CHAPTER 19

The Decolonial Imaginary of Borderlands Shakespeare

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Undergoing Spanish colonization and then forcibly incorporated into the United States following the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the United States–Mexico Borderlands have been shaped by colonial and anticolonial struggles. As Gloria E. Anzaldúa writes of the Texas–Mexico Borderlands, "this land has survived possession and ill-use by five countries: Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the U.S., the Confederacy, and the U.S. again. It has survived Anglo-Mexican blood feuds, lynchings, burnings, rapes, pillage" (112). These waves of colonization in La Frontera – a space encompassing northern Mexico and parts of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California – were driven by the White, settler-colonial desire to appropriate Indigenous land, labor, and resources and by concomitant efforts to maintain the power to enslave diasporic Africans living in the Americas. The effects of this colonial history continue to reverberate in the Borderlands, evident in the deaths, detention, and family separation of migrants and in racial inequality, labor exploitation, and environmental destruction. Colonial power continues to meet resistance in the region, however, as activists work to protect human rights and fight for the sovereignty of Native nations and the self-determination of communities populated predominantly by Black, Indigenous, and Latinx residents.

Borderlands arts and culture contribute to these collective projects by disrupting colonial logics and sustaining the region's communities, often performing restorative, healing work.[1] In this essay, I explore the decolonial power of two Shakespeare appropriations – Edit Villarreal's *The Language of Flowers* (1991), an appropriation of *Romeo and Juliet* set in Los Angeles during Día de los Muertos, and Herbert Siguenza's *El Henry* (2014), an appropriation of *Henry IV, Part I* set in postapocalyptic San Diego. Both of these plays fit into the category of Borderlands Shakespeare, a term used to encapsulate a growing body of translations, adaptations, and appropriations that situate Shakespeare within the unique context of La Frontera.[2]

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Written primarily by Chicanx and Indigenous playwrights, Borderlands Shakespeare plays engage with Shakespeare's treatment of issues such as migration, exile, family, sexuality, childbirth, and nature to reflect local concerns. Rather than ceding cultural, linguistic, artistic, or epistemological authority to Shakespeare, though, Borderlands plays such as *The Language of Flowers* and *El Henry* interpolate Shakespeare into a web of Indigenous, Chicanx, and Latinx narratives, rituals, languages, and frameworks. They take what they need from Shakespeare, embracing the Chicanx spirit of rasquachismo, defined by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto as an "underdog perspective" of "making do," a spirit often seen in recycled yard art, adorned low riders, and funky gardens, which "engenders hybridization, juxtaposition, and integration" and favors "communion over purity" (156). In *The Language of Flowers* and *El Henry*, Shakespeare becomes part of this repurposed mixture, his plays reimagined to disrupt colonial narratives and to envision decolonial alternatives.

The United States–Mexico Borderlands may initially seem like an unlikely place to find Shakespeare. However, as in many places around the world, Shakespeare's works have been employed as tools of colonial power in the region, used in schools and theaters to buttress the supremacy of White, Anglo language and culture.[3] In the Borderlands, Shakespeare remains associated not only with the English literary canon but also with the US settler state. His works and image seem ever present, but also in some ways alien and alienating. As Ruben Espinosa argues:

> Because of Shakespeare's deep interconnection with English, and with Englishness, he is often perceived to be less accessible to certain users, such as Latinxs. While apprehension surrounding the knotty nature of Shakespearean verse might partially guide these perceptions, attitudes about Shakespeare's place in the establishment of English linguistic and cultural identity certainly drive these views. ("Beyond *The Tempest*" 45)

Given Shakespeare's prominence, Borderlands residents have no choice but to interact with his plays, which often supplant Black, Indigenous, and Latinx texts in "English" classrooms. Shakespeare thus proves to be a site of contestation, functioning as a representative of European, Anglo, and/or White hegemony but also as a familiar and malleable set of texts, ideas, and characters that can be incorporated into the region's mestizaje, a term Rafael Pérez-Torres defines as "an affirmative recognition of the mixed racial, social, linguistic, national, cultural, and ethnic legacies inherent to Latino/a cultures and identities" (25).

