soldaderas* were not simply caregivers

following the army but “she is a soldier herself, sometimes donning man’s attire and fighting along with the men.” *Soldaderas* were “often military strategists, political thinkers who gave the Mexican Revolution more than tortillas and beans” (9). Cantú’s analysis points out how the lack of recognition for *soldaderas*’ labor and bravery mirrors a general problem within Chicana/o studies: a lack of recognition for the labor of Chicana writers and Chicana scholars within Chicana/o studies (10). This lack of recognition can be seen in Montejano’s analysis of Almanza. Though Montejano’s vision of Almanza does acknowledge her labor, he does not fully explore or acknowledge Almanza’s impact on her chapter.

For Susana Almanza and Sylvia Herrera, part of recognizing female leadership within the Berets involves learning to parse community and family dynamics. Herrera explained that well into the twentieth century there has been a derivative image of Mexican women that is just plain incorrect: “We’re all quiet and shy and won’t stand up. And anybody who knows a Mexican family knows that who rules is the mom.” For Herrera, people who are surprised that *Mexicanas* or Chicanas speak up and fight, have not actually observed day-to-day life within those cultures and are thus perpetuating inaccurate stereotypes. Herrera and Almanza both credit their mothers and grandmothers for demonstrating empowered female voices, for demonstrating how to fight. Herrera explained that Chicanas “had to make sure that there was representation [of women]” within various community, educational, and business structures, but the ability to confront inequity was taught first at home. Almanza was able to confidently negotiate her role within the Berets because of the everyday life practices she brought to the

organization. Those practices then became a part of the operating order within the Berets.

Vida Fuerte Goes to School calls upon these lessons learned about womanhood, labor, and education in order to argue for a conception of Chicano life that boldly voiced all that was hidden by systems of regulation. Like the viewers of Hugo Ball's performance at the Cabaret Voltaire who understood Balls' antics as not simply experimental nonsense but a conversation between Ball and the politics living just beyond the doors of the cabaret, those who watched the *Vida Fuerte*, primarily Latinos and Chicanos, never understood the play as a simply a short *acto* put on by children. Rather the production of space surrounding the play—from childhood labor to education, to violent encounters with the police, to the Berets' own controversial politics—formed the long dramaturgical arc of the play. *Vida Fuerte* not only depends upon and plays directly to these local knowledges, the play's message offers a critique of Latinos viewers who did not identify as Chicanos.

The Story of Vida Fuerte Goes to School and a Chicano Avant Garde

Vida Fuerte draws directly from the schooling experiences of many of the Berets and many of the audience members who watched the play. Initially, the play presents its audience with an oh-so-familiar portrait of the ways in which Latinos were silenced in school settings. However rather than continuing to realistically portray this scene from the past, *Vida Fuerte* instead reimagines power dynamics within the classroom and advocates for a new form of education fueled by the tenets of the Chicano Movement.

Vida Fuerte tells the story of a young Chicano who refuses to say the Pledge of Allegiance and provokes a small classroom riot. After a short series of stage directions

that first set the classroom scene and then describe the character Vida Fuerte's costume, the play opens in the moments just before Fuerte's class says the Pledge of Allegiance. In the first piece of the play, the teacher is questioning Vida Fuerte about the meaning of his shirt, which reads "Chicano de Aztlan." Eventually the teacher halts her line of inquiry and asks the students to stand and say the Pledge. All the children stand, but unlike the rest, Vida Fuerte does not place his hand over his heart, nor does he say the Pledge. The teacher interrupts the Pledge to question why Fuerte is not fully participating. Fuerte explains why he cannot say the Pledge. The teacher then threatens to send him to the principal's office where he is likely to be punished. Fuerte replies that he will not say the Pledge and agrees to go to the principal's office, and so the teacher grabs Fuerte by the arm and escorts him out of the classroom as the other students voice their support for Fuerte.

In reading *Vida Fuerte* on the page, the plot develops with additional layers: some of the text is typed; some is written by hand; and the final moments of the skit are not included at all. Thus analyzing the text of *Vida Fuerte* requires not just a copy of the script itself, but also knowledge of the everyday life practices surrounding the Brown Berets as well as additional insights from playwright Susana Almanza. Almanza not only saved the lone copy of *Vida Fuerte*, but her oral history of the play fills out the missing pieces of the text and provides a context for its performances. In her analysis of Latino theatre traditions in the U.S., scholar Yolanda Broylez-Gonzalez highlights the ways in which Latino performance traditions rely on systems of orality: "...oral culture is typically not just spoken words but words defined by their lifeworld context, hence inseparable from that context and from the body and voice that utters them" (5). As I

position *Vida Fuerte* within the field of avant garde performance, my study of the text relies not only upon a script but also on the script's context, explained in oral histories from East Austin community members. The energy, gestures, jokes, and storytelling abilities of those who shared these histories—at times in this process even acting out scenes from their everyday lives—influenced not only how I came to understand the development process surrounding *Vida Fuerte* but also how I analyzed the action of the script. Susana Almanza's *Vida Fuerte*, when placed in its social context, provides an opportunity to not only expand the field of avant garde theatre with the inclusion of a grassroots Chicano text, but *listening* to *Vida Fuerte* draws attention to the range of methodological approaches necessary for accessing texts from oral cultures.

Vida Fuerte in the Archive: The Story of Conditional Transformation

In my April 2015 meeting with Almanza and Herrera, Almanza presented me with the only known copy of *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*. Almanza had looked for it in a trunk full of old memorabilia that she stores at her daughter's house, but ended up locating the play in one of her files at the PODER offices. Almanza looked in the PODER filing cabinets following a hunch. This remaining copy of *Vida Fuerte* is a mimeograph of an older typed-copy. The text occurs across two pieces of paper. The vanilla-colored papers are folded in half "hamburger style," and the texts covers about one and a half pages of the half pages. (On one of the right-hand edges of the paper a faint burn lingers, as if someone had set a cigarette a little too close to the paper.) Additional hand-written text is added at the end of the typed text, and then at the bottom of the page in handwriting appears Almanza's maiden name: Susana Renteria. When presenting me with this copy, Almanza explained that she did not think this was the final

draft of the play because she knew some other lines happened at the end of the play. Then she reenacted the end of the play as she remembered it (Almanza and Herrera).

I describe the location and condition of *Vida Fuerte* to provide a short biography of the object. While Almanza was happy to have located her copy of *Vida Fuerte*, it clearly is not one of the more precious objects in her own personal archive. In fact, she told me that I could keep the text. As John Randolph explains in his analysis of the Bakunin Family Archive, "...archives as objects gather meanings over time—in their exchange and physical transformation—and have meaning for us today through this process and not in isolation from it." The biography of an archive, or the object in it, is also a subject of history. "Their evolving historical presence makes certain kinds of actions and meanings possible—even as their direct involvement in these processes insures their own continuing transformation" (210). As object gathering meaning within the archive, their biographies change. This transformation of biographies result not only in new meanings for the objects but also new meanings for archives and histories

In the case of *Vida Fuerte*, Almanza initially was not clear about the object's location—at her daughter's home or in the office—in her space of memorabilia or her space of work. At PODER, among many other projects, Almanza currently runs a youth education program that includes arts education. Clearly, *Vida Fuerte* is no longer a part of Almanza's youth education curriculum. Thus for Susana, *Vida Fuerte* is not a working object. In her personal archive, the play functions as memorabilia left from a cultural and political movement in which she participated in her younger years. When she presented *Vida Fuerte* to me, Almanza laughed and told stories about growing up in Austin and her days with the Brown Berets while I sat wide-eyed, staring at what had become an almost

mythical object in my mind—a play by an East Austin Brown Beret. Over time, the biography of *Vida Fuerte* has gathered numerous meanings. In our interview, Almanza described its place in longer histories of both the Chicano Movement and arts education in East Austin. She then narrated the script of the play—giving it life and action not indicated in the text. When she then presented the script to me for my own study, *Vida Fuerte* transformed once again. What had clearly been a working object saved out of a feeling of nostalgia would next become a piece of the history related to avant garde performance in East Austin. From nostalgic remnant, to oral history catalyzer, to text for analysis, the “transformative acts” surrounding *Vida Fuerte* were determined not only by the processes shaping an individual’s archive but also personal memories and some excellent storytelling. In this way, the biography of *Vida Fuerte* does not highlight an ever-expanding body of knowledge about the play. Rather, the biography of *Vida Fuerte* highlights how transformation is conditional. Eventually, *Vida Fuerte* will return to Almanza’s filing cabinet to become yet again something else altogether.

A Communal Archive of Vida Fuerte’s Development: The Story of Rough Edges

As both Gilbert Rivera and Susana Almanza explained, the seeds of *Vida Fuerte* first lived in the Berets’ everyday practices within their local community. In the case of the play, the ideological orders governing the Berets’ everyday practices were explicitly connected to their Brown Beret Manifesto and to the tenets of the Chicano Movement. However, *Vida Fuerte* was also a response to the group’s social relations within their local neighborhoods. These relations included community members who did *not* define themselves as Chicano and who fiercely protested being labeled as such, just as Chicanos often critiqued those who identified as Mexican-American. *Vida Fuerte* responds not to a

singular Latino identity but to a system of overlapping identities and overlapping social structures defining the East Austin Latino community. In his spatial reconceptualization of avant garde scholarship, James M. Harding calls for a rethinking of the ideological and geographical limits or “edges” of avant garde performance. Harding advocates for “the recognition of a plurality of edges devoid of an identifiable center, a plurality that the rectilinear center-to-edge/edge-to-center convention in scholarship on the avant-garde has obscured” (“From Cutting” 24). Harding’s theorization moves away from originary readings of avant garde performance that place the “edge” around European culture and instead questions not only Europe as the epi-center of the avant garde movement but also how and where avant garde performances might be found.

The development process and performance of *Vida Fuerte* certainly exists far beyond any geographical “identifiable center” for traditional avant garde scholarship. In fact, the play’s development highlights the pluralities of identity and artistic techniques within one given edge of the avant garde system. But perhaps in *Vida Fuerte*’s case, “edge” should be “edges.” The movement of *Vida Fuerte* through its community spirals through a palimpsest-like system of highly-localized identity constructions and culturally-specific arts practices. The development of *Vida Fuerte* highlights the rubbing together and rubbing away of multiple cultural identities for Latinos in East Austin. *Vida Fuerte* was not a celebration of Latino identity. It was call to arms for Chicano identity, and for some Latinos in East Austin, a condemnation of the supposed political passivity of the Mexican-American identity. The development and performance of *Vida Fuerte* points to the need to see plurality even within the very borders of ideas sculpting avant garde performance scholarship.

One of the base layers of the *Vida Fuerte* development process evolved from a surprising catalyst: childcare needs. Almanza and Rivera both explained that summer childcare was continually one of the pressing community needs for East Austin Latinos. Just like in much of the U.S., in the 1960s and 1970s many Latina mothers went to work outside of the home. In East Austin, once school was out for the summer, many Latino children lacked a structured and nurturing environment during the day. Rivera explained that this lack structure during the day resulted in any number of problems: from young children going unfed for much of the day, to kids getting into minor trouble around the neighborhood, to kids participating in drug culture, especially huffing paint. As Almanza offered, part of the *familia* mission at the Centro Chicano involved protecting all Latino families. Serving the kids who lived near Centro Chicano not only kept children out of harm's way, it also forwarded the Brown Berets' mission. Children were a means to bring the Chicano Movement message into all Latino homes.

For the Berets, addressing the dearth of childcare in the community near Centro Chicano first involved a simple act: feeding kids. (Not so different from the tacos at La Raza.) At the Centro Chicano, the Berets set up a lunch program for young kids who went unfed during the summer days. Largely run by the female leadership within the Beret organization, the summer lunch program had a number of impacts.²³ First and foremost, kids were no longer hungry, and at least for a portion of the day, they were under adult guidance. Second, as Almanza and Rivera explained, where the kids go, so do their parents. Mothers and fathers in the community were well-aware of how the Berets were caring for their children while they were at work. As a result of parents' appreciation, whole families were more open to investigating the Brown Berets' mission

and local community projects. Thus, childcare resulted in greater participation in Beret projects by all local Latinos (Almanza and Herrera; Rivera and Rivera).

The presence of the children at the Centro Chicano also led to the development of educational programming. Something had to be done with the kids once they were fed. Almanza describes working with the local kids on educational projects like *teatros* as a political act, not just as arts education. For example, she explained *Vida Fuerte's* politics as focused on justice: “So at that time you’re instilling within [the kids] the truth that there is no justice....They’re educating the community [through performance]. But they’re also being educated themselves. And they’re taking a stand. So young and adults can all relate to that particular issue that is happening” (Almanza and Herrera). In Almanza’s explanation, a particular interaction with justice surfaces: not justice’s definition or how it might be philosophically explored or enacted, rather a firm stand on the idea of justice—“there is no justice.” In this way, the Berets’ art education programming was forwarding a very particular political ideology built upon the Berets’ own political platform. In his reconceptualization of the avant garde as a practice led by small group formation not bound by art or aesthetics, Mike Sell positions the French Medial Corps in Algeria as avant garde activists whose performative gestures included embedding themselves within indigenous communities in order to reshape native ideologies and infiltrate and then co-opt the everyday life practices of native Algerians (41; 98-105). While by no means were the Berets colonizers, there were a minoritarian community in East Austin seeking to reshape other native ideologies via the repositioning of Latino everyday life practices, including the educational and art practices.

The Brown Berets' educational practice, like those associated with *Vida Fuerte*, in no way built upon the agendas of state agencies or local schools. The Berets were not studying progressive pedagogies like that of John Dewey or social justice pedagogies like that of Paulo Freire.²⁴ Nor did the organization's development of *teatros* connect to theatre practice in the city other than that of the culturally-specific performance practices of Latinos living in East Austin. Instead, as Almanza explains, the Brown Berets' militant educational and artistic mission evolved from a radical ideological stance determined to forward a new conception of Latinidad, despite the opinions of Latinos who did not identify as such. In this way, the educational vision of the Berets was more deterministic than dialectical, and undoubtedly for some Latinos living in East Austin, this deterministic pedagogy felt like propaganda.

With art like *Vida Fuerte*, the Brown Berets were not trying to complicate and critique notions of Latino identity, as in the case of Teatro Campesino's *Los Vendidos*. Instead, from within their own neighborhood, the Beret were trying to overtly mold Latino identity into a specific conception of Chicano life determined by the ideologies of the Berets' organization and its interaction with the Chicano Movement. And this potent and stringent visioning of Latino life is how *Vida Fuerte* sharply differs from the philosophical structures governing much theatre for social change movements or social justice pedagogies. The Berets were not simply trying to open up thinking, they were trying to determine the ideologies structuring Latino thought. Many Latinos I interviewed, including members of La Raza Roundtable, found such messaging and stratagems not only off-putting, but insulting and potentially dangerous.

Potential negative Latino community reactions to Beret ideologies made working with neighborhood children an important facet of spreading the Berets' message. In the case of *Vida Fuerte*, using a familiar indigenous *teatro* form, the Berets first practiced a radical, activist pedagogy that molded the mind of their actors. In this case, the actors were children. About fifteen kids performed in *Vida Fuerte*, including the Brown Berets' own children. Once the show was in front of an audience, the intent of *Vida Fuerte* was to indoctrinate the minds of the audience. The show was urging spectators to rethink not only the concept of justice but their own definitions of culture. Within an educational setting built around the tenets of the organization, the Brown Berets adapted a culturally-specific, non-naturalistic performance technique to disturb the idea of justice and Latino identity in Austin.

A consideration of *Vida Fuerte's* performance venues reveals how the play challenged conceptions of Latino politics in East Austin. In order to perform their *teatros* and forward their community education mission and Chicano ideology, the Berets had to find different venues for their *teatro*, a process which effectively expanded the demographics of their audience beyond those living around their headquarters. Sometimes the Berets' *teatros* were performed at Brown Beret-sponsored events; however, *teatros* like *Vida Fuerte* were also performed at local East Austin events where not all audience members identified as Chicano.²⁵ Almanza particularly remembers *Vida Fuerte* taking place at the Pan Am Hillside Theatre, a part of the Pan American Recreation Center (Almanza and Herrera). At the Pan Am Hillside Theatre, *Vida Fuerte* was incorporated into a larger swath of Latino programming, including musical numbers, other *teatros*, and *ballet folklórico*. These other pieces of programming did not directly

relate to the Brown Beret organization but were all part of the representational practices of Latinos living in East Austin. Well before the Chicano Movement, Latinos in East Austin used the Pan Am Hillside for numerous cultural events: religious pageants, school plays, and holiday celebrations like *Diez y Seis de Septiembre*, which marks Mexican Independence. Before the 1970s, Danny Camacho explained that the Pan American Center was a cultural hub for Latinos in East Austin, a place where the community could safely and freely engage in its own culturally-specific traditions (Camacho and Riles).

This consideration of the everyday uses of the Pan American Center points to who might have witnessed *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*. Certainly, the vast majority of the audience would have been Latino. However, given the diversity within the Latino community in East Austin, Latinos at the event would have identified as *Mexicanos*, Mexican Americans, Chicanos, Tejanos, and Texan. They might have been working class or middle class. They might have owned their own businesses or worked as migrant laborers in the summer. They could have been Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Catholic. Consequently, at the Pan Am Hillside *Vida Fuerte* was playing before audience members that would not have necessarily been in agreement with the play's very political position.

For example, Danny Camacho fondly remembers performances at the Pan Am Hillside. Camacho has also made it clear on multiple occasions that he does not identify as Chicano; moreover, he found the Brown Berets' political positions off-putting (Camacho "Fusebox"; Camacho and Riles). However, on the day of the 2015 César Chávez March in Austin, Texas, Camacho was front-and-center to hear Paul Chávez, César's son, speak on the steps outside City Hall. Chávez's dedication to the United

Farm Worker Movement helped spark the Chicano Movement. Danny Camacho is a non-Catholic, working-class East Austin Latino who supported Chávez's ideas but never self-identified as Chicano. Undoubtedly, any number of Latinos with racial and cultural identities as complex as Danny's watched *Vida Fuerte*. Perhaps the one thing that *Vida Fuerte's* audience members had most in common was not their self-identification but their treatment within the public school system. As far as the play's reception from its diverse Latino audience, Almanza did not recall anyone speaking against the play or other *teatros* during events like that at the Pan Am Hillside. She describes *Vida Fuerte's* reception as "It was really great and everybody loved it" (Almanza and Herrera). Because no press records exists, from within or without the community, and because only Almanza could really remember the details surrounding the play, it is impossible to determine if "everybody [actually] loved it."

Given the diversity within the Latino population in East Austin and that the majority of Latinos in East Austin did not define as Chicano, undoubtedly not everyone at the Pan Am Hillside agreed with *Vida Fuerte's* politics or loved the show. Audience members, familiar with the treatment of Latino students in East Austin, could have readily found the given circumstances of the play feasible, found the structure of the *teatro* familiar, and yet also disagreed with the play's message for the community. Consequently, *Vida Fuerte* was not preaching to the proverbial choir. Instead through the mechanism of culturally-specific form of theatre, *Vida Fuerte* presented a critical viewpoint of the school systems educating young Latinos in East Austin and also vehemently urged Latinos to consider the social and political structures governing their

own self-identification processes. For the audience of the Pan Am Center, the first hint of these critiques arrived in the setting of the stage.

Images of Racial Formation: The Story of Vida Fuerte's Design

The short stage directions for *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* are meant to invoke a simple everyday life scenario in the Austin Public Schools. Thus, the visual structure of the play is at first deceptively familiar and comfortable for its audience. Given that well into the 1970s Austin school were still segregated, the character Vida Fuerte would have attended a school in the eastern parts of the Austin Independent School District. As Almanza explained, the school setting would have been indicated by very simple and portable set pieces: chairs, books, etc. As in so much of the *Teatro Chicano* performed in the 1970s, bodily markers of race and class evoked the story more than the set itself. In Almanza's stage directions, she refers to *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* as "a skit about a mestizo child in the public school."²⁶ For the East Austin community of the 1970s, the very appearance of a *mestizo* child would have communicated information about the character's race, class, and even generational position, though not all audience members would have labeled the child as *mestizo*. All though would have read the character as a first or second generation Latino with darker skin that spoke to indigenous roots in Mexico or along the border in Texas. Especially for Chicanos, the use of a *mestizo* actor would have also indicated a subject who was from the working-class. For all Latinos watching the play, Vida Fuerte's very body told a story long before the language of words begins.

While this initial design would have seemed comfortably familiar to the audience, small design choices would have foreshadowed the radicality of the play's message.

Beyond the actor's phenotypical markers, the stage directions indicate that his shirt should be stamped with "Chicano de Aztlan," text forwarding a cultural and political position. In the 1970s in central and southern Texas, words like "Chicano" and "Aztlan" invoked social justice campaigns led by area Chicanos. In an address at a Latino Leaderships Summit, Susana Almanza provided her personal definition of *Mestizos en Aztlan*:

We are descendants of the tribes Nahuatlakas that populated what is now known as the southwestern states of the United States thousands of years before Christ was born... The birth of the mestizo people (most people), the people born from this mixture [Spanish and native] took on the language of Spanish with a native accent and the European culture intertwined with the indigenous culture... To recover our confidence in ourselves, the first step is to recognize that we are not foreigners; these lands are our ancestral lands. The recognition is for our "mental liberation," one way to de-colonize our mind. (Almanza)

Almanza's definition of a *mestizo* identity is a racial formation tied to a series of descriptors that address the interplay between physicality, language, geography, and multiple political positions: long indigenous bloodlines, the colonization of the southwest by the Spanish empire, the morphing of language, and a reclamation of self-identity define the *mestizo* identity for Almanza, not simply phenotypical markers or Spanish language in-and-of-itself.. For Almanza, racial identity is a process directly related to the production of space in a particular geographical region. Thus, while Vida Fuerte's t-shirt featured a known slogan from the Chicano Movement, for the Brown Berets that slogan represented a complex racial formation.

Other documents provided to me by Almanza make clear the connection between a *mestizo* identity and the Chicano Movement. In a document entitled “Origin of the Word ‘Chicano,’” a paragraph reads, “A lot of people ask what does the word Chicano mean? Before continuing, I want to say that whatever it wants to mean or does not mean, the word Chicano is not important. What is truly important is that the Raza in the United States has chosen this name, this identity.” The document goes on to connect the shaping of Chicano identity to “Anglo-capitalist society,” the “psychological confusion” created by that society’s efforts to subdue indigenous peoples, the history of the *Mexica* tribe in Mexico, Spanish imperialism in the New World, and the impact of segregation in the United States. Thus in this document, much like in Almanza’s theorization of the development of the *mestizo* identity, the development of the Chicano Movement is tied to an interconnected web of everyday spatial practices, ideological positions, and images and symbols that form the history of the Chicano Movement. In particular, the article works to demonstrate how this moving web correlates to language development. In its description of the *Mexica* tribe’s history, the article traces the genealogical transformation between the word *Mexica* and Chicano: “Mexica Mechica Mechicano Chicano Xicana.” In the 1960s, as some indigenous peoples of the Southwest began to protest against segregation and racist brutalities in the U.S., the Chicano Movement called for a reclamation of indigenous identity in order “to give new life to those ideas that for over five centuries the Anglo had made us feel shameful [about].” For Almanza, it was important that I understand the local history of words like “*mestizo*” and “Chicano.” She wanted local definitions to inform my analyzation of *Vida Fuerte* rather than broader academic definitions.

The final line of the stage directions reads: “The teacher is uneducated about the Chicano Movement.” Given the prominence of the Pan American Cultural Center’s festivals within the East Austin Latino community, *Vida Fuerte* would have been performed for audiences with numerous Latino identities, as well as possibly very small numbers of white and black residents of East Austin. Hence, the coding of Vida Fuerte’s body—in terms of its cultural and political identity—would have been perceived differently depending upon the backgrounds of the audience members: like the teacher, not all members of the East Austin Latino community would have read the same messages in Fuerte’s body. Some might have identified with Fuerte’s struggle while others might have been openly displeased with the imagery layered upon Fuerte’s body. For instance, those in the Latino community who saw the ideologies and the work of the Brown Berets’ as provoking violence, critiquing their own politics and lifestyles, or not acknowledging a plurality of Latino heritages in Texas undoubtedly read the image of Fuerte as unrelated or antithetical to their own cultural practice. Despite how audience members read Vida Fuerte’s appearance, when he began to speak, all doubt was erased. The words of a singular male student potently called for a radical rethinking of Latino identity and social justice in the United States.

The Form and Message of Vida Fuerte: The Story of Battling Silence

In direct contrast to the silencing experienced by so many members of the East Austin Latino community, members like Gilbert Rivera and Sylvia Herrera, *Vida Fuerte* imagines what might happen when young Chicanos are allowed to name their own truths, to use their own voices. The style of the performance was not driven by techniques like realism or naturalism, but rather was influenced by the flavor of *teatros* performed by

Latinos living along the border between Texas and Mexico. Almanza learned this style from a fellow Brown Beret, Hector Chacon. When I asked her how Hector learned to make political skits, Almanza linked his knowledge to the cultural practices along the border: “In the border, people always got around and did their own theatre” (Almanza and Herrera).

During the early and mid-twentieth century along the border of Texas and especially in San Antonio, the most popular form of *teatro* was the *carpa*. Scholar Rafaela Castro explains that during the Mexican Revolution, many Mexican actors and performers who worked in *carpas* “fled to Texas” (39). Scholar Jorge Huerta describes *carpas* as “people’s theatre that questioned authority and gave a sense of community to the dislocated refugees of the Mexican Revolution” (24). In her study of El Teatro Campesino, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez builds a clear, indigenous genealogy for the development of *teatros* in the United States. Broyles-Gonzalez connects such work to “Mexican popular performance traditions,” including the *carpa*. Broyles-Gonzalez postulates that popular performance traditions develop around a “unified field of interlocking cultural practices” driven by “the Mexican culture of orality” (4-5). In particular, Broyles-Gonzalez focuses on the *carpa*, or the tent show, explaining that *carpas* served as a “counterhegemonic tool of the disenfranchised and oppressed.” Importantly, the “disenfranchised and oppressed” were not all *Mexicanos*, but rather poor *Mexicanos*. *Carpas* originated some time in the eighteenth century and saw a huge resurgence in the twentieth century during the Mexican Revolution. The *carpas* featured often comedic acts that poked fun at the social and political structures of the upper-class *Mexicanos* (7). Members of Teatro Campesino referred to the style of the *carpa* as the

Rasquache Aesthetic: “earthy, unpretentious, gaudy, resourceful, etc.” (10). While Almanza did not draw a direct link between *carpas* and *Vida Fuerte*, undoubtedly *carpas* were the primary performance tradition for working-class Latinos living along the Texas border, the area from which Hector Chacon hailed. In the text of *Vida Fuerte* and in Almanza’s description of the performance, the influence of the border performance tradition is clear. *Vida Fuerte* features a refugee-like character seeking to question the authority of those now ordering his world. Much like a *carpa*, *Vida Fuerte* was “a tool of the disenfranchised and oppressed” that critiqued non-minoritarian culture, including that of more upwardly mobile Latinos living in East Austin.

The actual *text* of the skit begins with a simple question from Fuerte’s teacher in response to Fuerte’s t-shirt: “Vida Fuerte what is a Chicano?” Fuerte responds, “A Chicano is a person who believes in *tierra, justicia, y libertad* for the people of Atzlan.”²⁷ With his response, Fuerte does not counter the teacher’s query with the only accepted classroom language for East Austin in the 1970s, but instead he responds with a mixture of Spanish and English—a radical act in-and-of itself. Importantly, the Spanish words Fuerte uses mark some of the main tenets of the Brown Berets’ work: land, justice, and liberty. Rather than immediately punishing Fuerte for his use of Spanish, which Rivera and Herrera explained would have been the normal immediate outcome, the fictitious teacher goes on to ask Fuerte a series of questions that allowed for the further presentation of the ideology of the Chicano Movement and of the Brown Berets: “What is *Aztlán*?” and “Vida Fuerte what do you Chicanos want?” When Vida Fuerte again repeats “*tierra, justicia, y libertad*,” the teacher refocuses the class on the task at hand, saying the Pledge, rather than focusing upon Vida’s response to her questions. The

teacher fails to recognize the ways in which the U.S.'s pledge of "liberty and justice for all" in fact offers no land, justice, or liberty to Vida Fuerte.

Because of the Pledge, all the children in the class then stand up, including Vida Fuerte. However, only Fuerte does not place his hand over his heart, nor does he recite the Pledge. As a result, the teacher interrupts the Pledge to ask Fuerte why he is not participating. Fuerte responds, "I can not say the pledge of allegiance because it is a lie, there is no justice for the Chicano people [author's capitalization]." Again the teacher does not respond to the intent behind Fuerte's comment, but instead threatens a punishment: "Vida Fuerte, if you do not say the pledge of allegiance I will take you to the principal's office and you know what happens there. You might get a paddling." Undoubtedly, the teacher's threat of physical violence was not an empty one for the actors on the stage or the audience members. Across all schools in Texas at that time, and in some places still today, paddling was used as the primary method for disciplining students.²⁸ Thus for the kid actors and the audience, Vida Fuerte's next words would have rung out as especially brave. Vida welcomes physical violence rather than compromise his values: "Well take me to the principal's office, but I'll never say the pledge of allegiance and I will never cry for you gringos." In his last line of the skit, Vida Fuertes draws a clear line between his own race and that of the teacher in calling her one of "you gringos." In the 1970s, gringo was no term of affection for white folks, and Vida Fuertes' teacher would have found the label insulting.

At this point the typed text ends and the hand-written text begins. Almanza's hand-written lines note that the teacher grabs Fuerte's arm in order to take him to the principal's office, but before leaving, she issues an order to the rest of the children: "All

you children stay in your seats, I am taking Vida Fuerte to the principal's office.” The script's text ends with that line, but Susana Almanza filled in what she believed was missing. She explained that the classroom children begin to side with Fuerte: “Before you now it all the kids are yelling...They're all together. They're saying the same thing, ‘He's right! There is no justice for all.’ The kids then all get up and leave the class shouting different things; ‘We're all going to the office!’ and ‘Nobody is going to say the pledge!’” (Almanza and Herrera). This mass exit from the stage marks the end of *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*. The play draws to conclusion with children actively taking a stand against racial injustice as they chanted a Brown Beret ideology, “There is no justice for all.” For some, the climactic moment served to stir inspiration. For others, perhaps it intentionally sought to stir shame. If small children could enact Chicano ideology, why could not all Latinos take such brave steps?

As discussed already, at the Pan Am Hillside Theatre, some audience members may have disagreed with not only the message of *Vida Fuerte* but the participation of his classmates in Fuerte's rebellious movement. *Vida Fuerte* was forwarding an argument, intended for the young and old. *Vida Fuerte* was calling for open rebellion against systems that did not recognize Chicano history and Chicano rights, including some systems of Latino identity. Through a culturally-specific theatrical form, *Vida Fuerte* presented to the systemically disenfranchised—be they *Mexicanos*, Mexican Americans, Latinos, Chicanos, Tejanos, or Mexicans—a critique of local educational systems, a critique of the historiography of the Southwest, a critique of the treatment of Latino people in the United States, and a critique of the bulk of Latino positionalities within its audience.

Concluding this Story

Like so many pieces of avant garde theatre, *Vida Fuerte* takes a minoritarian-form of artistic expression and reshapes it to offer a critique of authoritarian systems of education and governance, including systems of Latino identity. As Almanza explains in her analysis of the political moment:

At that time there was a lot of police brutality. There was inequity in education. (It seems like we've gone full circle.) But we were pretty much in a police state. An anti-Mexican environment. A lot of backlash going on at that time. The whole integration of schools...people wanted the right to vote for who they wanted too. People of color were pretty much fed up with what was happening. We were pretty much at the height of the whole Chicano Movement... We were in a period of real enlightenment for our community and self-identifying and wanting self-determination in terms of what was going on. (Almanza and Herrera)

Here Almanza describes the work of the Brown Berets not as an unmitigated success but as a hyper-local response to forces shaping the production of space in East Austin. As James M. Harding notes in his discussion of experimentation within the avant garde, “Some experiments succeed; others fail. Most importantly, the avant-gardes are constituted not in the successes or failures—not in the rise or the decline—but in the experimental gesture leading potentially to either outcome” (25). *Vida Fuerte* was undoubtedly an experiment in that the Berets took a stringent ideological position, gave it an artistic shape informed by a particular set of local spatial practices, asked children to embody the message, and finally utilized a play featuring children to confront and critique not only the city of Austin but the Latino community. Perhaps, in the simplest

way, the success of *Vida Fuerte* is the gesture of critique in-and-of-itself. That gesture serves as a kind of metaphorical “removing of the tape” in order to offer a voice that not only names injustice, but offers a different ideological construction of identity as a mechanism for sparking social justice.

As Susana Almanza and Gilbert Rivera have each reminded me, it does not matter whether or not *Vida Fuerte* was a success or failure. Instead it mattered that I could place *Vida Fuerte* within a large system of spatial practice. For Brown Berets like Almanza and Rivera, the gesture, the action, is the point. For them, it does not matter that the Brown Berets of East Austin disbanded only a year after the performance of *Vida Fuerte*. They position *Vida Fuerte* and the Brown Berets are part of a larger cycle of Latino history in East Austin. Individual Brown Berets did not stop their activist work once the Berets had disbanded, rather their activism changed form: PODER, La Raza Roundtable, the poetry of Raúl Salinas. These new bodies of work and activism offer their own critiques in a variety of forms: protests against environmental injustice, candlelight vigils outside politicians’ homes, and a line of a poem that tells of a place in which “...ancient/ aromatic spices/ counter Reagan/ rhetoric on the tube...” (Salinas 28).

What matters to Almanza and Rivera is that their everyday life practices continue, their *vida fuerte*, their pursuit of justice. Inherent to their everyday life practice is the ideology of revolution and a quest for equity in education, in city policy, and in environmental protection. What matters to Almanza and Rivera is that their life’s work and their people’s histories are not lost. For Almanza and Rivera, that history lives in the archive, but it also lives in a piece of art. It lives in the books on their shelves and the

photos on their walls. It lives in the timber of their voices and the movement of their hands. It lives in the stories they tell.

For the scholar researching avant garde performance practice, the challenge is to place their life practices into discussion with the creation and reception of art. In this case, analyzing the Brown Berets' *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* through the lens of avant garde performance requires not simply an analysis of an experimental structure, but a consideration of the contexts that create experimentation—on the part of both the artist and the scholar. To unearth this culturally-specific avant garde performance required the development of a methodological practice that also lived within and was responsive to the spatial practices of the community. To understand *Vida Fuerte* as a minoritarian formation of performance (even within the Latino community) intended to subversively critique entrenched institutions (even within the Latino community) requires not only a deep study of community formation but a careful analysis of how methodological approaches both hinder and forward more nuanced understandings of minoritarian productions of avant garde performance.

In the next chapter, which focuses on a production of the Rude Mechs' *El Paraiso*, I move my consideration of the East Austin Avant Garde forward in time, some thirty years past *Vida Fuerte*. However, as *El Paraiso* demonstrates, even into the twentieth century East Austinites continued to use avant garde performance as a mechanism for critiquing the ways in which the state silenced minoritarian communities.

¹ This quotation is taken from a Susana Almanza interview in 2015. The citation for this interview, which also included insights from Sylvia Herrera, is included in the bibliography.

² As I explained in the introduction, Latinos living in East Austin have and do refer to themselves with many different labels, each holding a particular political past and

present. For the purposes of this chapter, I use the term Latino to refer to the larger population of Texas Mexicans (though many a Texas Mexican has taken me to task for calling them such). I use Chicano to refer to Texas Mexicans involved in the Chicano Movement or for folks who explicitly identified as such during conversations.

³ Contemporary scholars of the avant garde critique this line of analysis by Poggioli (as well as similar lines by Calinescu and Eggbert) as the “etymological imperative,” a trope whereby an avant garde performance must be linked to the notion of “being ahead” or the “advanced guard.” Such analyses build upon a questionable logocentrism of inheritance. Ie, performers like Hugo Ball could have never ended up in the Cabaret Voltaire without the direct inheritance of a phrase coined by Henri de Saint-Simon. Such gestures not only periodize the avant garde, but they also fail to account for the ways in which avant garde art responds most directly to local productions of space—productions far removed from the world of Saint-Simon.

⁴ In an interview with Sylvia Herrera and Susana Almanza, Sylvia discussed the work of El Teatro de Austin in detail. Herrera worked with the company for years, including touring their work to Washington DC for a Smithsonian Folk life Festival.

⁵ Throughout the Republic of Texas’s history, its boundary with Mexico remained in dispute. Not until the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848 was the Rio Grande River established as the boundary between Texas and Mexico. Until that time cities, like San Antonio and the Valley region of Texas were still considered part of Mexico by the Mexican government.

⁶ Jason McDonald explains that early in twentieth century, Central Texas, which includes Austin, saw three forms of “migratory movement—trans-border (between Mexico and the United States), inter-regional, and rural-to-urban—each of which contributed in some way to shaping a new social order in Austin.” As a result, the city’s population shifted from bi-ethnic into a tri-ethnic space (18-19).

⁷ *Dies y Seis*, the celebration of Mexican Independence on the 16th of September, is Austin’s most developed and ritualized Mexican holiday. *Pastorelas* are Latino interpretations of the Shepherd’s play—a funnier more political version.

⁸ Gloria Espitia left the Austin History Center shortly after I had completed the majority of my research there into the Brown Berets. For health and transportation reasons, Danny Camacho only visited the History Center about once a month near the end of his life.

⁹ The project was funded by an ArtsPlace America Grant, and its partners included new owners Richard deVarga and Richard Summers, the City of Austin, Fusebox Festival, a local entrepreneur Fred Schmidt, and the Austin-based design firm TBG.

¹⁰ As I was leaving Austin, the La Raza meeting was in the process of shifting from Lucky Lady to other locations. Lucky Lady had been for sale for some time. Developers eventually tore it down and put up condos. Worse perhaps even than the loss of Lucky Lady, the restaurant next door, Mexitas, shut down. Breakfast tacos were no longer available to the Roundtable. The loss of quick and easy access to breakfast tacos is unacceptable for any Austin organization in any part of town.

¹¹ In the times I visited the Roundtable, I noticed that most students present were connected to the University of Texas’ Center for Mexican American Studies. In particular, Dr. Emilio Zamora’s students were in attendance.

¹² The Ayotzinapa Case refers to the mass disappearance of a group of student teachers from Ayotzinapa Normal School who were likely attacked by police in the Iguala,

Guerrero Mexico. In the attack, three students and three bystanders were killed and 43 other student teachers were disappeared. The killing sparked months of protest and demonstration in both Mexico and the United States. The website for the Washington Office on Latin America offers rich, nuanced reporting on the case.

¹³ The next day, I received photos.

¹⁴ http://www.fuseboxfestival.com/thinkeast_old/2015-thinkeast/la-loma-or-the-place-sometimes-called-hungry-hill-2

¹⁵ To no small extent, the renaming of Johnston High School was driven by the history surrounding the very name of Johnston High. Johnston High, built to serve a minority community, was named after Albert S. Johnston. Albert Johnston was a general in the Republic of Texas Army, the United States Army, and finally the Confederate States Army. He was killed during the Battle of Shiloh.

¹⁶ My own aunts, contemporaries of Almanza and Rivera, were placed in special education because they were bilingual. As part of Texas's curriculum for enculturation, Spanish was forbidden in the vast majority of Texas schools. During my own high school years, when I questioned why French was offered rather than Spanish, my high school principal explained that Spanish was not a language of higher intellectualism, and that if I wanted to get ahead in college, I would learn to speak French.

¹⁷ I don't know if this teacher was white or Latino. Given the location of the school, she might have been either. The disciplining powers of enculturation are often enacted by those assimilated by the structure. My own father, who was a high school Spanish teacher for a time, refused to teach his own children Spanish. (He taped our mouths shut for entirely different reasons.)

¹⁸ Gilbert Rivera lightly demonstrated Mr. Moco's technique on my forty year-old shoulder. I, too, cringed down and away. The Mr. Moco Finger of Punishment fucking hurt.