As scholars of postcolonial Shakespeare have demonstrated, Shakespeare remains imbricated within colonial histories and structures even as his provocative engagements with questions of power, identity, and language offer generative material through which to interrogate colonial dynamics. As Espinosa contends, "one can scrutinize Shakespeare as being a tool of colonial oppression while simultaneously recognizing that the colonial, postcolonial or neocolonial subject can appropriate that tool for themselves to offer anticolonial perspectives" ("Postcolonial Studies" 162). Enacting this principle, plays such as Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* and Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* "write back" to Shakespeare, contesting the racism within *The Tempest* and *Othello*. Other works such as Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara*, *Maqbool*, and *Haider* decenter both Shakespeare and his English origin by emphasizing local cultures, languages, and conflicts. As Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia suggest, such productions "*repossess*" Shakespeare (3), "shattering the notion of the universalist interpretation that privileges Western experience as primary" (6). Postcolonial and decolonial interpretations, as Jyotsna G. Singh and Gitanjali G. Shahani contend, open Shakespeare's plays "to competing histories and a plurality of sociopolitical contexts – the marks of the postcolonial condition" (127). While reproducing Shakespeare runs the risk of reaffirming his centrality, colonized subjects continue to do so both because his plays, at times, invite anticolonial readings and also because they offer opportunities to negotiate, possess, or transform the White Western canon and, by extension, the forms of power that it represents.

Borderlands playwrights participate in this global phenomenon of Shakespeare appropriation, and their approach is influenced by their specific geographic and cultural position in a region shaped by Spanish and US colonialism and by the modes of decolonial and anticolonial thought arising from it. As Ato Quayson reminds us, "the return to Shakespeare is never only about the Elizabethan contexts in which his plays were first produced. It is also about the familiarity of Shakespeare in terms set by the worlds in which he is being reread" (45). In the Borderlands, Shakespeare's resonance is shaped not only by the ubiquity of Shakespeare in schools and theaters, but also by the contemporaneity of the plays with Spanish colonialism in the region and by their use within US colonial projects (as for example, when US troops performed *Othello* in Corpus Christi during the invasion of Mexico, with Ulysses S. Grant playing Desdemona).[4] Plays such as *The Language of Flowers* and *El Henry* contend with these legacies as they reimagine Shakespeare to

empower local communities and to address resonant issues related to Indigenous and Chicanx culture, politics, and relationships.

Theorists, writers, and artists in the United States–Mexico Borderlands have long emphasized the need to survive, to resist, and to think outside of the coloniality that has been imposed on the Americas since Spanish contact. As Anzaldúa writes, "This land was Mexican once / was Indian always / and is / And will be again" (113). Because of the encompassing nature of coloniality, theorists from this region emphasize the interrelated aspects of decolonialization, which, as Marco Antonio Cervantes and Lilliana Patricia Saldaña write, is a "political, epistemological, and spiritual project" that disrupts ongoing and systemic colonial operations of power (86). This project involves advocating for the sovereignty of Indigenous nations and working to return stolen land, while also creating new modes of knowledge and sociality for those who lack direct contact with their Indigenous ancestries. The work of Borderlands thinkers and activists dovetails with that of decolonial theorists such as Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and Catherine Walsh, whose writings focus mainly on Mexico and Latin America. They share with these theorists a critique of colonial modernity as well as a commitment to multiplicity and to creating pluriversal and interversal avenues that challenge Western universals and create space for alternate ways of knowing and being. As Walsh explains, "from its beginning in the Americas, decoloniality has been a component part of (trans)local struggles, movements, and actions to resist and refuse the legacies and ongoing relations and patterns of power established by external and internal colonialism" (17). Having experienced waves of both external and internal colonialism, Borderlands residents are an important part of this decolonial tradition, and their contributions to it are informed by Chicana feminism and by the knowledge systems of the Indigenous peoples of Mexico and what is now the Southwestern United States.

In addition to Anzaldúa's well-known discussion of Borderlands consciousness, Emma Pérez's articulation of the decolonial imaginary is particularly useful for understanding the power of Borderlands cultural production, including Borderlands Shakespeare. For Pérez, the decolonial imaginary is a space of active negotiation, creating a "time lag between the colonial and postcolonial, interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated" (6). As Pérez contends, Borderlands culture makers resist ongoing coloniality, forging this "rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history" (6). This space accommodates a plurality of people and cultures, many of whom are oppressed and marginalized within dominant, White institutions. In this way,

Borderlands cultural production aligns with the Zapatistas' decolonial imperative to create "un mundo donde quepan mucho mundos" (a world where many worlds fit). In many cases, it also instantiates what Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson calls "altermundos," alternate speculative worlds that, even if dystopian, rewrite the past, present, and future to remind us that "un otro mundo es posible" (another world is possible) (355).