¹⁹ When both Gilbert Rivera and Sylvia Herrera shared their stories, I cried. It's hard to hear about educators abusing children. My father and his sisters have shared similar stories. As I mentioned already, in Galveston, Texas, they were placed in special education for being Spanish speakers. Though Rivera and my father and aunts eventually found their voices in both English and Spanish, the impact of such educational brutality is multi-generational. Like Gilbert Rivera's children, my sibling and I were not allowed to speak Spanish for fear of how we would be treated when we went to school.

²⁰ Translation of "CHINGUEN A TODA SU MADRE": Damn all your mothers.

²¹ Gilbert Rivera and I had a long talk about the role of language in the formation of ethnic identity. Like my own father, who was a Spanish teacher in the Texas Public Schools, Rivera refused to teach his children Spanish. As we worked together, Rivera was always careful to translate any Spanish upon my request.

²² IN 1993, First Street was renamed César Chávez Avenue.

²³ Susana Almanza was careful to name Crystal Mendez and Angie Mendez as key figures in working with community kids at the Centro Chicano.

²⁴ Gilbert Rivera spoke at length about the tensions in the Berets around intellectual study of any text other than those produced by Chicanos themselves. While Rivera himself was inspired primarily by Marxist texts, many in the Brown Beret organization felt that all texts (or knowledge formation) produced by non-Chicanos would inevitably undermine the authenticity of the movement (Rivera and Rivera).

²⁵ Susana Almanza explained that typical venues for Brown Beret performances included both locations of the Centro Chicano, the Pan American Center, Cristo Rey Church, and Chicano Park—all sites in East Austin (Almanza and Herrera).

²⁶ Almanza cast her own son as the character Vida Fuerte. She said that he had the straight, black, long hair the character needed.

²⁷ The text of *Vida Fuerte*—which is typed on a typewriter—did not (could not) italicize non-English language.

²⁸ I myself was paddled in second grade—for whispering while the principal was in the room. I whispered, “Give my paper back. I forgot to put my name on it. [Didn’t want to lose points.]” Not that I’m still bitter today.

Rude Mechs and the Circulation of Texan Avant Garde Theatre

We've met all these people and they all think that it's weird that we make this kind of work in Texas. We don't think it's weird. So let's make a play about that sort of reaction. How normal it is to be a weird artist in Texas

--Kirk Lynn, Rude Mechs Co-PAD

The early 1980s marked a revitalization of the city center in Austin: the tech market began to blossom and the university grew. But by the late 1980s, across the city unemployment was on the rise, the housing market was collapsing, the city government itself was out of money, and entire buildings sat vacant in downtown (Humphrey and Crawford 263-265). In East Austin, most manufacturing and agricultural industries closed, and those industrial systems that remained were actively poisoning the neighborhood and destroying property values, as in the case of the Tank Farm, mentioned in the prior chapter. Additionally, East Austin educational resources—like the Chicano university, Juarez-Lincoln University—were destroyed, in this case literally bulldozed by the city (Rivera and Rivera; Rivera and Rivera *Austin's Rosewood Neighborhood* 105-122). As the entire city struggled with failed economic interests, a new wave of environmentalism—wary of yet more risky economic development—flourished in neighborhoods all cross Austin and began to successfully challenge and deter the further development of city, including that of East Austin (Humphrey and Crawford 266-267). Thus by the end of the 1980s, a pro-environmental, anti-development identity was actively shaping the city's production of space. As a result, the infrastructure that had once supported East Austin's manufacturing and agricultural industries sat largely unused.

In the 1990s, as yet another tech boom was taking hold in north, central, and west Austin, a number of arts organizations began to take up residence in East Austin, in no small part because unused warehouse-style buildings were available at incredibly low costs. As non tech-based economies closely tied to railroad shipping moved out of Austin altogether, the warehouses along the line, which had once stored agriculture-related goods and the like, sat almost empty. In this period, ballet folkloricos, cultural history centers, music clubs, art galleries, artist studios, and theatres slowly began to take root in East Austin. Though these arts organizations addressed cultural-specificity in vastly different fashions, they did hold a few characteristics in common: many were housed in converted warehouses and business fronts, none received significant funding from the state of Texas nor from Texas-based private giving foundations, and almost all of these artists working in East Austin received little to no compensation for their labor. Adding to the long tradition of East Austin communities creating space in which to critique larger structural regimes in the city and state, the Rude Mechanicals, an experimental theatre collective, found a home in East Austin in the 1990s.

Using the Rude Mechs' original work *El Paraiso* as the base of this study, in this chapter I argue that the creation process surrounding *El Paraiso* and the Rude Mechs' performance of the piece operate as an avant garde artistic practice and performance purposefully designed to critique the ways in which the state of Texas defines and disciplines queer bodies. For the Rude Mechs, each of their theatrical pieces, built in their East Austin theatre, The Off Center, operate as a dialogue between the company's own minoritarian ideological beliefs and the ways in which the state forwards dogmatically conservative social, political, and economic agendas. No matter how far

and wide the company ranges while touring, their work continues to be fueled by the aesthetics, ideologies, and everyday life practices alive in their warehouse theatre in East Austin. In the case of *El Paraiso*, I claim that these aesthetics, ideologies, and everyday life practices are decidedly queer. By close examining the necessarily entangled relationship between the aesthetics of *El Paraiso* and the production of space surrounding it, the play reveals itself as a queer reconceptualization of one mythic notion of Texas as a decidedly masculine, misogynistic, heteronormative land of big cowboys, big oil, and big dreams. Undoubtedly, *El Paraiso* functions within a land of big dreams. Only in this Rude Mechs' version of the Texas dream, queer cowboy/girls do not seek to tame and homogenize Texas, but instead they explore their own circuitous and unsanctioned desires and intellects in what the Rude Mechs refer to as "a rodeo of love."

How might an idea like avant garde practice illuminate new understandings of the Rude Mechs' work, and conversely how does *El Paraiso* allow one to challenge and question the field of avant garde studies in the U.S.? What can an analysis of the company's spatial practices, including rich detailing of its production process, teach about the relationship between spatial practice and the development of an avant garde performance? How does a "legitimizing ideology" like queer space open new ways of understanding how the avant garde questions and challenges power and privilege in the United States? What can cowgirl/boys, a dessert landscape, James Dean, and Ludwig Wittgenstein teach about creating a queer counter public?

. In positioning the Rude Mechs' production of *El Paraiso* as avant garde, I explicitly resituate the company within a local spatial practice, as opposed to the national and international contemporary performance scene. Since 1996, the Rude Mechanicals¹,

or the Rude Mechs or the Rudes or the Mechs, have produced experimental theatre in Austin, Texas. For eighteen of those years, the company has been based in their warehouse theatre, The Off Center, which sits smack in the middle of East Austin. Twenty years in, the company has toured their brand of theatre—physical, full of risk, playful in language and structure—all over the world. Their work is now commissioned by places like Yale University and the Lincoln Center. They've played in Helsinki, Brisbane, New York City, Los Angeles, Boston, Edinburgh, Galway, and Washington, DC (Rude Mechanicals). At this point, it's not much of a stretch to call the Rude Mechs an international success.

Importantly, when addressing the company, critics, scholars, and artists have all engaged in theorizations of the Rude Mechs' work that place the company's creations into the larger landscape of contemporary experimental performance in the U.S. and Europe. In the process, the company's oeuvre has been labeled "avant garde," pulsing with "verve and ingenuity," and "theater as ritual, as a form of communal religious experience" (Kremer; Brantley; Dyer). But perhaps in many ways, such labels stymie deeper considerations of the company's plays: the very label makes unnecessary further probing of the label itself or of the Rude Mechs' work. In the case of this chapter, I am *not* arguing that all of the Rude Mechs' productions function as avant garde art, nor do I believe that all Rude Mechs' production forward queer reimaginings of spatial practice in Texas. Rather, to think deeply about how specific spatial practices influence the development of avant garde practice, I consider only a single play, and by no means do I see this play as a synecdoche for the rest of the company's oeuvre. Again, such ubiquitous labeling thwarts deep examinations. Even the company itself is reluctant to

label their brand of performance. In the four years I have studied the Rude Mechs and in the fifteen years I have watched their shows, I have never heard a Rude Mech call their work “avant garde.” Shawn Sides, one of five current Co-Producing Artist Directors (or Co-PAD) and a founding company member, recently spoke of the company’s aesthetic on a PBS *Arts in Context* documentary which focused on Rude Mechs: “Aesthetically I think we’re a bridge between very experimental work and straight plays—play type plays. We’re in between” (PBSVideo).

Publically, “a bridge” is just about as defined a descriptor of their aesthetic as any company member will provide. Arguably, some of this reluctance to self-identify is driven by the tacit connections between labels like “experimental” and “avant garde” with the bourgeoisie and with locales far from Austin, Texas. The Rude Mechs come from working-class backgrounds, and the company exists upon a *very* slim budget. Often, labels like “avant garde” and “experimental” erase the specific conditions in which the Rude Mechs make work, and in the process, the Rude Mechs’ work is slotted into histories and genealogies that have little to do with how the company’s works serve as acts of political ingenuity that challenge dominate forms of political subjectivity in Texas. For an organization continually struggling to survive, a lack of acknowledgement surrounding the conditions in which they make work has proven and continues to prove to be economically disastrous. In many ways, this short-sightedness about the Rude Mechs’ working conditions parallels the lack of acknowledgement for the specific conditions surrounding the black and Latino communities in East Austin.

As with the black and Latino communities of East Austin, the Rude Mechs most readily describe their work and lives based upon their location. When speaking

personally with the company's Co-PADs, or Co-Producing Artistic Directors, time and again each has explained how their work is grounded in the ideas and practices of Texas (Darlington 2012; Lesley 2012; Lynn 2012; Richardson 2012; Sides 2012). In one such interview, I asked Shawn Sides which of the company's plays she found particularly Texan. She replied, "All of them." Sides went on to explain that all of the company's work is informed by its Texan-ness (Sides 2012). And perhaps by Texan-ness, Sides alludes to one cultural imaginary of Texas as rough-and-tumble, raw, loud, wild, and unapologetic—a tone present in much of the company's work. However, beyond the expected bold and brassy kind of Texan-ness, the Rude Mechs work is also inquisitive, unabashedly theoretical, and oftentimes politically risqué. Sides and the rest of the Rude Mechs also argue that these descriptors are indicative of Texan-ness as well. In placing the company's work into conversation with the production of space in East Austin, a clearer frame of reference develops for the nuanced ways that the Rude Mechs' self-define. This very self-definition of Texan-ness drives the company's avant garde *practice* of theatre-making, even when the aesthetics associated with that practice might not readily be considered avant garde in the field's traditional landscape.

As mentioned, in this chapter I focus my analysis on one particular Rude Mechs' show: *El Paraiso: A Humiliation of Pleasures*. In particular, this play highlights the relationship between the Rude Mechs' artistic practice and their own self-definition. First, the play occurs early in the company's history, before the Mechs were consistently touring. Because touring heavily impacts production and casting choices, a play built less with touring considerations in mind arguably more clearly reflects local spatial practices. Moreover, *El Paraiso* is one of the Rude Mechs' shows that most explicitly

addresses its home territory. With its overt intent to explore the Rude Mechs' version of Texas, *El Paraiso* offers rich fodder for exploring the connections between avant garde performance and the production of space in East Austin. Additionally, and perhaps surprisingly to some, the Rude Mechs' version of Texas in *El Paraiso* is decidedly queer. Grounded in the company's production of space, which includes queer ideologies, *El Paraiso* playfully twists and sublimates iconic Texas imagery to not only provoke questions about the state's social policies but also to advocate for a Texas that includes the bodies and minds of empowered women and queer citizens in the state's conception of everyday life. Hence, in the case of *El Paraiso*, I consider the ways in which queer identity and Texan identity intersect and transform one another within the play.

To build my argument, this chapter weaves connections between studies of avant garde performance, queer theorizations of space, the Rude Mechs' spatial practice in East Austin, and the play *El Paraiso*. In order to illuminate how each aspect of this study informs the other, I first consider my methodological approach to studying the company's work. In particular, I consider how my methodology functions as doubled ethnography, following Yutian Wong's theorization of the concept. That is I consider how ethnography can at times function as a self-reflexive process on the part of the performer and the researcher. Next, I consider patterns within current scholarly and artistic critiques of the Rude Mechs that label the company as avant garde and experimental without considering the local conditions that shape the company's work. To offer a counter-point to these patterns, I explore how the idea of queer spatial production nuances the understanding of the materialities influencing the Rudes and *El Paraiso*. I then place the production process of the play into relationship with local spatial

production, including analysis of the company's decision-making processes, a consideration of their home space The Off Center, and an examination of the production process surrounding the play. Finally I engage in a language and performance analysis of the text and of played scenes from *El Paraiso* in order to examine the ways in which the creation of queer space inside an avant garde performance effectively challenges the discourses surrounding the formation of gender and sexuality in Texas.

Doubled Ethnography

Borrowing a page from the book of sociologist Howard Becker, my methodological process for studying the Rude Mechs is perhaps first best explained with a short personal story. I found inspiration in Becker's approach to the study of art because of his emphasis on art-making as a collective action and because his studies emphasize art as an occupation and a labor. Both the collective nature of the Rude Mechs work as well as how they labor to make work strongly inform my analysis of their work. While Becker himself might begin a conversation on his post-structural research into jazz music in Chicago with "I always really wanted to be a piano player," my explanation begins "I always really wanted to be an actor." And it just so happens that my first paid, professional gig was with the Rude Mechs. Hence, I did not first learn about the Mechs; I first learned to work with the Mechs (Gopnik). That is, my earliest study of the Rude Mechs began as a labor-fueled analysis of collective art-making. The company paid me to act and to sing and to dance.² They also paid me to critically question the how and the why shaping their narrative structures. This chapter's emphasis on collective questioning and collective conversation as well as on the labors involved in

creating avant garde performance is grounded in my earliest conceptions of the Rude Mechs' work.

While my examination of *El Paraiso* includes close readings of the text and of the performance itself, in this chapter I also include information gleaned from watching copious hours of Rude Mechs rehearsal, from exploring parts of the company's archive, from interviewing the Co-PADs and various company members, and from being in fellowship with the Rude Mechs as a fellow theatre artist in the East Austin theatre community. This fellowship includes performing the character Mercedes with the Rudes in *El Paraiso*. Together, again following Becker's lead, my methodological approach to studying the Rude Mechs might best be understood as a series of collective gestures that examine the entirety of the labor process involved in making *El Paraiso*.

In utilizing different methodologies in my consideration of the Rude Mechs' creative process and of their play, I never considered one particular research approach as more advantageous than the next. Rather, each separate methodological approach highly influenced the application of the next, often different approach. For example, I interviewed all of the Co-PADS (some on multiple occasions) and an additional six company members. Initially, these interviews began with the same initial set of questions related to the company's inception and its working process. Often these interviews went on for hours and often our conversations roamed far beyond initial questions about the most obvious structures influencing the company's work and about the theories influencing my own dissertation research. Across conversations, we might talk about childhood experiences, the stresses of touring, the role of feminism within the company, the impact of children and outside relationships upon the company, a better frame for my

understanding of the company's work, ever-shifting personal dynamics within the company, how to save The Off Center, where to find the best coffee and/or margarita in Austin, or how I felt about my own academic work.

Inevitably these conversations shaped how I watched the company's rehearsals. I primarily observed the Rude Mechs rehearse a new work, *Stop Hitting Yourself*, and most of the forty or so rehearsal hours I watched involved long hours of tap practice—tap, like tap dancing. (*Stop Hitting Yourself* involves a rather ambitious tap number.) While the tap dancing itself did not reveal new insight into the company, the tiny breaks between sets often implicitly taught about power dynamics within the company: the communal shaping of the play's structure, the power of actors to mold and rephrase Lynn's language, and the care given to a communal understanding of the play and of the ways in which the play lived within the actor's body. For example, director Shawn Sides learned the entire tap number. Unquestionably, I mean unquestionably, Sides did this in part because she loves to dance. But the physical knowledge she gained by learning those numbers, also allowed her to better communicate with actors about the literal choreography, to better position the number within the entirety of the play's physical acting score, and to better understand how such movement numbers were also theorizing the intellectual ideas within the play. Watching Sides move and dance in *Stop Hitting Yourself* rehearsals surfaced my own memories of dancing beside her during *El Paraiso* rehearsals, and thus catalyzed my own theorizations about the ways that bodies looked and performed inside that older Mechs' play.

Beyond my viewing of their shows and workshops, archival research, and interviews, I have also *learned with* the Rude Mechs through less theatrical encounters: I

have lounged in bed beside Co-Producing Artistic Director Sarah Richardson as she nursed her baby while explaining how the company found their performance space via a romantic liaison. As an undergraduate, I took a Shakespeare in Performance class with Co-PAD Madge Darlington; Madge helped me unearth my inner-Bawd. I have sipped wine on Co-PAD Shawn Sides' front porch, alongside Co-PAD Lana Lesley and composer/company member Graham Reynolds. I have slept at Kirk Lynn's house (though not in his bed); his wife, poet Carrie Fountain, has indelibly shaped by own writing processes. I have timidly followed Co-PAD Thomas Graves through the innards of The Off Center. I have consumed some combination of drinks, coffee, and/or tacos with company members Lowell Bartholomee, Noel Gaulin, Matt Hislope, Hannah Kenah, José Hernández, Joey Hood, Heather Hanna, Jason Liebrecht, Ellie McBride, and Aron Taylor at some point in this project. Hell, I lived with Ellie and Lowell, and I have house sat for Kirk.³ Regardless of location or time of day, at any moment conversation in these informal settings could shift into what I began to think of as a "research worthy moment." To be in community with these artists meant that all times and places offered moments for self-reflection and analysis, a pattern in many ways reflective of the Rude Mechs' own creative process. By no means did these artists conceive of my research process as having an off/on switch, and so sometimes at two in the morning, I found myself jotting down research notes.

I do not offer up this list of personal interactions as a confession of my failures to maintain academic distance from my subjects of study. Rather, I would like to think about how a the intimacy of "learning with" and "learning alongside" can potentially create more meaningful reflection about the creation of avant garde performance. Like

my research into the black and Latino communities of East Austin, my research into the Rude Mechs is built upon being in relationship with a local community. Much like Danny Camacho and Karen Riles, the company members of the Rude Mechanicals not only aided me in gathering the evidence I needed to create a theorization, they also overtly presented their own theorizations as part of the “texts” I might rely upon in the analytical process. Thus, my analysis of the company’s avant garde performance still grows from a communal approach to research, even when these performances occur within a formal theatre setting.

As an example of the process of “learning with,” take an interview/burrito lunch with Jason Liebrecht, company member and fellow cast mate in *El Paraiso*. Over a carne asada-EZ rice-black beans-pico de gallo-and fresh jalapeño burrito, I asked Jason how he would describe the difference between *El Paraiso* and another Rudes’ play about Texas and the west, *I’ve Never Been So Happy*. Jason theorized that the two plays offered different interpretations of the idea of Texas. While *El Paraiso* explored the state’s culture as a whole, *I’ve Never Been So Happy* was much more reflective of current conditions in Austin. Jason then asked me whether or not I agreed with his idea, and so we processed his theorization (Liebrecht). Not only did I learn from (and agree with) Jason’s insights, his eliciting of my opinion affirmed a constitutive exchange—together we constructed insight and meaning. Moreover, with his reading of the plays as reflective of state-wide and hyper-local spatial practices, Jason theorized how rapid changes in the city of Austin influenced the Rude Mechs’ work. Namely in 2002, the Rude Mechs were still a young company with a modest national reputation and a grudge against those who dismissed their home state. By 2011, the Rude Mechs had an

international reputation that positioned them as artists not just from Texas but from Austin. The social capital of the city had grown to such an extent in that time period that the local spatial production of Austin itself could be exported to a city like L.A., as was the case of the tour for *I've Never Been So Happy*. Jason's insights point to how different structural and thematic elements within the plays reflect the works' dialogical relationship with the production of space in Austin. A burrito and stimulating conversation with an old friend taught me not only about the company's plays but about how the company operated within the Austin landscape.