In this essay, I situate Edit Villarreal's *The Language of Flowers* and Herbert Siguenza's *El Henry* within this body of Borderlands cultural production and decolonial thought. Like other Borderlands Shakespeare plays, these works interrogate Shakespeare's position – as a writer, a set of texts, and a cultural phenomenon – within intersecting colonial histories. Borderlands adapters of Shakespeare rarely lose sight of the fact that the dates of his plays align loosely with those of the Spanish conquests in the sixteenth century, a marker that Latin American decolonial theorists identify as the origin of coloniality/modernity. In addition to its material violence, coloniality imposed new regimes of knowledge. As Quijano explains, the Spanish "repressed as much as possible the colonized forms of knowledge production" while imposing European religion, language, and philosophy (541). European literature plays a role in this process, not only because discrete texts express White, colonial perspectives but also because the very idea of national literatures originates from colonial aspirations, functioning as a means of showcasing European cultural supremacy. Shakespeare, of course, has played an outsized role in this colonial project, as his plays have been employed in efforts to assert European experiences and epistemologies as universal. As Pérez writes, the work of decolonization involves rereading and retelling Western narratives, "to shift meanings and read against the grain, to negotiate Eurocentricity" (xvii). Borderlands Shakespeare plays perform this vital work.

Both *The Language of Flowers* and *El Henry* are set in Southern California, a center of El Movimiento, the movement for Chicano liberation begun in the 1960s that advocated for civil rights, labor rights, and political sovereignty. Both plays critique persisting structures of coloniality, seek to recover Indigenous genealogies, and express decolonial ways of knowing and being in the world. *The Language of Flowers* emphasizes the material violence of colonization and its linguistic, epistemological, and spiritual consequences. Indigenous languages, mythologies, and rituals persist into the present and future, Villarreal suggests, and they hold the potential to heal colonial wounds if they can be more fully integrated into Chicanx communities. By contrast, *El Henry* employs dystopian

frameworks to trace neocolonial practices that continue to devastate Indigenous and Latinx communities in the United States and throughout Latin America. Siguenza invokes the political construct of Aztlán, the mythical homeland of Chicanxs as well as a potential revolutionary space of reclaimed sovereignty, to assess the limitations and potential of El Movimiento and to chart pathways forward. Both plays thus perform transtemporal and transhistorical work, bringing Shakespeare together with Borderlands art forms, both past and present, to contest colonial histories and to pry open space through which to imagine decolonized futures.

Colonial Violence and Indigenous Futurity in *The Language of Flowers*

Edit Villarreal's *The Language of Flowers* is set in a Mexican American community during Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, a ritual commemoration with deep roots in Mexica spiritual practices in which the deceased return to visit the living. As Jorge Huerta writes, Chicanx drama often "shows a fascination with and respect for the Chicanos' Indigenous roots" and "affirm[s] the Chicano as Native American" (182). Participating in this tradition, *The Language of Flowers* validates Chicanxs' Indigenous heritage and draws on Mexica epistemologies, practices, and languages to negotiate and resist structures of coloniality and White supremacy. In *The Language of Flowers*, Mexica beliefs transform the *Romeo and Juliet* story, as the belief system infusing Día de los Muertos disrupts binary divisions between life and death and permits Romeo and Juliet's love to endure in the afterlife. Furthermore, Villarreal brings both Mexica belief systems and Shakespeare's play into contact with the technologies of the colonial state that has imposed militarized borders on Indigenous land and which inflicts harm on Chicanx communities. Through this triangulation, *The Language of Flowers* explores how myths from earlier periods, both Indigenous and European, might shape the present and provide a means of mitigating its violence.

Villarreal situates Los Angeles within a Pan-American Indigenous history, calling attention to the original inhabitants of the Americas, as well as to broader patterns of voluntary and involuntary migration. In the play's opening scene, Romeo's friend Benny, a combination of Shakespeare's Benvolio and Mercutio, responds to the accusation that he is a "wetback" (1.1), saying:

> We're all wetbacks from somewhere. Some of us walked over here. Like the Indians. Across Alaska, mano. In winter. Red-brown indio mules, they walked all the way to Patagonia. Later, some of these same indios changed their minds and came back. They flew out of the valles of Mexico, the barrios of Central America, the favelas and barrancas of South America like hungry birds. . . . Everybody in the whole world found themselves right here in the middle of pinche L.A. Hungry. Tired. Sweaty. And pissed off at everybody. Eventually somebody said, "Why can't we all get along?" But nobody listened. (1.1)

Benny critiques colonial borders, which deem some people "citizens" and others "illegal." Whereas the earlier migration of Indigenous people is depicted as peaceful, the play exposes the colonial violence that influences modern migrations. The corridista, a singer of Mexican ballads who replaces Shakespeare's Chorus, calls attention to these dynamics, explaining that the city is full of "Nicaragüenses y salvadoreños / Guatemaltecos all fleeing from war / Pobres cubanos, también mexicanos / Searching for work for themselves / Bringing their families here to stay" (1.2). While Los Angeles has become a refuge for immigrants, the city can also be harsh and dangerous. As the corridista sings, "But El Lay is not for loving / El Lay is not for love / El Lay is not for dreaming / And El Lay is not for luck" (1.2). This experience is not limited to Latinxs, moreover, and Benny's closing question, "why can't we all get along?" references one posed by Rodney King, whose beating by two White police officers and their subsequent acquittal, sparked a series of uprisings. With this line, Villarreal calls attention to experiences of Black residents of Los Angeles, who are subjected to state-sanctioned terror. The violence that pervades the city in *The Language of Flowers* is thus shown to be a result of intersecting histories of enslavement, settler colonialism, and neoliberal economic policy.

In this play, Romeo and Juliet's love is doomed not by a feud between their families but by endemic colonial violence and its aftershocks. Interpersonal conflicts do exist, though, between Mexican Americans who assimilate to White norms and those who embrace their Indigenous roots and look toward decolonial futures. Juliet's father, Julian, is committed to upward mobility, and he hopes to marry his daughter to a young lawyer with "the right credentials" and "the right friends" (2.8) – a stark contrast to Romeo, who is an undocumented immigrant from Michoacán. Contending that "the movimiento is over" (1.2), Julian wants undocumented Mexicans to be jailed or deported. Hypocritically, he has divorced Juliet's mother because she "had an accent," and "was pretty but not light enough" (1.13), and he has coerced his Mexican housekeeper Maria into

a sexual relationship. He and his associates reject Spanish, seeking to speak without a Mexican accent and objecting when their names are given Spanish pronunciations.

Romeo and Juliet transcend these divisions, however, largely through their embrace of Mexica traditions and the Nahuatl language. When Romeo first meets Juliet, he says in Spanish, "Encantado de conocerle," to which Juliet responds, "You shouldn't speak like that. I mean in Spanish" (1.6), explaining later that her father doesn't want her to learn Spanish. Even as Juliet begins to learn Spanish, however, Romeo and Juliet find a more fundamental connection in "the language of flowers," a phrase that encapsulates a Nahuatl linguistic genealogy and which signifies a more embodied language of love. Romeo and Juliet meet near a magnolia tree, which prompts Romeo to note, "in México, we call magnolias 'yoloxochitl.' Flowers of the heart," and he later refers to Juliet herself as a yoloxochitl, explaining that "it's Nahuatl, the language they spoke in Mexico before it was Mexico" (1.13). Romeo's use of Nahuatl aligns with Villarreal's emphasis on the Indigenous roots of Día de los Muertos, and the play's imagery of flowers includes the marigolds, or cempasuchitl, which were sacred to the Mexica and which are traditionally placed on graves during Día de los Muertos to entice souls to return from the dead.

The tragic arc of Romeo and Juliet's love story is shaped by the sequence of Día de los Muertos celebrations, from Día de los Chicos, commemorating the lives of dead children, to Día de los Difuntos, which commemorates the lives of all the dead but, in this play especially, with added emphasis on adults. The servant Manuel – who is a calavera, or skeleton, but who is seldom recognized as such – comments on Romeo and Juliet's unusual decision to marry on Día de los Chicos, but notes that the calaveras "have two days to celebrate with them" before they "must die. Again" (1.18). Later, after Romeo has killed Tommy (the Tybalt figure), he bumps into a calavera who notes that it is now el Día de los Difuntos and says, "Yesterday we honored dead children. Today we honor adults. Which one are you?" (2.7). The question resonates, as Romeo and Juliet marry and die on the cusp of adulthood. In keeping with the core belief of Día de los Muertos, the dead are not excised from the play but rather continue to advise and in some cases torment the living, and Benny holds a special place as a spiritual guide to Romeo and Juliet after his death.