This kind of intimate dialogue also extended into seemingly more passive interactions with the company. Oftentimes while watching rehearsals, one of the Rude Mechs might question me about my thoughts or opinions about a scene, about a movement sequence in the process of development, or even shoot me a nonverbal "how did that go" look/gesture. In these kinds of moments, boy did I ever want to provide astute and useful feedback. Thus, even when I was present simply to observe, my very presence elicited a response from the company. Never was anything "objective" about my presence in even the most formal of research settings with the Mechs.

In *Choreographing Asian America*, Yutian Wong advocates for the concept of "doubled ethnography" in which the ethnographer recognizes that artists themselves present self-reflexive performances in their work, be it on stage or in writing (5). The ethnographer is always observing a mediated process. I believe that this kind of doubling process, via self-reflexivity on the part of artists and scholars, also extends across rehearsal processes and interviews. Certainly as I began to interview the Co-PADs of the Rude Mechs, their comments were peppered by "I could be wrong," "I may remember

incorrectly,” and time-and-time again the refrains “check with [insert another Co-PAD’s name]” and “[insert Co-PAD’s name] will tell you different.” These kind of referential phrases work on two levels. First the markers of self-correction and self-doubt indicate that the interviewee is aware that she is constructing a narrative that is an object of study. Moreover, “the check with” and “tell you different” phrases speak to the idea of a negotiable collective memory. While each separate Co-PAD offered unique and individual responses to my questions, all six continually expressed the belief that their narrative would directly contradict that of another Co-PAD. Thus, the Co-PADs understood from the get-go that their response were interpretations; these interviews, rehearsals, and performances were all performative in nature. Within each, Co-PADs shaped and edited the discourses they offered even as I was shaping and editing how I framed the research—a doubling of ethnography. “Double ethnography” proves to be a useful frame for my work with the Rude Mechs because this study relies heavily upon the subjective nature of collective memory.

While studies of the avant garde have typically relied on archival research and close readings of texts, my work with the Rude Mechs offers an opportunity to consider how ethnographic approaches to studying the avant garde might further nuance the contexts surrounding the production of art. In this case, my research involved first considering how learning alongside a company impacts analysis. Moreover, I needed to consider how my ethnographic research is a doubled act, involving performances on the part of myself as a researcher and on the part of the company as self-reflexive subjects. Undoubtedly, part of the Rudes almost hyper-awareness of the subjective nature of

academic research, and their own ability to interface with and influence that process, is driven by their own study of the bodies of writing responding to their collected works.

Rude Readings: Prior Theorizations of the Rude Mechs' Work

Prior theorizations of the Rude Mechs work reveal the ways in which analyses of the company's plays are often removed from the ways in which the company's work responds to the production of space in East Austin. Though publications like *American Theatre* and the *New Yorker* as well as newspapers like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* have copiously written about the company's work, a limited amount of academic scholarship has addressed the Rude Mechanicals. In terms of scholarly analysis, reviews of the company's shows have appeared in journals like *Theatre Journal* and *The Drama Review*. In the case of these analyses, they offer analyses of specific aspects of the Rudes' programming in order to expand fields of study from affect studies to utopian performatives, but none position the Rude Mechs work as avant garde. Intensive scholarly analysis related to the company comes from Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance* and two *Theatre Journal* articles. Dolan's focus on the Rude Mechs does not directly address the artistic practices of the company itself. Rather, Dolan considers a feminist autobiographical soloist performance series, *Throws Like a Girl*, which she herself curated for the Rude Mechs at The Off Center. In her analysis, Dolan carefully attends to how The Off Center produces a space in which queer performance artists might experience a utopic community. In *Theatre Journal*, Robin Bernstein's essay "Towards the Integration of Theatre History and Affect Studies" focuses upon the Rudes' parody of method acting in their original play *The Method Gun*. Bernstein employs the play to explore how "method acting presents an extraordinary

opportunity to historicize affect” (213). The essay theorizes affect by reading the play through the lens of a method-style approach. (Interestingly, the Rude Mechs rarely, if ever, use method in their development of new work, including with *The Method Gun*.) Also focused upon *The Method Gun*, Marla Carlson’s essay “Furry Cartography” hypothesizes the Rudes’ use of an actor in a furry tiger costume as a mechanism for exploring the “simple appetites and direct action” that humans struggle to handle because of undue social restrictions (195). While both Carlson and Bernstein offer careful considerations of the *The Method Gun*, unlike Dolan, neither consider the play’s relationship to spatial practices, those of East Austin or the company. Thus their analyses cannot account for how the play might function as an avant garde particular to East Austin, Texas.

While the presence of the Rude Mechanicals in scholarly literature has largely occurred in reviews of their shows and in the occasional journal article, the website HowlRound provides a clearer picture of both how the Rudes are positioned within contemporary theatre practice in the U.S. and how their colleagues from across the country respond to the company’s work. In HowlRound, the Rude Mechanicals appear in a number of articles written from a wide variety of perspectives—including articles on collaboration and performance by the Rudes themselves. The non-Rude Mechs authored articles frequently label the company’s work with titles like “avant garde.” Collaged together, the varying pieces—written by the Rude Mechs and by theatre artists from across the US—produce a clear sketch of the company’s spatial practice. Thus, HowlRound provides a means for both interpreting the aesthetic of the Rudes’ work in relationship to contemporary theatre practice in the US and understanding how that work

is developed in response to the production of space in Austin. Moreover, these readings not only offer insight into how the Rude Mechs are labeled, upon examination they also reveal how the idea of the avant garde often functions as an aesthetic category removed from its means of production

Some of the earliest Rude Mechs' related articles on HowlRound position the company's new work as "cool," "essential," and "avant garde." In 2011 at Radar L.A., Richard Montoya, founder of the Chicano performance group Culture Clash, delivered "A Manifesto," which included commentary about the Rudes and which HowlRound then printed. The Rudes performed their play *The Method Gun* in the festival that year, so Montoya's exposure to the group happened outside of Austin: "The future sees me as the first Chicano to join the Rude Mechs—I can be a Rude Mexican—I am not deriding the Rude Mechs—I envy them—I wish to be young and cool and essential I just didn't know there were twenty-five white people left in South Texas—let alone that they all found each other and make theater hell I'm moving to Austin!" Here Montoya nods toward the relationship between race, geography, and the label of "cool and essential" theatre. Though Montoya went on to further praise the Mechs' work, his statement to the field cleverly addresses the difficulties that Latinos face in receiving recognition for their work in environments labeled "cool," "experimental," or "avant garde." As I discussed in my chapter on the Brown Berets' work, part of the challenge of seeing culturally diverse work as "cool" or "avant garde" involves placing that work into its own local context, as opposed to reading it through established, often white and western genealogies.

Interestingly, a number of self-identified Latinos worked and do work for the Rude Mechs, including Jason Liebrecht who performed in the play Montoya watched.

However, *The Method Gun* in no way expresses a Mexican sensibility, which one might expect of a “South Texas” theatre company. Austin, though, is located squarely in central Texas, a part of the state with a Latino history distinctly different from that of South Texas. While nodding towards the dynamics at play between race, geography, and the “cool and essential” theatre of the Rudes, Montoya’s analysis of the company evolves from a geographical and cultural misunderstanding, the conflation of Austin with South Texas. Rather than focusing on the particulars of geography and race, playwright and dramaturg Kate Kremer’s two-part article from HowlRound in 2014 positions the avant garde movement as “forward thinking” and “the leading edge,” without speaking to the political nature of an avant garde response (“Inheriting”). Kremer names the Rude Mechs as an avant garde company in her discussion of the fiscal viability of long-term artistic collaborations: “Meanwhile, ensemble-based companies like Rude Mechs, Radiohole, and the Elevator Repair Service have pioneered models for long-term artistic collaboration while creating original and formally fresh new works that eschew the perfect in favor of the risky, specific, and sublime” (“Devising”). Kremer, though, never describes the specific local-conditions that shape the company’s work into the “risky, specific, and sublime,” nor does she explore how the company’s “fiscal viability” actually impacts company’s members day-to-day lives.⁴

Theatre scholar and queer, black performance artist Daniel Alexander Jones mentions the company in his HowlRound essay elucidating the theatre world of Austin, Texas. Importantly, Jones’ essay positions the Rude Mechs within the city’s larger cultural and artistic landscape, purposefully creating relationships between the development of new work in Austin and the rapidly changing cityscape. In the essay,

Jones describes the theatre scene in Austin as the place where he first learned to love the form: “Austin was the Valentine you wish was in your class. The cool one, lean, long, with the shiny eyes, copper brown skin, silver smile, raven blue black hair sweeping half his face. That one. Smelling like peppermint on a hot day.” While initially evoking a sexually-charged, young, barely bridled, racially diverse, and yet sweaty interpretation of the Austin theatre scene, Jones goes on to describe how he learned to see Austin as “one of the most rigidly segregated southern cities (I-35 cut black from white and white from black, the lake cut both from brown).” As he details the shifting-landscape of the theatre community in Austin across his 20 years of experience working in the city, Jones concludes with his future plans for creating new work in Austin while also acknowledging cultural and demographic shifts in the city: “Some of the casual welcome, many of the fixtures of daily Austin life, have been bruised or broken or erased by gentrification and the swell of a certain kind of moneyed hipsterism that depends on ahistoricity to run its game.” Jones’ descriptions of the current theatre scene marks the ways in which Austin’s booming economy and growing popularity in the nation as a “destination,” a kind of “new” place, in effect erases its past, what some might label as the effects of hipster racism. Over the course of the essay, a view of the city that begins like a youthful “Valentine” gives way to reality of a city that “depends on ahistoricity to run its game.”

Jones directly positions the Rude Mechs along this sweep of Valentine to moneyed hipsterism. Jones first writes of the Rude Mechs in relationship to their formation in the late 1990s, “The birth of the Rude Mechs and the signal signs of their radical brilliance.” At the end of the essay, twenty years later in his theatrical genealogy

of the city, he remarks, “Rude Mechs have sung their song around the world, Kirk and Madge and Lana and Shawn and their crew and their lithe ensemble regularly writing their tales in the eager minds of their audiences.” These two descriptions mark the movement from the company as a youthful organization full of “radical brilliance” to a world-renowned ensemble that has “sung their song around the world.” While many companies mentioned in Jones’ genealogy of twenty years of Austin theatre history have faded away, the Rudes survived. I believe to no small extent the company’s longevity is directly tied to their ability to continually grapple with the changes in Austin’s urban landscape over the past twenty years.

As the East Austin landscape and the areas surrounding The Off Center have become overrun with matchbox condos, fusion restaurants, music clubs, and South by Southwest events, the Rudes have dogmatically remained in their humble home, The Off Center, making their own brand of radical theatre for very little financial gain even as much of the rest of Austin enjoys the fiscal largesse fueled by in no small part the “ahistoricity” of the city’s own self-promotion. In many ways this ahistoricity portrays Austin into a homogenous space created by a system of “progressive” ideologies that forward the unique and the weird. The production of *El Paraiso*, however, illuminates how queer spatial practices explicitly seek to critique and challenge both Austin’s and Texas’s erasure of the nonnormative .

The Queering of Space

Judith Halberstam’s definition of queer arguably best defines how the company engages with queer ideologies in *El Paraiso*. In *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam uses “queer” to refer to “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual

identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.” Queer space involves not only life practices in which queer people engage but also envelops “new understandings” of life practices generated by “queer counterpublics” (6). As these new forms of cultural production run both in-sync and counter to normative social structures, queer space creates an opportunity to examine the dominant hierarchies and power flows structuring life in places like East Austin. According to Halberstam, queer space is not a performative utopia hermetically sealed off from heteronormative productions of space. Rather the development of queer space, with its intent to “destabilizes normative values,” carries a very real risk—the loss of financial stability, home environments, physical safety, jobs, family, and friends (10). For a company whose early funding relied heavily upon the city and state, artistically exploring queer ideologies on stage carried with it a very real financial and social risk.

The idea of queer space builds upon Foucault’s theorizations of disciplining and managing sexual bodies. Foucault notes that in the west in the twentieth century, sexual repression is not simply a matter of discussion but a matter of discourse. To understand the ways in which the sexual body is managed, one must examine not merely the language of the event but the contexts producing the language. For Foucault, the radical potential of “sexual taboos” lies in their power to disrupt the discourses controlling social practice (*The History of Sexuality* 115). In this case, Foucault connects the controlling discourses to the power of the bourgeois. Thus for nonnormative sexual bodies to counter the stranglehold of bourgeois capitalism, the very discourses governing sexuality must be examined, not merely the surface level of conversation surrounding sexuality.

Building upon Foucault's argument, the notion of "queer space" engages with how "perverts" are inescapably tied to a systematic management of bodies—perverts do exist outside the system. Rather, "perverts" are a part of the hegemonic production of space that does not create an idealized counter space, but instead perverts overtly engage in the destabilization of the hegemonic production of space. In the case of an avant garde performance creating a queer spatial practice, performance serves as a mechanism for illuminating the processes/characters/methods/successes/failures/joys/absurdities associated with the process of destabilizing the social management of the sexual body. Avant garde performance does not run away from these systems, but rather runs directly at them.

Because the social management of the queer body is not driven by a singular governmental mechanism but rather by the totality of the environment (the ideologies, artistic expressions, and everyday life practices at play), to understand how a piece of queer avant garde performance operates requires a careful analysis of the artist within a system of reference points that live within the production of space surrounding the artist—the ideologies, everyday life practices, and artistic traditions surrounding the artist. Henri Lefebvre provides a frame for understanding how a queer avant garde artist interacts with the local production of space. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre notes that avant garde art actively registers and then challenges outdated ideological structures, "or old points of reference." With the introduction of new "legitimizing ideologies," the artist does not move outside of dominant social practice but rather introduces a new "ideology that justifies and motivates." Thus, this new ideology, or "object," does not

exist within a utopic world but rather “within the space of dominant social practice” (308). .

For Foucault, Lefebvre, and Halberstam alike, a legitimating ideology, like the notion of queer space, operates not merely as an “outside the norm perspective” but rather as a structure that examines and challenges the discourses overtly shaping the “norm.” Importantly, to understand a queer spatial practice is not to understand *the* queer spatial practice, but rather to understand how one thread of discourse fits into highly particular and local social practices. Thus, I place *El Paraiso*’s exploration of queer space into conversation with the production of space in Austin and Texas, as opposed to assuming it responds to a generalized world discourse about the avant garde or about queerness.

To begin this consideration of the Rude Mechs’ production of *El Paraiso*, I next examine how and where the play was made. As much as the text and performance of *El Paraiso* create a queer theorization of the production of space in Texas, so too do the “nonnormative logics and organizations of community” the lead to the play’s production.

El Paraiso: A Rude Response

Oddly enough, the impetus for the Rude Mechs to develop a play that queered normative standards of sexuality and gender in Texas actually grew from a Rude Mechs’ play that received rave reviews in New York City. Though the company deeply appreciated the adulation, the praise of their original play *Lipstick Traces*, in fact, often erased the specific conceptual paradigms influencing the company’s artistic processes. Moreover, that praise revealed the ways in which conceptualizations of the avant garde are bound by cultural and geographical biases.

By the time the Rude Mechs produced *El Paraiso* in 2002, the company had found local success in Austin with original work like *Pale Idiot*, *Curst & Shrewd*, and *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century* (Rude Mechanicals). In particular, *Lipstick Traces* not only solidified the company's reputation in Austin as makers of original, experimental work, the play was also well-received as the company toured nationally for the first time. The stark difference between *Lipstick Traces* and the company's next production, *El Paraiso*, prompts any number of questions. Why produce *El Paraiso*, a play about cowboys and James Dean and Wittgenstein and want and desire, after successfully touring a show about punks and DaDa and heretical mystics? Why follow up a national hit with a show that thematically sits so close to home? When I asked the Rude Mechs what spurred their creation of *El Paraiso*, they pointed my investigation not towards Texas but towards *Lipstick Traces* and the lands outside of Texas.

As the Rudes toured their first show across the U.S., *Lipstick Traces*, their reception in theatre scenes like that of New York made clear that many critics and theatre patrons found the idea of avant garde performance in Texas almost inconceivable. How could a socially conservative, cowboy-hat-loving, backwards place like Texas produce such work? *El Paraiso* is the company's direct response to feelings of isolation and alienation encountered when working outside of Texas. The story of *El Paraiso*'s reception outside of Texas serves as a direct example of why scholar James Harding's call for a "concerted attack on conceptual paradigms that posit uniformity at the expense of multiplicity" in the study of avant garde performance (*Ghosts* 9). Here Harding asserts that to no small extent what the conceptual paradigms like the "avant garde" are

themselves staid and cliché. In order to preserve an easily recognizable and negotiable field, the study of the avant garde often relies upon a uniform set of conceptual paradigms rather than expanding its own practice of study.

Case in point, critics and theatre-goers praised *Lipstick Traces* but with a sense of wonder and disbelief not because its form or content read as unfamiliar but because the play was developed in Texas. For example, *The New York Times* twice wrote about *Lipstick Traces*. The first was a preview article of the show, featuring an interview with the Rude Mechs and more importantly an interview with Greil Marcus, author of the book *Lipstick Traces* and an early editor for *Rolling Stone*. Marcus's own cultural capital and his support of the project lent the company a degree of cultural capital even before the show opened. Only a few days later, the *Times* reviewed the play: "*Lipstick Traces* has a surprisingly high success rate in finding theatrical equivalents for Mr. Marcus's fervid brand of scholarship... there are many moments that pulse with verve and ingenuity, in which resonantly simple solutions are found for presenting the seemingly unstageable..." (Brantley). While the "surprise" and "ingenuity" involved in staging the "seemingly unstageable" perhaps reads as an unmitigated positive review, the Rudes detected a less obvious tone in such responses to *Lipstick Traces*—a sense of disbelief. How did these red necks from Texas pull this off? Such disbelief also points to geographical biases in the conceptualization of the avant garde in the U.S.—ie New York produces the avant garde. Geographically, culturally, and economically, strains of the "classic" European avant garde could more readily flourish in New York. Moreover, this disbelief also silences the political specificities involved in the making of avant garde performance in Texas. Namely, if avant garde work is primarily read through

materialities shaping work in places like New York, then the hyper-local political response of pieces developed outside of New York are necessarily erased. Taking into account this geographical bias, the work of a company like the Rude Mechs can only be understood in relationship to work produced in New York and thus not as a specific response to spatial production in Texas or in Austin. Such geographical biases not only skew interpretations of the Rudes' work, they erase greater potential multiplicities within avant garde performance scholarship.

In order to counter the uniformity prevalent in much U.S.-based avant garde scholarship, I position this study of an avant garde performance created outside of a major metropolitan center in the U.S. in relationship to the specific materialities of the art's home space. I look for the unfamiliar and the disorienting and seek to understand how what reads as "unfamiliar" might, in fact, actually serve as channels to everyday, local knowledges. The development of the Rude Mechs' *El Paraiso* provides one framework for considering the balance between the drive to expand the places and peoples associated with avant garde performance and the simultaneous need to attend to the specific local spatial productions shaping these pieces. Without delving into the relationship between art and its local spatial production, multiplicity, in fact, serves only as a term for running new work through an established pattern of theorization.

The Rudes Take Manhattan

For the Rudes, the positive fervor for the show was off-set by some unexpected consequences of working outside of their home state. Rather than critics and audiences reading *Lipstick Traces* through the lens of the play itself, they read it through a reductive cultural imaginary of Texas itself. For example, as the company performed in New York

and toured to places like The Walker in Minneapolis and the Wexner Center at Ohio State, responses to the company and to *Lipstick Traces* included not only comments on the show itself but commentary on the artists' home state. Lana Lesley, who performed the character Dr. Narrator in *Lipstick Traces*, voiced her discomfort for the intersection of theatre reviews and reviews of Texas: "We were sort of getting a lot of elitist East Coast and Midwest reactionary thinking about what kind of artists we could possibly ever be [if we were from Texas]. Certainly not the kind that would ever read Greil Marcus's critical theory. Certainly not the kind that would care about punk rock or Dada or Situationists. We felt pretty bitch-slapped by that, as artists" (2014). Lesley's insights point to geographical and political biases among those who produce and view avant garde work. Namely, theatre artists from Texas could not possibly produce art that moved beyond the stereotypical imagery and ideas associated with the state: conservative, misogynist, gun-loving, anti-intellectual bigots who ride horses to work and live on ranches that produced endless streams of oil.⁵ Telling a story about the impetus for the *El Paraiso*, Kirk Lynn keyed in on the same catalyst for the play saying, "*Lipstick Traces* has gone on the road and we've met all these people and they all think that it's weird that we make this kind of work in Texas. We don't think it's weird. So let's make a play about that sort of reaction. How normal it is to be a weird artist in Texas" (2014). Here, "this kind of work" and "weird" stand in for theatre that is experimental, radical, and avant garde. For the Rude Mechs, working in this manner was not "weird" but a daily practice of life. Ideological structures related to the experimental and the radical directly informed the company's everyday life practices. Lynn's and Lesley's explanations illuminate how *El Paraiso* was developed to not only explore how avant garde artistry responds to the

production of space in Texas, but to directly respond to the historiographic biases shaping the field of avant garde performance in the U.S.

In many ways, *El Paraiso* both rejects and embraces these assumptions about Texas, which fired the Rudes' emotions and their creative imaginations. The Production Notes from the play's program detail the company's process of wrangling with outsiders' expectations while simultaneously embracing the space of Texas. In particular, the notes comment on the Rudes' time in New York while performing *Lipstick Traces*: "...we found that everyone had certain expectations of us as Texans...In the process, we caught ourselves performing our Texan-ness" (Mechs). In interviews, Lesley and Lynn describe how the company became louder and more boisterous the longer they stayed away from home; their accents became thicker and "y'all" took up greater space in their everyday diction (2014). *El Paraiso's* Production Notes explain that the company decided to pursue the idea of their Texan-ness when they returned to the state after touring *Lipstick Traces*. The company pursued the idea all the way to Marfa, Texas, an almost painfully Texas sort of place—home to cowboys and wide plains and mysterious lights.⁶

We chose a long time ago to make plays in Texas. This flagrantly defies all conventional wisdom and random bits of advice. We started out on a trip to Marfa to see the lights, thinking about what it means to be an artist in Texas and why we want to do it. That was too big of a question. This play isn't about any one thing in particular except what it feels like to be a wanting, thinking Texan.

That's what we think we want to say, or at least what we want to think. (Mechs)

With *El Paraiso*, the Rude Mechs not only present a physical landscape that directly speaks to iconic imagery related to the state, but they also directly juxtapose this imagery

against queer, feminist, and intellectual conceptions of Texan-ness. The result is an avant garde performance produced both to challenge and question what it means to be a “wanting, thinking Texan” and to challenge and question how the avant garde is understood in the United States. To posit how the play itself theorizes and reimagines Texas geography and local ideologies in relationship to queer spatial practices requires examining connections across the text itself, studying the dramaturgical processes surrounding the text’s development, and considering the Rudes’ relationship to queer, feminist scholars and performers. Thus in the next sections, I provide a synopsis of the play, explicated the production processes surrounding *El Paraiso*, and delve into the Rudes’ relationships to queer theorists like Jill Dolan, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver.

A Synopsis of El Paraiso

The text for *El Paraiso: Or the Humiliation of Pleasure* (a Spanish title that alludes to both Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the Latino history of Texas) includes an inscription from St Augustine on the play’s first page.⁷ The inscription reads:

Little by little I begin to realize where I was
 And to want to make my wishes known to others
 who might satisfy them. But this I could not do,
 because my wishes were inside me,
 while other people were outside,
 and they had no faculty which could penetrate my mind.
 So I would toss my arms and legs about and make noises,
 hoping that such few signs as I could make would show my meaning,
 though there were quite unlike what they were meant to mime.

Arguably, more than any other play by the Rude Mechs, *El Paraiso* addresses what it means for the company to be composed of artists from Texas who “want to make their wishes known to others,” and yet know even as they try that their gestures will play “quite unlike what they are meant to mime.” In St Augustine, Lynn found a voice that elucidated the company’s frustration and dissatisfaction with perceptions of its work outside of Texas.

El Paraiso takes place in a kind of purgatorial heaven, if this purgatory were in fact a sandy bar in far west Texas. In a series of tableaux, karaoke songs, line dances, gun shots, fights of all sizes and shapes, lightning storms, and heartfelt confessions, six characters swagger through an in-between land, battling their intellects and desires. At the top of the play, a stranger, who has just died in a car crash, saunters into a saloon in somewhere west Texas. While the stranger may seem strange within this purgatorial paradise, the audience quickly identifies him as James Dean, ala the movie *Giant*. The world of the saloon is already inhabited by four “stock” Texan characters: a cowboy (think James Garner plus more testosterone and a little cocaine), a cowgirl (Gary Cooper’s understatement dressed up with Calamity Jane’s fringe), a bartender (a Latino Debra Winger ala *Urban Cowboy*), and a saloon girl (as if Miss Kitty from *Gunsmoke* had really been able to speak her mind). Into this mix, pursuing James Dean across the land of El Paraiso, comes another unexpected character: Ludwig Wittgenstein. (That’s right, the Austrian-British philosopher whose work includes ideas about logic and philosophy as they relate to the mind, mathematics, and language.)

Wittgenstein is pursuing Dean in order to flesh out a philosophy that can account for the play between intellect and desire: “...it is their way of thinking about the problem

which springs the trap/ *our* way of thinking/ *our* misunderstanding--/ *our* confinement is inevitable/ until we learn to look in a new direction you see--?--/ --when desire and intellect gather in a single moment.../ well—I haven't solved it.. [author's emphasis]" (10). The six characters encounter each other not through a singular narrative structure but rather through a series of textual showdowns that are broken by physical movement numbers and country karaoke. They attempt to “learn to look in a new direction.” They fall in-and-out of love with one another, battling with words/songs/bodies their own ways of thinking. As the play draws to a close, the characters have not reached the land of denouement. Instead, they seem to have settled into a practice of continual mutability. In the final moments of the play, they sing a kind of goodbye and then wander off into the unknown dark, leaving *El Paraiso* much like they found it.

Aesthetically, the structure of the play, its casts of characters, and the play's very setting might qualify *El Paraiso* for the status of “avant garde,” but if as scholars like Harding and Sell suggest, the contexts/discourses/materialities surrounding the avant garde provide the clearest picture of the work's political ingenuity, then *El Paraiso* must be placed into conversation with local contexts

Marfa: High Art versus High Noon

To understand why Marfa, Texas, might be a perfect place for a bunch of punk rock-inspired theatre artists to contemplate existential questions that focus on “what it feels like to be a wanting, thinking Texan,” I place Marfa's own production of space into comparison with the world of *El Paraiso*. On the surface, Marfa reads like the most reductive cultural imaginary of Texas possible, but the contradictions of industry and art alive within it shed light upon why the Rudes found Marfa to be an inspiration. Little

Marfa, Texas, sits in the high plateau area of the Chihuahuahua desert. The small town, initially built around industries related to the railroad and ranching, also boasts an assortment of the unexpected: curious, inexplicable lights that float above the desert horizon; the backdrop and set for the movie *Giant*; the annual Marfa film festival; Berlin-based artistic team Elmgreen and Dragset's installation, Prada Marfa; any number of high art galleries; and a series of thriving contemporary arts organizations, including artist Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation (Marfa Chamber of Commerce). Marfa is high art and high noon. In my own visits to Marfa, I have found myself sitting at a small formica-topped table—something out of *Come Back to the Five and Dime*—while eating a chile relleno. To my right sat a table of honest-to-god-for-real cowboys, and to my left sat a table of contemporary artists from New York City. Marfa can be socially and ideologically disorienting.

Arguably more than any other city or town in the state, Marfa's landscape directly and clearly juxtaposes stereotypical Texas imagery and industry (like ranching, farming, and railroading) against artistic industries (like film and sculpture). In Marfa, one observes an economic practice perhaps unlike any other in Texas: the arts as well as industries like ranching equally drive the local economy. Importantly, these seemingly opposing industries hold equitable social capital in Marfa. The Marfa Chamber of Commerce boasts of its proud arts traditions even as it displays pictures of the empty desert and dusty pick-up trucks. The collision of high art and high noon industries creates Marfa. For example, the installation Prada Marfa forms such a striking impression because it is bound on three sides by barbed wire and cattle pastures and on

the fourth side by a lonely highway. In many ways, such juxtapositions shape day-to-day life in Marfa. Certainly, they drive tourism, which helps sustain the local economy.

When the Rude Mechs visited Marfa, however, they were less moved by the inclusion of “high art” on the desert plateau. In an interview, Kirk Lynn described and theorized the tension the company felt when experiencing the natural landscape of Marfa and the ways in which contemporary art was positioned within it. The group had set out to Marfa with the intention of studying Chinati and Donald Judd’s minimalist art installation. As Lynn recalled, the company loved the work, but “it was not what they wanted.”⁸ For them, the art read as foreign, as opposed to local. After the *Lipstick Traces* tour, the company was seeking the hyper local. Rather than at the Chinati foundation, the company found themselves more at home in the Crystal Bar in Alpine, Texas, the next town over from Marfa. In the Crystal Bar, the company struck up a conversation with a group of cowboys who belonged to Sul Ross State’s rodeo team. (I’m not making this up.) After much swilling of liquors, the Rudes and the cowboys agreed to meet up the next day at the local Dairy Queen for further interviews. The cowboys were apparently confused by the Rudes’ interest in the theatricality of the rodeo, but the team obliged the company’s request regardless. As the two groups conversed at the Dairy Queen, the Rudes let the cowboys know that they wanted to watch them work. Lynn described the interaction as going like this:

Rude Mech: We want to come see the rodeo.

Cowboy: We have performance at six and at nine.

Rude Mech: We don’t want to see a performance. We want to see the actual rodeo.

It turned out that the cowboys called the rodeo a show or a performance. Lynn went on to explain that in that confusion about what is rodeo and what is performance, the company realized the actual nature of Texan art they were pursuing: “We were like, ‘Oh my god, these are the artists in Texas we should be talking to... They were the artist we wanted to examine and all their divisions [of labor]’” (Lynn 2014).

As a result of this road trip, rather than being inspired by the international art that dots Marfa’s landscape, the company found itself drawn to the landscape itself and to the people and labor practices associated with cowboy life. In *Not the Other Avant Garde*, James Harding and John Rouse advocate for a conceptualization of avant garde studies that includes not only “a broad cultural understanding of performance,” but also “one that recognizes that the sites of artistic innovation associated with the avant-garde tend to be sites of unacknowledged cultural hybridity and negotiation” (2). In selecting Marfa and the Sul Ross Rodeo Team as inspirations for a play directly intended to address their own artistic processes and identities, the Rude Mechs acknowledged the potential for a dismissed and often derided culture to spark innovation and cultural critique. The Rudes recognized that Marfa itself is a hybridization, with its promotion of ranching life and national and international art. However, rather than speak to the ways that the global art world had already interpreted Marfa, the company instead investigated how a seemingly less artistic economy and way of life—that of ranching and the rodeo—in fact offered its own “broad cultural understanding of performance.” As a result, a distilled version of the Marfa landscape shapes the life of the stage in *El Paraiso*. The characters who move through this landscape, who offer critiques of love and life, are not figures like Donald Judd, but the cowboys/girls whose cattle graze just beyond the shadows of Judd’s

looming sculptures. Thus, the spatial practice informing the development of this avant garde performance is one little, if ever, considered by avant garde scholarship. Marfa, Texas, however, was not the only land informing the development of *El Paraiso*.

The Off Center

Beyond Marfa, Texas, another place that highly influenced the Rude's development of *El Paraiso* was their own home theatre, The Off Center. As much as exotic locations like Marfa, the Rude Mechs' home space shapes the aesthetics, everyday artistic practices, and ideological viewpoints of the company. The history of The Off Center reveals not only insights into the theatre company but also illuminates East Austin's labor history.

In a PBS documentary, Shawn Sides explained how the company grounded itself in The Off Center:

When we're working on a new piece and we start to imagine it visually in our heads, we imagine it in our space. It informs the works. It informs the aesthetic of our work. We don't picture it in a very fancy performing arts center with 400 foot ceilings. We picture it with some wooden rafters and maybe a random possum walking through at some point, which has happened. When we tour, we hope for, we usually hope for an intimate space of three hundred seats or less just because that's how we made it in here. That's what the work usually wants because we made it in here.

Shawn's description of The Off Center not only gives a short physical description of the place, wooden rafters and possums, but she also notes the relationship between place and aesthetic. That is a play's aesthetic often responds directly to the place in which the piece

is developed. In the case of The Off Center, the aesthetic is directly informed by the history of economies and labor practices in East Austin.

Constructed in 1952, the buildings at The Off Center function as a kind of always-shifting archive organized to house communal memory, a history of labor practices, and stories of the creative arts in East Austin. In many ways, the building houses a history of the production of space in East Austin. However, to access this archive requires both guidance from company members, the memories of the local East Austin community, and at times the very bones of the building itself. Though little formal archival information exists about The Off Center, for those who know how to read the signs, the building itself houses a rich archival history. To understand how the everyday practices of life in East Austin influence the development of theatrical practice at The Off Center, I read the building not as a theatre or as a place for economic industry but as a palimpsest of labor practices. Importantly, while some of the history of The Off Center is handed down from building owners and property managers, Co-PAD Thomas Graves pointed out that the building's stories are also learned when neighborhood folks wander into The Off Center and say something like, "I remember when this use to be..." Thus much of what is known of about the life cycle of The Off Center is built through a collection of oral histories accumulated by the space's managers and the local community. However, The Off Center's history can also be gleaned from the very architecture of the building. Any given pipe or platform tells not only the story of a performance but also a longer history of the building.

Initially The Off Center was a feed supply warehouse that sat along a spur of the primary railroad track running through East Austin. The warehouse was run by a feed-

and-seed company named Tex-O-Mix, which handled Paymaster Feed brands. (Still today the branding for these companies remains visible on walls and pipes at The Off Center.) Given the location of The Off Center and the unbending segregation of the city in the 1950s, undoubtedly Tex-O-Mix primarily employed people of color, who worked to supply feed for the state's farming and ranching industries (Lesley 2014; Lynn 2014; Graves 2014). Co-PAD Thomas Graves, who is in charge of building management and the Rudes' Scenic Co-op, explained that the most-used performance area on The Off Center grounds originally housed giant palettes of feed. In the 90s, this portion of The Off Center was converted to a space for visual artists. (And by "converted," I mean the palettes were removed.) Artists both lived and worked in the room but did little to alter the basic blueprint of the feed-and-seed other than add a few small, lofted spaces at the far west end of the room (Graves 2014; Lesley 2014). Until the Rudes began to repurpose the building in the late 90s, The Off Center had little electrical capacity, no air conditioning, and no bathing area (Lesley 2014; Lynn 2014).

The Rudes call the middle warehouse in the complex The Center Center. During the days of Tex-O-Mix, the seed from the palettes was transferred from The Off Center area of the warehouse into The Center Center area for mixing and processing (Graves 2014). Since its construction, The Center Center has also housed an ice factory, an anarchist bookstore, and a mattress storage facility. The roof and walls of The Center Center are shaped by the trusses and old smokestacks from the feed supply and ice-making industries. The Center Center's walls feature a labyrinth of electrical wires and fuseboxes that kept its businesses supplied with energy. The remains of the anarchist bookstore—an old mattress, painted walls, and skateboard ramp—are located up in the

old foreman's office, which sits in a kind of walled and lofted area high above the floor of The Center Center

Though clear economic histories are associated with The Off Center and The Center Center, other areas within the complex have a less clear genealogy. The far east end of the warehouse houses a third, separate space, which the Rudes call The Off Shoot. It primarily serves as a rehearsal space and the classroom for the Rudes' long-running summer education program, Grrl Action, transformed in the summer of 2015 to Off Center Teens. At ground-level, jutting north from The Off Center performance area, is the Rudes' office area—a hive of desks, computers, papers, and storage. Most of The Off Center warehouse complex is ringed by a high chain link fence. The yard area includes gardens, an outdoor ticket booth, a pagoda, picnic tables, landscaping, rough-hewn sheds (which house the Scenic Co-op), and a large moving truck donated to the company by the University of Texas. The Off Center warehouse spaces flow one-into-the-next, and when visitors arrive, the UT moving-truck or the picnic table or sagging door hinges are just as much as part of the theatrical scenery as the set itself.

The Rudes' management of The Off Center complex has turned the warehouses into not only a performing space but also a performing archive. Performances at The Off Center, either by the Rude Mechs or any number of arts organizations that rent the venue, take place all over the complex—in all three warehouses, in the sheds, and all over the yard. When audience members walk through The Off Center spaces, they have come to recognize space as transformable. For example, when Graves and I visited the Scenic Co-op, we talked about the time it served as the audience dress barn (a kind of free costume rental) for the company's production of *I've Never Been So Happy*, and we

talked about how Graves lived in the shed when he first moved to Austin. We looked at the sloping entry in front of The Center Center and talked about how Fusebox Festival had built the ADA-compliant ramp when renting the space and then left it in place for the Rudes. We stared at the enormity of a cargo truck donated by the University of Texas and talked about the different company members' educational experiences at the university, the company's residency at UT, and the irony of the university donating the truck to the company even while the university's real estate company (the owner of The Off Center) makes plans to tear down the facility. In any given location at The Off Center linger histories of prior art events, prior homes, and prior partnerships with other organizations.

Inside the warehouse, the performance spaces of The Off Center and The Center Center provide the most evident links to the building's history. Today the primary performing area in The Off Center is a 55x38 space with concrete floors and low ceilings. The Off Center performance area has no wings or permanent curtains. Its cinder brick walls are painted black and clearly visible at all times. The ceiling is covered in a layer of insulation that sometimes pokes through its black plastic covering. The Off Center stage area of the building is air conditioned and heated, though the air conditioning struggles in the summer months and the heat offers limited warmth in the colder months. Accordingly, most of The Off Center performances happen September to December and then February through May, the cooler months in Texas. In this primary playing area, the Rudes have added flexible seating for 93, a tiny light/sound/video booth, a grid, and three small studios for visual artists. However, much of this part of the building remains unchanged from when the Rudes assumed management of the building in 1999. All

entrances and exits are still those once used by the feed-and-seed company and all open directly to the outside. In the playing area, old pipes reading “Tex-O-Mix” run along the stage. The set for the Rudes’ original play *Decameron* covered this pipe. The Rudes recreated the logo further down the pipe away from the performance area so that it remained visible during the production. It was important for the company that such traces of history always remain visible. Today, both the original and its facsimile remain.

The building’s age and purpose is also visible in other ways. The warehouse was constructed to be open to the outdoors. As a consequence, over the years animals have been (and still are) guests during rehearsals and performances at The Off Center: raccoons and possums walking across the grid, cats meowing and trapped in the office so that they won’t wander on stage; birds flitting in the rafters; rats living in set pieces. Long-time audience members and the Rudes’ visiting artists are well aware of the possibility of a “critter” visit. Though a Rudes’ show may offer political commentary on George W. Bush’s presidency, explore Busby Berkeley movies and the writing of Ayn Rand, or challenge ideas about sexuality and gender in the West, the atmosphere and very structure of The Off Center’s performing area never allows the audience to forget where it is. The warehouse-nature of the space is always front-and-center: the air conditioning struggles to keep the open building cool; the building exits—clearly visible on the stage—are marked with glowing red exit signs; animals cross the stage; and going to the restroom requires traversing old concrete steps down into another section of the building. The bones and original purpose of The Off Center remain present within every Rude performance (Graves 2014; Lesley 2014; Lynn 2014).