Romeo frequently thinks about his experiences in relation to Mexica mythology, and he feels especially connected to Tezcatlipoca, the god of the Great Bear constellation whose name translates as Smoking Mirror and whose worship was important in sacrificial traditions. Romeo invokes

Tezcatlipoca's smoke as a sign of the death and violence that surrounds Los Angeles but also as part of a broader, rejuvenating spiritual cycle. The city, he says, is full of "nothing but hate. You can smell it. The barrio on fire with uzis light as feathers. Tezcatlipoca's dark smoke burning bright. Brighter than the sun. And nobody sleeps. Even at night" (1.4). He also notes, however, that Tezcatlipoca's smoke "burns in the eyes of those in love" (1.4), and he imagines his reunion with Juliet as occurring in Tezcatlipoca's palace. Read in relation to Mexica myth, Romeo, Juliet, and Benny function as sacrifices, but they also live on in the afterlife. While this Indigenous worldview is dismissed by some of the play's characters, it is fundamental to Villarreal's appropriation of *Romeo and Juliet*, compelling an ending in which the lovers are united in the Mexica afterlife.

Indigenous healing practices promise to facilitate Romeo and Juliet's reunion after Romeo is deported to Mexico, but this happy ending is thwarted by state repression. The drugs that Juliet takes to feign sleep are special medicine "used by curanderos . . . to cleanse the body and calm the mind" (2.11). As Juliet chews the leaves, Benny's calavera encourages her to sleep and "dream of justice" (2.15). Although Romeo purchases fatal poison from a curandera, or healer, in Mexico, he has no need for it, as he is killed by gunfire symbolizing the violence of both the militarized border and the streets of Los Angeles, twin forces that are conflated in a rapid succession of images at the end of Villarreal's play. Upon hearing that Juliet has died, Romeo finds a trafficker to take him across the border, where he sees many calaveras also trying to catch a "ride going north" with "no tickets, no seats, no snacks, no water, no toilets, no cops" (2.21). As they begin to cross into the United States, they are ambushed by a huge figure of Uncle Sam who shoots at them. Romeo explains that he is an American, who speaks English and "has a wife there now," but Uncle Sam rejects him, shouting, "COWARD! BEGGAR! YOU THINK AMERICA WANTS YOUR KIND?" (2.22). Soon after the ambush, Romeo finds himself in the crypt with Juliet and discovers that he has been shot. Against this backdrop, a calavera laments that "El Lay is dying" and "bleeding from knives, bullets, and rage!" (2.26). This scene suggests that bloodshed in Los Angeles itself results from ongoing colonial repression and cannot be disconnected from the racist violence that Romeo and his fellow migrants face at the border.

Although Romeo cannot reunite with Juliet in life, death brings them peace within the play's Indigenous worldview, and the calaveras help to facilitate this passage, encouraging Juliet to kill herself and then ushering the lovers into the thirteen heavens of the Mexica afterlife. Romeo and Juliet, "children of Mexico," are ready to begin their next journey and

"become what [they've] always been. Flowers and song" (2.26). Amidst Tezcatlipoca's rising smoke, Romeo and Juliet pledge not to be separated, with Romeo using Spanish and Juliet using English. Beyond merging Spanish and English, though, Romeo and Juliet end the play speaking the language of flowers, the language of the heart and of their Indigenous ancestry. With everyone walking in the direction of the sun, sacred to the Mexica, the calaveras welcome Romeo and Juliet, "Earth flowers, spirits, niños," into their "Divina casa de flores" (2.26). Although the colonized Borderlands prove too oppressive to sustain Romeo and Juliet's love, Indigenous frameworks provide a space of union and possibility. By staging this possibility, *The Language of Flowers* opens decolonial imaginaries that sustain such lifeways, ensuring that they exist not only in the afterlife but in life itself.