The Rudes' reproduction of the Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69* offers a clear example of the building's ability to shape a performance through its original architectural structure. This performance took place in The Center Center area. The Rudes' primarily use The Center Center to house sets, and the architecture of the room has little-changed from that related to its prior uses. The two-story, open space has no heating or insulation. There are clear holes and gaps in the wavy metal roof. (The audience of *Dionysus in 69* was treated to a sound-design that included all the cues made available by Texas weather.) The foreman's office/anarchist bookstore (did I mention there is skating ramp in this lofted area) remained clearly visible during the show as did the remnants from smokestacks and grain elevators. All the old wires and fuse boxes remained visible in their original places. (Looking at The Center Center with Graves, I asked if the wires were "for sure dead." His response: "Yeah, but I still wouldn't touch them.") The bare and impossible-to-clean concrete floor remained for the performance, only covered by a few rugs during the show to cushion the actors' bodies. The only change to The Center Center made for *Dionysus in '69* was the uncovering of a pit in The Center Center floor. As Graves and Lynn were exploring the room before building the set, they were thumping around on the floor with a sledge hammer and found a hollow-sounding space just off what would become the center playing area. The two busted through the floor to discover a pit. The Rudes liked this pit because the Performance Group used a similar raw, below-ground space in their original production. The Rudes were also fascinated by the pit because it linked back to the building's purpose. Maybe grains were mixed in the pit, or perhaps it once housed a piece of ice-making equipment? (Graves 2014; Lynn 2014).

Though the company's production of *Dionysus in '69* was guided by an archive of documents from the Performance Group as well as the input and looming presence of Richard Schechner, undoubtedly the Austin production of the play also dialoged with the history of East Austin. An audience member had to only look beyond the performers' bodies to encounter the history of the room. In effect, the performance formed a dialectic with the room. While the piece itself reflected a canonical work in the U.S. theatrical avant garde, the performance also told a story of spatial practices and industry in East Austin. This production was not the Performance Group's *Dionysus in '69*, but instead a piece of canonical art exposed to the realities and histories of life in Austin. By its very placement in the undisguised world of The Center Center, a radical performance history of New York and an ancient tale of the Greek gods were placed into conversation with the history and artifacts of labor practices in East Austin. Rather than hide that potential collision, the Rude Mechs welcomed the new conversation created by The Center Center itself.

Any number of Rude Mechs have commented upon how their shows work best in The Off Center. Undoubtedly, The Off Center offers the Rudes a place to think artistically. But the building itself remains a place that continually asks the Mechs to grapple with the economic conditions and labor practices that shaped East Austin and the company's own work. Beyond these more obvious histories that live within The Off Center, for many years work made within the building has also been influenced by what some might assume is a decidedly un-Texan set of theoretical influences—queer ideologies. However not only do these ideologies inform how the Rudes' *think* about their work, they also inform how the Rudes *make* work.

Queer Ideological Inspirations

While reconceptualizations of Marfa and gritty warehouse life might fall within expected parameters of a Texan spatial practice, the Rudes Mechs are also heavily influenced by their personal work with queer artists and scholars. At the time the Rudes began making *El Paraiso*, the company was still very early in its career. Kirk Lynn notes, “When I think back on it, I feel like we didn’t even know ourselves yet, so we were still trying to figure out how to make plays and why.” When I then asked Lynn who he would name as the company’s early influences, he presented a list that toggled between his personal life experiences and company experiences. Lynn named The Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, Jill Dolan, and the general New York fringe theatre scene as inspirations. (Of course, other Rude Mechs would add additional names to this list.) Lynn explained that when the company was performing *Lipstick Traces* in New York, they stayed at “Peggy and Lois’s.” During that stay, “they had told us how to be artists” (2014). Even as the company was experiencing its first national success, the Rude Mechs were still looking for artistic and intellectual guides. To no small extent, early interactions with feminist and queer artists and scholars solidified not only the kinds of material the company produced but also *how* the company made art. While the group readily embraces their Texan-ness and their hometown, other overt ideologies shaping the production of space at The Off Center include the theories/practices of feminist and queer theatre scholars/practitioners.

The influence of these ideologies on the company’s everyday practice is perhaps most noticeable in their decision-making process. As Co-PAD emeritus Sarah Richardson explained, early in the company’s development, the group especially operated

with a decision making process called “consensus minus one” (2012). Other Co-PADS give the consensus process a slightly different name, but all agree that in general decisions were and are made through consensus. Projects, ideas, even the color to paint The Off Center cannot be forwarded until all Co-PADS are in agreement. The only exception to the consensus process is “a moral block.” If a Co-PAD feels that a decision will infringe upon her own moral compass, she may “throw a moral block.” A moral block effectively tables the idea under discussion. To date, no Co-PAD has ever officially thrown a moral block; instead, phrases like “we’re getting into moral block territory” are used to indicate extreme personal discomfort and to resituate discussions. The phrase “moral block” reminds the Co-PADS of the role of individual thoughts and beliefs within the collective. Over the past twenty years, as the Co-PADS have become individual experts in positions like accounting, space management, or media relations, fewer and fewer decisions require consensus. However, all major artistic decisions are still derived through a process of consensus decision-making (Darlington 2012, Lesley 2012, Lynn 2012, Richardson 2012, Sides 2012).⁹

To no small extent, queer organizations and organizational strategies influenced the development of the Rudes’ decision-making process. Richardson explained that in the very earliest point in the company’s history, the Rudes wanted an organizational model that moved beyond hierarchical decision-making structures: “We were sick of tyrannical white male director horse shit. It was exhausting. I could have better ideas than him but because he was a white guy who wore black eyeliner or whatever, people thought he was hot shit. It was exhausting.” Here Richardson is personally referring to her own early theatre experiences and training, but almost all of the Co-PADS noted that

the consensus decision-making structure was intentionally chosen to off-set a false horizontal organizational structure. Namely, the company wanted to avoid a labor system in which artists worked cross-disciplinarily and collectively, and yet a single “director” figure held the power to sculpt and mold final artistic and business decisions (Darlington 2012; Lesley 2012; Lynn 2012; Richardson 2012; Sides 2012).

In researching alternative organizational structures, the Rudes came across a New York-based activist group, The Lesbian Avengers. Founded in 1992, The Lesbian Avengers work as a “direct action group focused on issues vital to lesbian survival and visibility” (Lesbian Avenger Documentary Project). In particular, The Lesbian Avenger Handbook featured a Conflict Resolution Appendix that spelled out the group’s decision-making process: “If an issue on the floor is contentious and only has the approval of a small majority, instead of proceeding based on a direct vote—we try to enter into a phase of negotiated compromise. During this period, every party must be willing to be flexible and open until we find a solution that most people are comfortable with.”

Built on the ideas of companies like Lesbian Avengers, the Co-PADs’ consensus decision-making process involves similar frameworks. For the Co-PADs, the point of the process is not to forward an idea favored by the majority, but instead, consensus decision making provides an opportunity for listening to one another, especially in the case of a single voice directly opposing the direction of the majority. For example, early in the company’s history the Co-PADs toyed with deconstructing the story-making process surrounding the Tectonic Theater Project’s production of *The Laramie Project*—a potential project with the working title, *The Laramie Project Project*. While the majority of the Co-PADs were intrigued by the general idea, Madge Darlington voiced concern

about the Rude Mechs' show unintentionally undermining the pursuit of LGBTQ equality in the U.S. In this case, Darlington, who identifies as queer, did not have to throw a moral block despite being the singular voice opposing the idea of the majority. The years spent learning to reach consensus had taught the Co-PADs to effectively read and interpret dissension. Madge was heard, and *the Laramie Project Project* concept was dropped. Of course, another Co-PAD might theorize the moment differently—"we just realized it was a terrible idea" (Darlington 2012; Sides 2012).

Across differing stories about the Co-PADs' decision-making processes, the thread sustained from narrative to narrative remains the influence of queer and feminist artists on the company's frame for working with one-another. With backgrounds largely grounded in experiences with conventional artistic leadership, the company could have easily turned to more traditional models for structural operations. However, by utilizing systems that supported the inclusion of voices of women and/or queer people in the decision-making process, the Rudes purposefully promoted ideologies within the company's production of artistic space that moved beyond the heteronormative, male-dominated leadership models that flourish throughout the state and much of the country and that many of the Rude Mechs had themselves experienced.

Beyond organizational structures, the Co-PADs have also spoken about the role of theatre scholar Jill Dolan as a mentor and an intellectual inspiration for the company. At the time the Rudes made *El Paraiso*, Dolan worked in the University of Texas's Performance as Public Practice program. She also sat on the advisory board of the Rude Mechs, and she curated the performance series *Throws Like a Girl*, a co-production between the Rudes and UT Austin. The series includes performances and lectures by

artists and scholars like Lois Weaver, Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw, and Sue-Ellen Case (Rude Mechanicals). Dolan explains that the performers and the audiences of *Throws Like a Girl* created a kind of hybrid community: “These communities of citizens created a wide public not just of feminists, Jews, and queers, but of people who care about the ideas and issues that these feminist, lesbian, and/or Jewish performers addressed, as well as about the pleasure provided to them as witnessing, active spectators” (*Utopia* 24).

As the company grew, Dolan’s influence played out in not only guiding the intellectual and social territory the group entered (Lesley tells stories of the Co-PADs mulling over “utopian performatives”), but Dolan also directly shaped how the Rude Mechs saw themselves:

Kirk: There was a point in *Lipstick Traces* where Jill Dolan presented us to her class or something, and I remember being very proud. She introduced me to her class, with no checking in with me or anything, just as a queer artist. And I thought that was a great compliment. The work is queer. And the way we make work is queer...I don’t think this is something you can claim for yourself...For me, I would not represent myself as a queer artist because I think it would get bound up with my privilege as a white, straight male...But I think we frequently want to be in queer territory at the very least, whether or not we make queer art...Erik Ehn said this great thing about the theatre: You’re a guest in the theatre, and you’re guests of the people who have made theatre before you. And I think with so much of the theatre we make, we’re the guest of queer artists.

(Lynn 2014)

Lana: It doesn't have to be a play about queers. It doesn't have to be a queer play. It has to be a world in which that [queerness] can exist. (Lesley 2014)

In 2015, the PBS series *Arts in Context* focused on the work of the Rude Mechs. Early in the short documentary, Co-PAD Madge Darlington, who identifies as queer, effectively described how the influence of scholars like Dolan and companies like Lesbian Avengers takes shape in the Rude Mechs' work:

You know, I just feel so fortunate that in college I met a really wonderful group of people. Geniuses, in fact. And I fell in with them and really enjoyed making theatre with them. We had a lot of ideals about making theatre as a collective, working with an egalitarian structure. Everybody needs to stay engaged because you need to—you need everybody's involvement to get to that better decision. The idea is that five heads are better than one. I think of it as a big queer marriage, we have to kind of keep recommitting to one another. (PBS Video)

With queer ideologies informing not only the content of their new work but also their everyday artistic practices, the Rude Mechs carved for themselves a methodology for both expressing radical ideas and for making work. They have created a spatial practice that includes “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time,” and they use this practice as a point of reference by which to challenge the fixed, normative ideologies that govern the production of space in Austin and around the state (Halberstam 6). In no way does this practice mean that the majority of the artists in the company identify themselves as queer (although a fair number do) or that remarks like Dolan's prove that the Mechs are a “queer” company. Rather, by engaging with the logics and practices of the queer

community via the guidance of queer artists and scholars, the Rude Mechs are able to engage with queerness as a spatial practice. Many in the state, and certainly many working two miles away at the state capitol, did and do read this methodology, this practice, as heretical and amoral. *El Paraiso* responds to precisely these socially conservative viewpoints, with which the decided majority of Texans identify, by tactically manipulating a Texas imaginary grounded in hyper-masculine, heteronormative, often violent conquerors.

El Paraiso, A Close-Reading

Paradise and Purgatory

Scholar James Harding notes that the recognition and the influence of an avant garde are situational and contingent. In any given locale, avant gardes may arise that are not directly in conversation with one another, not “necessarily reliant on one another.” They do not speak the same language of ideas. Harding explains that many unifying theories of the avant garde, particularly those of Bürger, seek to explain away these differences, thus erasing the multitude of ideologies shaping the avant garde. Harding’s project, instead, aims to resurrect the ghosts that linger within the pluralities and slippages of the historiography surrounding avant garde performance (*Ghosts* 5). Building upon Harding’s theorization of ghosts in the avant garde, I analyze the imagery—both literal and symbolic—of the very setting of an avant garde performance to clarify how a set serves as a mechanism for exploring the ghosts and pluralities alive within the identities and ideologies forming the space of Texas.

Interestingly, across interviews with the Co-PADs, they often referred to the setting of *El Paraiso* in different ways. Kirk calls it “paradise”; Lana calls it “purgatory”

(Lynn 2014; Lesley 2014). While the *Divine Comedy* separately addresses both places, the Co-PADs' differing interpretations of the play's setting perhaps arise from the inherent pluralities blooming within the Texas landscape. However in order understand these pluralities, one must read the set of *El Paraiso* as a kind of historical ruin. In the essay "Ghosts in the City," de Certeau theorizes the procedures and outcomes involved in modernizing Paris, paying particular attention to the ways in which "sleepy, old-fashioned things, defaced houses, closed-down factories, the debris of shipwrecked histories still today raise up the ruins of an unknown, strange city." In effect, sites like Paris both worry contemporary order and produce a sense of "nostalgia attached to a world on its way toward disappearing" (133). This contemporary "disorder" results in a kind of architectural echo of the past heard in the ears of the present moment—a historical heterogeneity held within a single place.

In 2002, directly addressing national perceptions and assumptions about the company and its homeland, the Rudes set their next play in the "ruins of an unknown, strange city," at least an unknown, strange world for the contemporary avant garde. Far from the fractious, blistering lands of punk rock history and *Lipstick Traces*, the physical world of *El Paraiso* explores what de Certeau might call "the 'collages' produced through the successive reuses of the same buildings." In the case of *El Paraiso*, the "buildings" are less of a singular building and instead include both geographical, economic, and architectural iconography associated with Texas. For some, the place reads as familiar and welcoming, a kind of heaven; for others, the place represents an intermediate state, a place to seek atonement, a purgatory. As de Certeau points out, such collages involve "complex debris that is impossible to classify within a pedagogical

linearity” or to firmly place within “a referential ideology” (135). Thus for Lesley this place is purgatory, and for Lynn, it is paradise.

In many ways, the juxtaposition of geography and industry formed the “debris” at the heart of *El Paraiso*’s visual landscape. The stage, even under the audience’s feet, was covered in three cubic yards of sand. Sand littered beams of light shooting across the stage. Sand filled the nose and the mouth. Sand changed the ways actors moved, slowing their pace, turning each step into a saunter and an effort. Atop the sand at the back of the stage loomed the simplified frames of three oil derricks, which actors could climb and sit atop. In front of the derricks perched a set of three swinging saloon doors, marking the entrance into the stage’s most active playing space. The right center-stage area featured a bar framed in the same simple style as the derricks; the bar served only beer, shots of liquor, and chicken-fried steak. The left center-stage belonged to the play’s live band. Downstage right boasted the karaoke dais. Downstage left sat a water trough for bathing that also came with a hard lid—a perfect platform for poker or pouring a shot. The set also flickered with its own mysterious lights. The entirety of the performance space was ringed with individually-lit, vertical hanging strands of multi-colored beer bottles. Moreover, multiple old TV sets were sprinkled across the set, like trash abandoned in the dessert. The TVs broadcast black-and-white footage of a car’s headlights speeding down a two-lane highway at night.

From the oil derricks to the footage of the open road, from the band platform to the mics perched on the karaoke stage, the world of *El Paraiso* took up many of the ideas and images the Rudes keyed-on in the landscape of Marfa. Like the set of *El Paraiso*, West Texas is sandy and empty and dotted with industrial architecture that mars its empty

expanses. But it's also a place given to song and to fellowship and to games—all those bars and rodeos. Importantly, the landscapes of Marfa and *El Paraiso* are markedly different than that of Austin in the early twenty-first century. (After all, Austin doesn't even sit in a desert, and it ain't got no oil.) The play, however, necessitates moving through all these different locales simultaneously. The Off Center does not disappear behind the set. In effect, upon entering The Off Center warehouse, the audience is confronted with the “debris of shipwrecked history.” Leaving behind a modern city, the audience steps directly into “a world on its way to disappearing,” a land of ghosts.

The Off Center has no vestibule or indoor ticketing area. One steps directly from an outside porch into the playing space. In this case, an audience member stepped directly from a modern Texas city into a world of “wild objects, stemming from indecipherable pasts,” pasts that had all but disappeared from Austin by 2002 (135).¹⁰ The first indication of this layering of past and present began with the sand. Like the actors, the audience had to trudge through the sand on the way to their seats, under which lived more sand. Comfortably distancing oneself from the world of the play proved almost impossible. The grind of sand underfoot served as a constant reminder that viewers were no longer quite in Austin, and yet they had not quite left Texas. Beyond the sand, the deconstructed iconic images next challenged one's sense of home. While the oil derricks, saloon doors, water trough, and bar undoubtedly read as familiar, each had been rendered as a bare frame of the original (undoubtedly for fiscal as well as aesthetic reasons). Hence, each was decipherable and yet at the same time peculiar. In de Certeau's discussion of objects in the city, he notes that “these objects play the roles of actors in the city” not because of what they might do or say but “because their

strangeness is silent.” In effect, this silence, this inability to speak of the past gives rise to narrative: “Their withdrawal makes people speak—it generates narrative—and it allows action; through its ambiguity, it ‘authorizes’ spaces of operation” (135-136).

In littering the playing space with oddly familiar and silent objects that pointed towards an iconic past, a particular narrative of Texas, the Rudes initiated a narrative that then allowed for action. Like the set’s haunted imagery, the action of the play was also driven by a band of ghosts, a collection of forgotten figures rarely discussed in the study of avant garde performance in the U.S.

A Band of Queer Ghosts

As Lesley noted, *El Paraiso* was not developed to specifically be a “queer play,” but instead the world of the play was designed to include queer characters. Of the six characters occupying the purgatorial paradise of *El Paraiso*, the Rude Mechs identify four as queer (Darlington 2015; Lesley 2014; Liebrecht 2014; Lynn 2014; Sides 2014). Intended to capture the spirit of what it means to be a “wanting, thinking Texan,” *El Paraiso*’s tagline might also be framed as an exploration of what it means to be a “wanting, thinking, *queer* Texan.” Notably, the development of wanting, thinking, queer characters inside *El Paraiso* does not lead to a tautological conception of queerness in Texas. As José Muñoz explains in his analysis of avant garde performance in relationship to the punk rock under commons, the theoretical challenge is to frame queerness as a “mode of ‘being-with’ that defies social convention and conformism and is innately heretical yet still desirous for the world.” This practice of heretical “being with” forms a space “that is not a pulverizing, hierarchical one bequeathed through logics and practices of exploitation (“Gimme” 96). Thus, a space that is both queer and avant

garde in nature allows for the defiance of social convention without devolving into social anarchy. A sense of community very much remains inside queer avant garde performance, though that community is not defined by a system of hierarchical “logics and practices.” Rather queer avant garde performance allows for the creation of relationships less ruled by fixed notions of gender, sexuality, and relationship status that, in fact, forward and fuel the social conventions that drive contemporary U.S. capitalism and democracy. *El Paraiso* features queer characters from different moments in “Texas” time and from different spatial practices. As this band of characters explores desire, they innately defy normative logics of Texan-ness. Within the fictional world of *El Paraiso*, each character may continuously and safely question the hierarchical and rigorous social practices disciplining his or her sexual body.

Importantly, the queer characters in *El Paraiso* do not represent a singularized notion of non-heteronormative identity in Texas. Instead, their bodies, their language, even their social status mark each as a production of a particular spatial practice: a more-masculine Calamity Jane-type character translates differently from a 1980s honky tonk gal-type character which both translate differently from a movie star Jett Rink-type character. Each alludes to a specific period and social status in Texas. Not only do these characters physically look different, but they are also linked to different locations and different forms of labor: rurality and gun-slinging versus urbanity and drink-slinging versus Hollywood and film-slinging. In its totality, the group forms a kind of ghostly, queer bricolage in the play that is then juxtaposed against the iconic Texas imagery of the set. In her analysis of queer affect, scholar Elizabeth Freeman notes, “This stubborn lingering of pastness (whether it appears as anachronistic style, as the reappearance of

bygone events in the symptom, or as arrested development) is a hallmark of queer affect: a ‘revolution’ in the old sense of the word, as a turning back” (8). The effect of this turning back in queer affect is not to simply engage in an act of nostalgia. Rather, the gesture of turning back allows one to speak of a past erased by “progressive logics” in which “becoming more visible was correlated with achieving ever more freedom” (9). Active turning back also allows a community to surface histories hidden by dominant progressive narratives. Characters like Marfa, Mercedes, James Dean, and Wittgenstein in *El Paraiso*, with their different expressions of queerness, point to strikingly different ways in which queer Texans openly countered or quietly lived within the state’s conservative social environment. Through language, song, and physicality, this bricolage argues for a diverse, nuanced understanding of queerness in Texas. In sum, their presence positions avant garde performance in Texas within a queer production of space.

Marfa and Mercedes: Women in the Afterlife

Marfa and Mercedes offer seemingly incongruous portrayals of Texas women. Marfa—buckskin-clad, wearing a white cowboy hat, and sporting a gun belt—operates as a kind of quiet authority, a woman capable of both naming truths and physically defending her point of view. At the top of the play, taciturn Marfa explains that she has come to El Paraiso in search of the “strange lights”: “there’s no need for all this song and dance/I think it’s simple—I don’t need to tell you/ people do what they do for their own reasons/ I came out here for the lights—like most everyone else” (8). At the top of the play, Marfa’s behavior and speech are perhaps most marked by a reluctance to engage, a wariness of the world. In comparison, Mercedes—a contemporary cowgirl sporting big hair, big cleavage, and lots of lip gloss—believes that in El Paraiso she can learn to

temper her desires. Early in the play, Mercedes, almost painfully vulnerable in her self-assessment, describes her hazardous attempts to find love: “All right but I’m just gonna say what everyone else says/I would prefer to control my desires...please don’t let me love him—Not him...let it be someone else/ let someone else love him/ and let me love someone else altogether...” (7). Initially, Mercedes is embroiled in a love triangle involving her beau, Casey, and saloon girl, Langtry, but Mercedes is attempting to steadily work her way out of love. She says to Langtry, “Don’t think I don’t want to hurt you/but I can’t think of anything worse/than to let you have him” (44). Unlike Marfa, Mercedes is painfully open to the world, a walking love wound. Though there is limited vocal interaction between Mercedes and Marfa at the top of the show, the two do engage in a non-verbal physical score: long, bashful looks and flirtatious tips of the hat indicate a brewing awareness of one another as something more than mere acquaintances. At the top of the play, Marfa and Mercedes together not only represent different female physicalities, one highly feminine and one more overtly masculine, they also represent lives structured around different concerns: Marfa seeks mystery while Mercedes seeks control.

As the play progresses, Marfa names how life before El Paraiso silenced her: “I took my first steps at seven months but couldn’t speak til I was twelve years old/ couldn’t/didn’t—everytime I opened my mouth I heard that town say hush/ the only word I learned was, ‘Shhhhh,’ until I realized that wasn’t my town/ my life was somewhere else until I heard about the lights...” (35). In El Paraiso, Marfa’s new-found vocalicity is perhaps as much expressed in her physicality as in her speech. Marfa first confronts the cowboy Casey about his ill treatment of Mercedes and his general attitude toward others:

“People like you are unbelievable... You’re the reason nobody believes in people anymore...” When Casey refuses to listen, Marfa then engages him in a lengthy boxing/grappling match that ends with Casey dunked in the water trough. In a moment of the queering gender roles, the cowgirl defends the lady and then physically beats up the cowboy to boot.

In a different manner, Mercedes also learns to find her own sense of authority. After being told to “fuck off” and to “shut up” by Casey, Mercedes breaks up with the cowboy, and eventually confronts Langtry about her affair with Casey. Mercedes’ confrontation with Langtry begins with a series of rapid-fire insults. Importantly, Mercedes begins to speak in Spanish for the first time in the play during this dialogue. In the world of *El Paraiso*, Mercedes learns to not only escape an unhealthy love, but her unexpected use of Spanish indicates that Mercedes is also no longer willing to operate solely within normative culture. Her quick, biting Spanish shifts the cultural frame of the play, reminding the audience that historical portrayals of Texas have systemically erased the ideas, lives, and language of non-white citizens. Like Marfa’s confrontation with Casey, the fight between Mercedes and Langtry also ends in physical violence. The two perform a bizarre, highly choreographed battle using the ingredients for chicken fried steak, which Mercedes is preparing prior to the confrontation. In a choreographed series of movements that loop and repeat, ladies douse each other in the face with flour, they shove each other’s faces in milk, they then spit milk at one another other, they smack each other’s breasts with meat, and each woman slaps the other across the face with large pieces of raw steak. This physical score continues until both women are exhausted.¹¹

At the end of this fight, covered in flour and meat juice, Mercedes looks across the stage at Marfa. The two slowly approach one another, move to the karaoke stage together hand-in-hand, and begin to sing a love song: “Maybe it started as flirtin’/ probably we’ll both end up hurtin’/ but there’s one thing that’s certain/we get along” (46). At the end of the play, Mercedes has found her cowboy. And her name is Marfa.

Together, Marfa and Mercedes disrupt expected constructions of female identity within Texas history. As Judith Butler explains, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (34). What then are Marfa and Mercedes teaching about the constructed identity of women in Texas through a series of performative expressions? Women fall in love—with men and/or other women. Women handle guns and shoot tequila. Women are masculine. Women are feminine. Women avoid confrontation. Women do not avoid confrontation. Women are quick-witted. Women are silent. Women sometimes solve problems with physical violence and sometimes with song. Marfa and Mercedes teach that women in a Texan, purgatorial heaven constantly negotiate and renegotiate their performances of gender. Through their gender expressions, the two effectively queer the identity of womanhood in Texas.

El Paraiso produces a world in which characters like Marfa and Mercedes can perform—through song, words, and the body—alternative conceptions of womanhood and sexuality in Texas. In queering the constructed identity of Texas women, Marfa and Mercedes never move totally beyond many of the primary spatial practices associated with Texas. They are still cowgirl/boys. They still handle guns. There’s a twang in their voices. These kinds of spatial practices are most often associated with conservative

Texas culture, and yet in *El Paraiso*, queer women engage with them. Thus, Marfa and Mercedes do not represent a call to overhaul all ideological, artistic, and everyday life practices associated with the idea of Texas. Instead, their presence in *El Paraiso* suggests that such queer folk have always existed within the spatial practice of Texas, no matter how the state seeks to brand itself.

Wittgenstein and James Dean: Men in the Afterlife

Unlike Mercedes and Marfa, my pairing of James Dean and Wittgenstein is not intended to highlight a love narrative within the play, or perhaps rather it highlights a queering of the kind of relationships that inhabit a love narrative. Other than the cowboy Casey, with his hyper-masculinity and abundant cowboy energy, Dean and Wittgenstein are the only other men in the play. Both James Dean and Wittgenstein function as outsiders within the world of *El Paraiso*—one a movie star, one a philosopher, and neither native Texans. Moreover, both characters are developed via a liberal mixture of truth and fiction. Like the real Dean, *El Paraiso*'s has just died in a car crash, but the James Dean that appears in *El Paraiso* is less a mirror of the real Dean and more of a distilled version of Dean's character Jett Rink from the movie *Giant*. This Rude Mech version of James Dean/Jett Rink, however, is openly gay, unlike the real Dean and definitely unlike Rink. If *El Paraiso*'s James Dean is a distillation of Jett Rink, its Wittgenstein is an embodiment of the scholar's philosophy. There is little of day-to-day life in Wittgenstein's language; his speech can perhaps best be described as a continual philosophical rumination on the tensions between desire and intellect. Wittgenstein does not merely pull a gun or down a shot; he first deliberates on what such actions signal about thinking and wanting. While Dean's sexual desires in the play are self-evident,

Wittgenstein's are less clear. Lynn points out that in researching Wittgenstein, multiple biographical sources described the philosopher as a closeted gay man (Lynn 2014). In the play, while Wittgenstein never professes sexual desire for Dean, his single-minded pursuit of Deans across the course of the story hints at a compulsion that is not simply that of a researcher focused upon his subject.

In the play's first scene, "A Showdown Tableau," Dean and Wittgenstein almost magically appear in El Paraiso. Wittgenstein says to Dean, "When I saw how they said you were dead--/ I knew just where to look" (2). Dean asks Wittgenstein why he is pursuing him, a question which catalyzes a language-fueled showdown. The battle of wits that ensues is driven by what Wittgenstein defines as a particular tension: "It's a hard ride/ between wanting and having" (3). At the end of the two philosophically hashing over the difference between "wanting and having," Wittgenstein levies his own question at Dean: "How did you get here and what map tells the way?" (4). Dean is nonplussed by the question, and the two end the scene by pulling their guns and conducting a more traditional spaghetti western-style showdown. The appearance of Dean and Wittgenstein in the first scene effectively skews the audience's assumptions about the initial world of the play, fueled by their immediate encounter with the set design. Beyond oil booms and saloon happenings, the spatial practice of this Texas also includes philosophically questioning one's intellectual, emotional, and sexual desires. In *El Paraiso*, Texas is a place for philosophers like Wittgenstein. It is a place for gay cowboys, like James Dean/Jett Rink. It is a place where a philosopher and a gay cowboy can wrangle with another, figure each other out. And maybe that wrangle is driven by desire or intellect or the fusion of the two. These kinds of allowances within the play's

theorization of spatial practice in Texas invert assumptions about Texas' conservative persona and instead point towards ways of being that include more fluid notions of masculinity: masculinity that is also gay; masculinity that is overtly intellectual.

As the play develops, time-and-again Dean and Wittgenstein introduce non-heteronormative ideologies for governing masculinity in El Paraiso. Dean's impact is perhaps most felt in his conspicuous displays of sexuality. His forthright attempt to seduce Casey offers one example of the ways in which Dean openly challenges the rules of sexuality governing cowboy culture. For example, over the course of a single scene Dean unleashes a barrage of sexual propositions upon the cowboy as they share a drink:

Dean: Kiss me.

Casey: Okay.

Dean: No, kiss me like you were kissing a girl. Can I fuck you?

Casey: Jesus. I don't know.

Dean: Can we try? It may not be real but it makes sense--/ like the King of France on a bull--/ you get a picture of what that would be like--/complete with crown jewels that don't exist/ and what's that a picture of if it ain't real? Heaven needs the Loch Ness Monster/ that means something/ even it ain't realistic/ and I want it.

Casey: Stay calm. Stay calm.

Dean: I am calm./ Your teeth are good, but they're small/ Why don't you kiss me?

Casey: Keep the flask.

Dean: Can I fuck you? (32-33)

Dean's attempt to seduce Casey displays not only fervent requests for the physical, but Dean's seduction also launches an argument for the power of the mythic and the seemingly unreal. Dean's ruminations that follow the logic "it may not be real but it makes sense" signal that what appears unrealistic or inconceivable, in fact, often first takes shape in the mind. One can picture an impossibility when the laws of the land say otherwise. For example, if Casey can imagine in his mind's eye the King of France riding a bull, then the image in his mind is real, even if such a ride seems unlikely to ever take place. If Dean can imagine kissing Casey, then the image is real, even if it ain't realistic.

Dean's analysis of the relationship between the imagination and reality opens up a gateway for reimagining the structures that govern sexuality in Texas and thus the ideologies controlling its production of space. While it might seem inconceivable that in Texas a hyper-masculine Casey would kiss an openly gay cowboy, Dean can and does think otherwise. With his request to Casey, Dean acts through his imagination, through a restructuring of governing ideologies. Imaginative thought reveals its materiality. Moreover, the use of the very figure of James Dean to convey such an ideological shift points to yet another kind of historical construction of sexual identity. By 2001 when *El Paraiso* opens, much of popular culture in the U.S. understood James Dean to have been a gay man, closeted to protect himself. While this play's fictionalized version of Dean pitches a radical rethinking of cowboy sexuality, the audience also simultaneously understands this portrayal of James Dean as a gay cowboy to be historically accurate. In 1956, *Giant* did, in fact, feature a gay cowboy. Thus, Jett Rink's heretical presence in *El*

Paraiso not only effectively captures the possibility of thinking otherwise, James Dean's cultural status reminds one of how the past lingers in the present.

Unlike Dean, while some in the audience might have been familiar with Wittgenstein, the character in the play is likely more connected to intellectual work than to sexuality for the audience. Rather than an overt exploration of desire, Wittgenstein engages other characters in an overt exploration of how meaning is constructed through language. In one such scene, Wittgenstein talks with Langtry and Marfa about the idea of pain. He asks them to imagine that all people carry with them a little wooden box, and that no one can look in any box other than his or her own. Wittgenstein tells the ladies to imagine that inside this box is a beetle. Building on Wittgenstein's logic, Marfa remarks, "But no one can look in your box/ So no can see your beetle—they can only see their own." When Langtry is confused by Marfa's insight, Wittgenstein explains one possible interpretation for this scenario:

The box is you and the beetle is pain—

It's possible for everyone to have a different beetle in their box

one might even imagine the beetle as constantly changing

the box might even be empty

so each of us might mean something different by the word pain. (37)

Wittgenstein's analysis points to the ways in which words like "pain" are constructions based upon personal experience. A "beetle" or pain has no essential meaning; rather the meaning relies upon the individual. The "beetle in your box" moment exemplifies not only Lynn's love of playful language (in this case absurd alliteration), but this kind of dialogue also exemplifies how the play explores the construction of self and identity.

Though most characters in *El Paraiso* are marked by a kind of hyperbolic notion of Texan identity, their physical appearance juxtaposed against such dialogue points to the ways in which Texan identity is, in fact, fluid and driven by personal experience, as opposed to governed by a finite system of expression.

Later in the play, Wittgenstein applies this same method of analysis to the idea of love. In this moment, Wittgenstein is directly addressing the audience and teaching it about how a single image might be turned to reveal a new understanding: the image of a rabbit is rotated and reframed to reveal the image of a duck. Wittgenstein likens this image to love:

And what about this question?

How often does the ambiguity of the picture escape us?

How often do we say, "I see a rabbit," when we should say, "I see it as a rabbit."

Especially when we see nothing at all,

For instance in special cases like:

I see the truth in that.

I see this is justice.

This is love.

Wrong, perhaps.

I am seeing this as love.

I am trying to see this as love.

I am trying.

I am trying to live in this way of thinking as my home. (52)

Here Wittgenstein uses an image developed by Joseph Jastrow to illuminate how love, like pain/the beetle, is a concept constructed through experience. Love has no inherent meaning, no perfect truth, no truly standard social coding other than those placed in association with it. Thus, Mercedes can fall out of love with Casey and learn to see Marfa. Dean can try to seek physical satisfaction with Casey. Wittgenstein can pursue Dean. In each of these cases, singular points of view determine the perception of love. Who one loves, much like one's development of a self-identity, is a way of thinking, as opposed to a given circumstance determined by gender and social codes.

Wittgenstein's analysis of love occurs near the end of the play. Shortly thereafter, the other characters slowly leave El Paraiso. The last two characters who remain are Dean and Wittgenstein. Like at the top of show, this final moment is also labeled as "A Showdown Tableau" in the script. In the final scene, Wittgenstein and Dean discuss the concepts of heaven and hell. Dean also questions what El Paraiso is: "This isn't real either—is it—Texas." Wittgenstein replies, "No, but if heaven is the net of who we love and need for paradise/ and who they need and on forever/ then we've had it—we had it when we lived/ and each of us was someone's star/ and that's the map of how we made it." Shortly thereafter, there is a role reversal of sorts: Wittgenstein speaks of his desires, and Dean speaks of the logical and the realistic. El Paraiso allows these two men, so driven by singular missions at the top of the show, to shift and change. The final stage directions read, "Dean and Wittgenstein get on a horse/ draw guns and whoop it up/ as they ride off into the sunset."

Over the course of the play, Dean and Wittgenstein's arc is not meant to exemplify any prototypical notion of a gay male relationship. As the two ride off into the

sunset together, there is no clear idea of where they are headed: maybe they are headed to romance; maybe they will seek different people altogether; maybe they will remain together in a practice of questioning until that practice, too, needs to be questioned. If anything, Dean and Wittgenstein represent a landscape of possibilities—from romantic to adventurous to intellectual. They are only as real to one another as their relationship practice, and that practice is fluid and flexible, much like the idea of Texas in the play. *El Paraiso*'s radicality is driven by its open allowance of fluid gender and sexual identities in place that looks an awful like a highly stabilized vision of Texas.

Final Thoughts on El Paraiso and the Rude Mechs

In *A Queer Time and Place*, Judith Haberstam defines queer space as “the place-making practices within postmodernism” in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics (6). As these new forms of cultural production run both in-sync and counter to the stabilization of form and meaning by late capitalism, queer space creates “an opportunity to rethink the practice of cultural production” with “its hierarchies and power dynamics” (6). Undoubtedly, the Rude Mechs’ production of *El Paraiso*, via its exploration of the production of space in Texas in the past/present moment, opens a window for considering how a queer counter public might introduce a new understanding of cultural and sexuality within the state. In *El Paraiso*, queer characters view the state’s landscape not as a space for disciplining the sexual body but as a space for questioning the logics and desires that stabilize notions of gender and sexuality within Texas. Such a piece of avant garde theatre not only illuminates a local space little-considered by the

field of study, the piece also expands discussions about the intersection between the construction of queer spaces and avant garde performance.

In Austin and across the state, such a performance piece was and is read as heretical. To date, Texas still has a state law labeling sodomy as illegal despite a 2003 Supreme Court ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas* that called the state's bar on consensual sex among adults a violation of the 14th Amendment (Press). Though the Obama political machine pushed to change the state to "purple," the 2014 Texas elections revealed the continued stranglehold of social conservatives: the popular democratic candidate, Wendy Davis, only garnered 40% of the vote; Greg Abbott, the republican candidate, not only handily won but performed better with both Latinos and women than did his predecessor, Rick Perry ("Greg Abbott"). (And Rick Perry is a crazy person.) Just this year, shortly after the nuptials of the first gay couple to be married in Texas, but before the recent Supreme Court ruling federally legalizing gay marriage, many state officials including the Lieutenant Governor celebrated Faith and Family Day at the capitol. At the event, state leaders cut into a wedding cake to celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the Texas constitutional amendment that defined marriage as only taking place between opposite-sex couples. Dan Patrick, the Lieutenant Governor, whose legislative powers outweigh even those of the governor, "urged the crowd to become an army of supporters helping him and other Christian politicians oppose abortion, protect marriage and defend the Constitution" (Lindell). In the face of the state's political and social atmosphere, avant garde performances like *El Paraiso* offer critiques that do not impose new hierarchical logics but instead explore modes of inclusion that defy social convention while still

remaining “desirous of the world”—even if that world is Texas. Like *Vida Fuerte* and Juneteenth parades, *El Paraiso* explicitly and tactically works against silence.

While the body of the Rude Mechs’ new work after *El Paraiso* continued to explore historical moments and figures framed in the sensibilities of the present moment—from Nikolai Tesla to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* to mythical, method acting gurus—the company did not overtly take back up the subject of Texas and the west until their 2011 show, *I've Never Been So Happy*. Once again, the company’s exploration of the mythic west was decidedly queer in subject matter and in artistic process. With this most-recent exploration, the company invited queer visual and performance artists in Austin to create a ghost town in the yard of The Off Center where audience members could hang out with their “friends gettin' drunk, makin' rope, bustin' imaginary mutton and drawin' maps of Texas land use in real time.” All-in-all, each night’s ghost town hangout lasted almost as long as the show itself (Rude Mechanicals).

However, the days of the Rude Mechs producing work that challenges spatial production in Texas from their home base of The Off Center in East Austin are quickly drawing to a close. In 2017, the company will lose their lease to The Off Center, which will be shortly thereafter torn down to allow for the expansion of the University of Texas’s elementary school. Ironically, the Rude Mechs are just completing a three-year stint in which they served as Resident Theatre Company for the University of Texas Department of Theatre and Dance.

Despite Texas’s, and particularly Austin’s, booming economy, arts funding remains miniscule. Moreover, Austin was just named America’s most economically segregated large city (Florida). The poor in the city, including working-class artists, are

being steadily pushed to the far edges of the city—beyond even East Austin, one of the fastest gentrifying neighborhoods in the U.S. (Petrilli). By 2018, the three performance venues in East Austin that hosted and produced the city’s most radical theatre will be all be closed due to ever-increasing rent and property taxes. While the Rude Mechs and The Off Center may be Austin’s most well-know and well-respected theatre company and theatre building, their nationwide cultural capital has not insured their survival. If the Rude Mechs leave Austin, the city and state potentially lose one of its most important voices for heretical innovation.