As it brings together Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with the colonial histories shaping the lives of Chicanxs in Los Angeles and with Mexica rituals and epistemologies, Villarreal's play reconfigures colonial chronologies, geographies, and hierarchies. It thus participates in a Chicanx speculative tradition that, as Merla-Watson contends, "unearths objects, images, symbols, and mythos associated with the primitive and the past and recombines them with those associated with the present and the future, thereby re-seeing colonial distinctions between the past and the future, the human and the nonhuman, the technologically advanced and the primitive" (353). *The Language of Flowers* does not depict Mexica spiritual and linguistic practices as preceding colonial Spanish and Anglo practices but rather as coexisting with them and even superseding them, thus coding Indigenous epistemologies not as premodern or primitive but rather as contemporary and necessary for Chicanx survival. If Shakespeare's sixteenth-century play remains in circulation, frequently taught in classrooms and performed in theaters, then so too must the Indigenous and Chicanx ways of knowing that colonial power structures seek to suppress. Shakespeare's plays, Villarreal suggests, can be part of this decolonial project, particularly if – as with all aspects of settler colonial life – they are amenable to critique, revision, and reinterpretation from Indigenous and Chicanx perspectives.

Shakespeare in Aztlán: The Decolonial Politics and Poetics of *El Henry*

Whereas *The Language of Flowers* dramatizes the healing powers of Indigenous spirituality, Herbert Siguenza's *El Henry* emphasizes the political aspects of decolonization. In this appropriation of *Henry IV, Part I*,

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Henry is the son of Chicano gang "king" El Hank. Rather than assuming his role as heir, though, Henry prefers to hang out with Fausto, the play's Falstaff figure, and his other friends in a local bar. Set in Aztlan City, a postapocalyptic San Diego, California, *El Henry* explores the successes and limitations of the Chicano Movimiento and reconfigures histories of colonial oppression and political activism to imagine decolonized futures. Aztlán was a key signifier in El Movimiento, a political imaginary encompassing much of what was once northern Mexico and promising a unified homeland for Chicanxs. As Rudolfo Anaya and Francisco Lomelí write, "Aztlán brought together a culture that had been somewhat disjointed and dispersed, allowing it, for the first time, a framework within which to understand itself" (ii). In contrast to the aspirations of El Movimiento, the Aztlan City of *El Henry* has been established not through political revolution or cultural reclamation, but rather through the exodus of White people from regions increasingly populated by Mexican Americans and other Latinxs. Those inhabiting this failed revolutionary space, however, find ways to maintain their cultures, languages, and livelihoods, and their lives bear a resemblance to those of Chicanxs living in barrios that have been abandoned within White-centric neoliberal economies. Similarly, Siguenza infuses Shakespeare with this resilient energy, reimagining *Henry IV, Part I*'s exploration of political power and intergenerational tension from Chicanx perspectives.

Part of La Jolla Playhouse's Without Walls series and performed in San Diego's gentrifying but still largely Mexican American East Village, *El Henry* incorporates Shakespeare into Chicanx space and into Chicanx political, linguistic, and theatrical lineages. Siguenza explicitly aligns *El Henry* with Chicanx teatro, a tradition to which *The Language of Flowers* also belongs. Teatro traces its lineage to El Teatro Campesino, which arose from within the movement of the United Farm Workers (UFW), led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, for better pay and working conditions. Founded by Luis Valdez in 1965 on the picket lines of the Delano Grape Strike in Delano, CA, El Teatro Campesino performed scenes, or actos, that used humor and political satire to advocate for the rights of immigrant laborers. Teatro evolved to address a range of political and social concerns and to validate Chicanx identities. Singuenza himself was a founding member of Culture Clash, a theater troupe that adapted teatro to urban Los Angeles and sought to create "theatre of the moment, written and performed first for the people and communities on which it is based, and secondly for a broader audience" (quoted in Zingle 57). This tradition, as Matthieu Chapman observes,

shapes *El Henry* and is strikingly evident in Siguenza's decision to cast Kinan Valdez and Lakin Valdez, sons of El Teatro Campesino founder Luis Valdez, in the key roles of El Henry of Barrio Eastcheap and El Bravo of Barrio Hotspur (61–62).