¹ While some formal documents refer to the company as the Rude Mechanicals, this full name is used less in Austin and rarely amongst the company itself. Around The Off Center, the company is called the Rude Mechs or the Rudes or the Mechs. I choose to use these more local names because they reflect how the company functions within the city. Moreover, the company and its audience sometimes applies the same technique for shortening their play titles. For example, *I’ve Never Been So Happy* becomes *Happy* or *Stop Hitting Yourself* becomes *SHY*.

² They got the raw end of the deal, paying me to sing.

³ If you ever find yourself with the opportunity to eat the pizza Ellie and Lowell devise in their backyard grill, count yourself lucky and then eat a couple more slices.

⁴ The Rude Mechs are very open sharing information about their financial status. In summary, In the entire company, only three Co-Pads receive “full-time” pay. That pay is significantly below the current income per capita for the city, which is roughly \$31,000.

⁵ I, in fact, grew up on a ranch riding horses and talking about our oil well. Also, there was a gun continually perched by the front door. The gun was for discouraging varmints.

⁶ Marfa, Texas is known in part for its mysterious lights. VisitMarfa.com describes how the origin of the lights and how they are perceived today: “Accounts of strange and unexplained phenomena just outside of Marfa began during the 19th century and continue to this day. Ranchers, Apaches, high school sweethearts and famous meteorologists alike have reported seeing seemingly source less lights dance on the horizon southeast of town, an area that is nearly uninhabited and extremely difficult to traverse. The mystery lights are sometimes red, sometimes blue, sometimes white, and usually appear randomly throughout the night, no matter the season or the weather.” I have seen the lights. I was sober.

⁷ On multiple occasions, I asked Lynn, “Why *Dante’s Inferno*?” His answer: “Because I was reading *Dante’s Inferno* at the time.” Like so many artists, oftentimes the Rude Mechs’ find inspiration for their work from their personal reading lists. The Rudes take particular pleasure in mashing their personal reading with seemingly unrelated concepts: Busby Berkley musical and Ayn Rand; soap operas and *The Decameron*; *Dante’s Inferno*

and Texas cowboy culture. The point of the process is to find the connection while working rather than deciding upon the connection before the work begins.

⁸ Lynn tells a hysterical story of the group's horror when they realized that the glass windows of Chinati resulted in the death of any number of birds. The birds fly into the windows and die. "The notion of permanent art in conversation with the landscape, this was not a very good conversation. It was like fuck you landscape."

⁹ Scholars like Mike Weinberg argue that, in fact, consensus decision making relies upon a homogenizing process that over time regulates the group. However, the company's early history points to homogenizing processes that much more readily shape the group: All of the original Co-PADs identify as working-class and white. All except for one moved to Austin to attend the University of Texas. All except for one majored in one of the humanities. Even more importantly, all except for one attended UT's Shakespeare at Winedale program: a kind of three month-long Hogwarts for Shakespeare program and campus located on a working farm in an incredibly rural area of Texas. The program requires that students never leave the area and that all students learn all aspects of theatre-making while performing three Shakespeare plays in rep. At the time the Co-PADs attended, Winedale was run by an authoritarian director who lauded communal practice and decision-making while also exercising final say in almost all aspects of the process. (I myself participated in the Winedale bliss). These factors related to economy, class, and education not only served to homogenize the initial company, but the decision-making processes of Winedale itself served as inspiration for the company to practice consensus decision-making at all costs. The company feels that consensus decision making taught the early company how to voice opinions and ideas after many had been silenced in a highly disciplinary arts education program.

¹⁰ In the many laments about the city's changing landscape and about the loss of local culture, Austinites most frequently mention lost places that were "classically" Texan. A prime example is the Armadillo World Headquarters, the saloon/dancehall where Willie Nelson rose to fame.

¹¹ I eventually developed an odd facial infection from the raw steak slaps across my face.

The Vanishing Off Center

I opened this study with a series of questions focused upon the interplay between the avant garde as a field of practice and performance traditions in East Austin Texas. How might contemporary conceptions of the avant garde illuminate the political, social, and economic stakes at play for the East Austin communities who dare(d) to use theatrical performance to critique the governance of their bodies and their cultures? How might the lens of avant gardism reveal the tactical and political nature of performances often labeled as simply folkloric or community-based theatre? Conversely, how might these avant garde performances of East Austin illuminate social and political debates that have not yet been deeply explored as a part of U.S. avant garde studies or even deeply explored as part of U.S. history? Answering such questions necessitated placing these sites of performances within the larger networks that control Austin's spatial practice and the ideologies that shape the city, rather than leaving these performance to rest within more traditional historical frameworks.

Early Juneteenth parades were not simply black patriotic celebrations. They were the performative incursion of black residents into a white spatial practice that had once included owning the very bodies populating the Juneteenth parade wagons. In focusing on the culturally-specific, local spatial practices of East Austin's black community rather than on an application of structural and political analyses driven by European thought and tradition, the chapter argued for the inclusion of events like early Juneteenth parades and of public figures like Lottie Stotts into considerations of the U.S.-based avant garde. By considering the ways in which the avant garde performances of Stotts and Juneteenth critiqued the production of space in Austin, the radical and daring nature of these

performative acts took precedence. Beyond a close-reading of Stott's behavior and Juneteenth parades, my study of East Austin's black community's levying of avant garde performance provided an opportunity to question the mechanisms of knowledge formation that allow avant garde performance to become recognizable within the academy. The chapter queried not only how traditional archiving structures erase and obscure the history of people of color, but it also engaged with oral histories and storytelling as living archives in which to locate little-considered avant garde performances.

The play *Vida Fuerte Goes to School* was not simply a piece of community theatre with overtones of Chicano politics. *Vida Fuerte* provoked Latinos, in particular Mexican Americans, to furiously rebel against Austin's racist school system. But gaining this insight into *Vida Fuerte*, required sustained community interaction upon the part of myself as a researcher. For more than two years, I unsuccessfully tried to make contact with the Brown Berets of East Austin. In my examination of this chapter's methodological process, I positioned this "lost" research time not as a failure but as a mechanism for exploring how systems of race and privilege hinder the study of non-mainstream avant garde performances. Beyond this examination of methodology and community, the chapter also explored the divergent spatial practices that form the Latino community in East Austin and featured numerous oral histories of local East Austin Brown Berets that illuminated those spatial practices. These research failures, the relationship-building, and the local stories all proved to be a part of a research process that led to a close reading of *Vida Fuerte Goes to School*. In *Vida Fuerte*, the Berets utilized their own indigenous native forms—the *carpa* performances of Mexico—as they

paid homage to their roots even as they levied a sharp critique upon the systems, both intercultural and intracultural, that disciplined brown bodies in East Austin.

The Rude Mechs' *El Paraiso* should not be oversimplified as a playful, poetic, post-modern conceptualization of Texas when in fact the play's creation and performance served to critique the ways in which the state of Texas defines and disciplines queer bodies. However, in order to place the Rude Mechs' work into relationship with both local and queer productions of space, and the intersections therein, I first examined the early history of the organization, including their mission, their collaborative practices in Austin and far west Texas, and their personal relationships to queer artists and scholars like Jill Dolan, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver. I then offered a close reading of one of their early original works, *El Paraiso: Or a Humiliation of Pleasures*. While this play with music certainly takes up sounds, images, and songs rarely seen in histories of U.S. avant garde performance, I argued that the play's decidedly queer themes and the company's decidedly queer approach to creating the piece directly challenged the disciplining of the queer body by not only the history of the "west" but more specifically by Texas's production of space.

In each of these interpretations of East Austin performance, I used new understandings of avant garde practice to study the ways in which minoritarian communities utilize performance as a tool with which to critique and challenge the production of space in Austin. Framing these performances as avant garde surfaced their aesthetic and political ingenuity. Framing these performances as avant garde required me to move beyond simple aesthetic analysis and instead engage with and nuance the political, social, and economic stakes alive within this art. Framing these performances

as avant garde created a long-term, complex, circuitous, and fulfilling engagement with the community I was studying. This last finding was the most unexpected—this fruitful relationship between community engagement work and avant garde studies. Arguably, my very methodological practice within this research process might be framed as avant garde. From a minoritarian position—as both a scholar and in terms of my methodological approach—I engaged with a field of study in part to explicitly disrupt its primary systems for ordering methodological processes thereby challenging the very flows of power and perspective within that field. Importantly, this methodological gesture was not strategic but tactical. I worked within established orders to forward a research approach that critiqued those very orders. And so just as the field of avant garde studies changed how I understood and theorized performance in East Austin, East Austin changed how I understood the state of avant garde performances studies in the U.S. The field of U.S.-based avant garde studies needs to more directly engage with the local productions of space surrounding its sites of study. This deeper engagement will only enrich theoretical insights. The field of U.S.-based avant garde studies needs the complexities, the cultures, the histories, and the performances of East Austin.

A Final Tour of the Neighborhood

When I drive through East Austin now, my mind and imagination toggle back-and-forth between what de Certeau might call “the population” and “the spirit of things,” between the new and the hip and the rapidly fleeting ghosts of the neighborhood’s past. The production of space in East Austin is now almost completely unlike any of those I have detailed in this study, even that surrounding the Rude Mechs’ *El Paraiso*. As de Certeau points out, new populations act as a colonizing force that reshape the spatial

practices of a neighborhood: “This population spreads out its ramifications, penetrating the entire network of our everyday life, descending into the labyrinths of housing, silently colonizing its depths” (*The Practice of Everyday Life: Volume 2* 136).

As a new population, primarily white and upper-middle class, spreads out through East Austin, especially into the “labyrinths of housing,” the discourses surrounding the neighborhood shift. For example, perceived spatial practices have shifted from family-centric routines to those of residents who are primarily single or married with no children. Ideological and conceptual practices have then shifted as well: neighborhood schools and churches are rapidly closing even as commuter trains, bike paths, high-end restaurants and tech industries reshape the flow of the neighborhood, in the process creating new dominant narratives about East Austin. And of course, representational practices are also shifting: the number of fine art galleries in East Austin has exploded even as all but two of its theatres have closed and even as its Latino murals are covered by hipper murals advertising downtown-centric events like South by Southwest. Thus, researching avant garde performance practices in East Austin has come to feel much more like locating secret passageways that reveal the “the spirit of things,” engendered by past productions of space, more than conducting a straightforward analysis of performance practices.

If you will indulge me, I want to take a mental tour of sorts of how I now see East Austin. While this tour undoubtedly reads as nostalgic, a given considering my attachment to the community, the tour also surfaces the ways in which spatial production determines the development of art, in particular avant garde performance.

When I conjure up passing through East Austin now, I don't imagine moving through a grid-like formation, but instead I imagine navigating a space where bumps and cracks and shadows haunt a utopic surface. Turning east off of the I35 access road, I see the condos atop the hill where Karen Riles first told me the story of Lottie Stotts. Continuing down East 7th, which runs just below Stotts's hill, I note an explosion of new clubs and restaurants, including Paul Qui's new eatery—a kind of global fusion extravaganza from the winner of Top Chef. A Top Chef winner in East Austin. Not too far beyond Qui Austin and just past a new jungle of condos, I barely spot the rusty tin roof of The Off Center peeking out from behind the rusty tin roof of Joe's Bakery and Coffee Shop, an old hangout of the Brown Berets and one of Raul Salinas's favorite spots to write. (Joe's still chicken fries their bacon.) In my misbegotten youth, when I first visited The Off Center, I would grab a taco at Joe's before heading into rehearsal with Kirk Lynn and Lana Lesley and Madge Darlington and Shawn Sides. Back then, the warehouse was surrounded by empty fields in which we parked our cars, hoping they would still be there when we returned. The fields now host even more condos and a school. The Off Center exists on borrowed time. I wonder how long Joe's can hold out.

A few blocks past Joe's, I turn south towards East César Chávez, formerly East First. Along the farthest east end of César Chávez Avenue, a string of Chicano businesses and advocacy organizations holds out, even as boutique hotels and French bistros spring up around them. From this complex of small houses, Susana Almanza operates PODER, and Gilbert and Jane Rivera run Resistencia Bookstore. The complex also hosts the new location of Jumpolin Piñata. Two years ago, Jumpolin's original location was illegally bulldozed overnight by the land owners in order to make space for

a South by Southwest outdoor, social-networking party—thrown by a New York PR firm (Cantú). In the weeks before the demolition, Jumpolin was featured as a part of a piñata store tour on Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, in town to cover the Texas election featuring Democratic gubernatorial candidate Wendy Davis, who famously filibustered a draconian anti-abortion bill before the Texas Senate. Davis would suffer an abysmal defeat in that statewide election, worse even than that of the Democrat in the prior gubernatorial election (Root). A café catering to cats and their owners now sits atop Jumpolin’s original location.

Headed back west on César Chávez towards downtown, I come upon Chapala Mexican Restaurant, which sits right next door to the Fusebox office and where I often met with Danny Camacho. At Chapala, after an annual César Chávez March, I once conned César Chávez’s son Paul into handing over his business card to me. Gilbert Rivera, who was sitting by me at lunch that day, had just whispered that the Chávez Foundation ran excellent low-income housing developments, and he and I both knew that thinkEAST needed a low-income housing developer that would work with the needs of the local community. So that night, after advice from Rivera and the thinkEAST team, I wrote an introductory email between Paul Chávez and the owners of thinkEAST. Within the year, the Chávez Foundation should break ground at thinkEAST.

Leaving Chapala, I consider imagining heading north once again, towards Lottie Stotts’ hill and towards the African American district that sits just north of the hill. But really, that “district” is the hardest of all to see in my mind’s eye. Victory Grill, an original chitlin’ circuit nightclub, remains, but the club is now completely hemmed in by angular buildings of metal and glass, all selling over-priced sodas and retro eyewear.

Most of the other stops on the district tour truly are divine ancestors—old churches, parks, cemeteries.

I took this imagined tour of East Austin, to once again highlight how the production of space is developed through a series of changing practices related to ways in which space is perceived, conceived, and lived through. If one views the space of the neighborhood not as a tidy plane but as a palimpsest upon which productions of space are layered one on top of the other, then faded ghosts might emerge to tell a story of individuals fighting to maintain their everyday life practices. Lottie Stotts still lingers under condos; The Off Center remains standing for now, surrounded by new schools, new bars, and yet more condos; and Susana Almanza, Gilbert Rivera, and a struggling piñata shop continue to face down high-priced restaurants with their Kobe beef and vats of French 75.

Passing by The Off Center and the table from which Raul Salinas wrote his poems, my imagined tour also noted the dialectical relationship between perceived, conceived, and lived space. As the everyday life practices and ideologies of East Austin change so to must its representational imaginations. Thus, the East Austin avant gardes of the late 1800s, the 1970s, or even the turn of the twenty-first century must necessarily work differently from one another and differently from any avant gardes that might still exist in East Austin today. Importantly, this imagined tour also featured the voices who taught me how to parse the avant gardes of East Austin and the neighborhood's production of space— Camacho, Riles, the Riveras, Almanza, Lynn, Lesley, Sides, and Darlington. As Lefebvre explains, "Spatial practice is lived directly before it is conceptualized" (34). My ability to analyze the avant gardes of East Austin grows

directly from those whose spatial practices formed the concepts and ideologies that once shaped East Austin. In many ways, the very subjectivity of these interlocutors drives my theorization of avant garde performance practice in East Austin, not to mention my imagined tour.

The Future of East Austin and This Study

Given the rapid gentrification of East Austin, one of the top five fastest-gentrifying neighborhoods in the U.S., I spend a not insignificant amount of time worrying about what will become of the neighborhood (Cohen). What will happen to the Rude Mechs and to folks like Gilbert and Jane and Susana and Karen (whom I worry about on a first name basis)? Has the production of space in East Austin shifted so much that long-time residents of East Austin themselves, more or less the art they create, can no longer survive there? And to be purely self-interested, how does this study function without its interlocutors? What stories have they yet to share?

Undoubtedly, folks like the Riveras, Almanza, and the Rude Mechs can elucidate other instances of avant garde performance in East Austin, a fact which points to the inherent weakness within my current conceptualization of avant garde performance in East Austin. Unquestionably, the scope of this project is far too large. While the study builds a complex picture of a single neighborhood's production of avant garde performance, the research does not fully dive into any one of the three communities considered. In an effort to be inclusive, I believe I have short-changed each of the sites featured here. For each of the communities I considered in East Austin, a host of additional sites of potential avant garde performance exist. For instance in the black community, their robust and extensive use of performance within chautauquas and tent

revivals calls for further examination, not to mention the community's rich tradition of musical performance. My consideration of the avant garde art of Latinos in East Austin could be expanded to include other performances at the Pan Am Hillside Theatre or even the performative traditions involved in their creation of murals that tell a visual counter-history of life in Austin. Certainly, the ever-expanding body of work of the Rude Mechs calls for deep and careful consideration. The entirety of the Rude Mechs original works offers a chance to consider how and if an avant garde company can remain politically relevant even as their work gains cultural capital. Any one of the three communities considered here is worthy of fuller, deeper study.

Sadly however, the economy and demographics of East Austin are so rapidly shifting that the possibilities for deepening research at these sites are also quickly diminishing. Austin is the only rapidly-growing city in the U.S. that can also claim a falling black population. At one time, blacks made up 25% of the city's population; today projections predict that number will shrink to 5% within the next few decades (Vincent). In a City of Austin arts community meeting in the fall of 2014, I heard Lisa Byrd, who works for the African American Cultural Heritage District in East Austin, speak of her fear that one day she and her son might become the last black people left in the city. Byrd's fears for her community are not ungrounded. Danny Camacho and I both believed that Karen Riles has left Austin. The same demographic trends also apply to Latinos in East Austin. The number of Latinos living in the neighborhood fell by 10% according to the most recent census data (Castillo). While the Latino population in East Austin has not dwindled as rapidly as the black population, Gabriel Estrada, who works for Austin Voices for Education and Youth, explained at a Fusebox community meeting

that elementary schools have closed all over East Austin because the number of families with children in the neighborhood is also rapidly shrinking. In particular, the closed schools at one time served Latino families. Hence, the very conception of space in East Austin is changing at such a rate that the shift is detectable within large institutional structures. And as I have mentioned already, the Rude Mechs are also struggling to remain in East Austin. In the near future, the Campus Real Estate Office, who manages the real estate holdings of the University of Texas, plans to demolish The Off Center and use the land for an expansion of the University of Texas Elementary School, a research-based demonstration school that sits next-door. In sum, I genuinely fear that those who have made this study of East Austin possible face an impossible battle to remain in the neighborhood. Without the presence of people like Byrd or Karen Riles or the Rude Mechs, and now Camacho who passed away just as I was completing this project, a history of the culturally-specific mechanisms driving East Austin's production of space will be lost. It is these local knowledges that make possible a spatial analysis of East Austin's avant garde performances.

As I was leaving town at the end of my field work, the Rude Mechs, the African American Cultural Heritage District, and Salvage Vanguard Theatre (another East Austin experimental theatre company) were considering banding together to find a long-term lease for an office and performance space that all three organizations might share. The maneuver is overtly and purposefully tactical: each organization leaning upon the social and cultural capital of the other in an effort to remain in East Austin. The day before I left town, I introduced Kirk Lynn to Gabriel Estrada, and the three of us toured Allen Elementary, a closed elementary school that will likely never reopen. A number of non-

profits focused on community issues in East Austin now work out of Allen, including Austin Voices for Education and Youth. It was my hope that the Rude Mechs-African American Cultural Heritage District-Salvage Vanguard Theatre coalition might find at least a temporary home in the cafetorium at Allen. Estrada's willingness to promote and work with organizations like the coalition highlights how those who have historically lived in East Austin are willing to fight for people who have also lived and worked in the neighborhood for many years. In places like Allen elementary, long-time neighborhood residents are renegotiating their production of space in East Austin. They don't see this effort as heroic or as one that will shift the tides of change sweeping the neighborhood. Rather they see places like Allen as exemplary of East Austin's multi-generational, spatial practice of making-do.

However, the coalition has now been searching for a permanent space now for a year-and-a-half. They still haven't found a new home in East Austin.

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