Just as *El Henry* replaces El Movimiento's liberatory nationalist image of Aztlán with a more dystopian version, it also updates teatro both for the twenty-first century and for a future potentially characterized by intensifying poverty, disenfranchisement, and environmental disaster. In particular, Siguenza infuses teatro with a cyberpunk ethos, participating in an artistic movement that Catherine S. Ramírez terms Chicanafuturism, a speculative aesthetic that brings "the high-tech and rasquache together" to envision alternate futures (x). As Lisa Rivera suggests, Chicanx cyberpunk art "often flew in the face of the nationalist logics of *el movimiento*, whose writers and artists largely aimed to recover and preserve a core, essential, and pre-Columbian cultural identity erased by centuries of colonial oppression and exploitation" (96). Chicanx cyberpunk and Chicana futurism are less concerned with essential identities than with the ways in which global capitalism has damaged and transformed Indigenous cultures and people. As Rivera writes, cyberpunk illuminates challenges "that are more unique to the new millennium, including the rise of globalization and information technologies and the new hybrid identities made possible by both" (96). With its reconfiguration of Aztlán – and its light critiques of the machismo embedded not only within Chicano politics but also within gang culture and in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* – *El Henry* participates in this Chicanx dystopian project. It moves beyond the essentialist, nationalist politics of El Movimiento and envisions modes of Chicanx survival even in the most hostile of circumstances.

While *El Henry* emphasizes ongoing structures of coloniality, it also celebrates the vibrancy of working-class Chicanx life and art and celebrates the rasquache ethic of "making do" in contexts in which wealth has been hoarded by White elites. As the play begins, audiences learn that White people have, predictably, taken the most valuable resources with them. Channeling the resourcefulness of teatro, which was often performed in union halls and on flatbed trucks, *El Henry*'s set is comprised of "a collection of trash, old signage, tires and old television sets" with "trash and graffiti along the brick walls" (Prologue). As Fausto welcomes the audience, he emerges from a pile of trash and explains how this situation came about:

> Welcome to Aztlan City, formerly known as San Diego, capital of Aztlan. Now Aztlan is basically California after the Gringo Exodus. Yeah, you heard

> me right, I said Gringo Exodus! See back in 2032, there was a worldwide pandemic and all the banks collapsed and Mexico went completely bankrupt and fifty million Mexicans fled north, crossing the border into Califas. No fence, no laws, no drones could keep them out. Raza everywheres! La Jolla started looking like Chula Vista, and Chula Vista, well, kept looking like Chula Vista! In 2035, the Gringos, the Negros, the Chinos, even the Ethiopian cab drivers said, "Chale! Screw this! Too many Mexicans! We're out of here!" So they packed their bags and split, and formed their own country east of the Rockies. It was "White flight" on a big scale, tu sabes! (Prologue)

El Henry's Aztlan has arisen through the collapse of the neoliberal, neocolonial order, a collapse that the United States–Mexico border could not withstand, thus allowing Mexicans to join longtime residents of former San Diego. Preceding this collapse, racial capitalism had only become more violent, with its effects felt most acutely in Indigenous communities. For example, audiences learn about a generation of Mexiclops, "one eyed Mexican cowboys" who were born after a nuclear explosion in Oaxaca in 2020. Despite these violent colonial legacies, though, Chicanxs have their own space in Aztlan City, one in which, as Chapman contends, "rasquache becomes a way of life," with people "repurpos[ing] the garbage left behind into what they need to survive" (64). Chapman points out, moreover, that Siguenza's decision to stage Aztlan in a gentrifying neighborhood in San Diego works to "decolonize the land in the colonizers' minds" by gesturing to both a precolonial past and a postcolonial future, thus exposing the erasures effected by the United States' colonial land claims (67). Land often considered by White residents to be simply part of the United States is reframed to highlight ongoing Indigenous presence. *El Henry* thus challenges the historical processes that colonized the land of the Kumeyaay People and that have displaced many Mexicans and Central Americans, causing them to migrate to the region. Furthermore, through its invocation of Aztlán, the play reveals that this land may not remain in colonial possession forever.

Colonial power structures persist in *El Henry*'s Aztlan, however, even in the absence of White people. The revolution has been thwarted by respectable "Hispanics" who have taken over the violent apparatuses of the colonial state and make liberal use of its police force. This situation leaves a network of street gangs as the only viable avenue through which Chicanxs can attain power. As Fausto explains:

> They left us California to live and to rule. We renamed it Aztlan, and it was cool for a whiles, you know. Everybody was happy and got along. "Viva la

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> Raza," "De Colores," and all that shit, but then it all went to hell. Corrupt Hispanic politicians who think and look and act like they're white took the political and civic power, but the people, los Chicanos, we took the streets. (Prologue)

The Hispanic state has appropriated the Indigenous and activist imagery of El Movimiento: their dollars are called Cesar Chavezes; their city seal looks like a Mayan calendar with the UFW eagle over it; and their slogan is "Gracias, De Colores, Viva La Raza, and God Bless Aztlan" (1.1). However, the Hispanics employ the rhetoric and political strategies of conservative Anglo politicians. When El Henry's rival El Bravo kills a member of the Hispanic Police, the Mayor declares war on the Chicano gangs. The Mayor's political philosophy is revealed by her quotation of "the great Anglo leader Ronald Reagan, on whom we Hispanics base our political ideals," in her statement, "when you can't make them see the light, make them feel the heat" (1.1).

The Hispanic state seeks to punish El Hank not because he is responsible for killing the policeman, but because he has begun distributing water to the barrios. As El Hank explains, "the Hispanics don't care if I'm dealing drugs and guns, but once I got into legit water they had to get me on something to put me away" (1.2). Amidst Aztlan's economic and environmental catastrophe, water has become a prized commodity, horded by elites and replacing "guns and coca" (1.2) in illicit trafficking circuits. In this violent, underresourced world, El Hank facilitates a network in which Chicano gangs profit from prostitution, gunrunning, and drug dealing. But the gangs also play an important role in the community, attaining resources for people who would otherwise be left destitute by the state, lacking access even to clean drinking water. As El Hank explains:

> The Hispanics drink clean water they buy from the Gringos while we drink "toilet to tap" chingadera, if we can even get it. The Hispanics would rather have us die of overdoses, kill ourselves, than to thrive and live. Chavalillos in the barrio die every day, of dehydration, of disease. Well not anymore. I'm buying fresh water from North Aztlan, and I'm distributing it at no cost to the barrio. (2.1)

For these reasons, El Henry finally assumes his role in the familia, seeing it as his responsibility to resist colonial power and to ensure Chicanx survival in this postapocalyptic world. He embraces his destined role, fashioning himself as an Indigenous cyberpunk hero, described as both "an Aztec warrior ready for battle" (2.3) and "a brave Cholo warrior of the future!" (2.4).

El Henry's victory against El Bravo, however, brings not revolution but only a détente, with structural oppression inhibiting true decolonial politics. Henry and his father are able to avoid prison and to vanquish their enemies, but to do so, El Hank must fund the Mayor's reelection campaign. It initially seems as though El Henry's reign will be more compassionate than his father's, but his promise to pardon all the rebels is quickly shown to be a lie as he takes them outside and shoots them instead. El Henry might succeed in establishing water-distribution centers for the barrios, but this work is contingent upon his family's support for the Reaganite mayor, who polices and impoverishes Chicanx communities. Poverty, Siguenza suggests, engenders violence among Chicanxs, who must compete for the meager resources left to them and who are seduced into colluding with oppressive state power. Such structures of coloniality, *El Henry* reminds audiences, were also enforced both by the English monarchy rendered in its Shakespearean source and by the governments of Spain, Mexico, and the United States that so greatly influenced the history of California.

Despite its pessimistic ending, though, *El Henry* offers a hopeful decolonial vision, rewriting a canonical Anglo story within Chicanx contexts to imagine alternate realities. This decolonial project is evident not only in *El Henry*'s plot and its repurposing of gentrified space but also in the language practices it employs and implicitly validates. Caló, which blends urban Spanish and English, is the dominant language of the play, and this Chicanx vernacular is used throughout *El Henry* without translation for monolingual Anglos or for Spanish speakers accustomed to more state-sanctioned linguistic registers. Glancing humorously at the play's deviation from its Shakespearean source, Fausto jokes that the Mexiclops, who primarily speak Spanish, "don't understand the Queen's Spanglish!" (1.5). The Anglo theatrical tradition is also satirized in the play, and Fausto is compared to histrionic Shakespearean actors, "those putos that used to do theatre in Balboa park, the Old . . . English players or something" (1.7). In keeping with the rasquache ethos of Chicanx speculative fiction, *El Henry* repurposes existing narratives, languages, and practices – those of Shakespeare as well as those of El Movimiento – to write Chicanxs into the future and to inspire humor and joy, even amidst ongoing structures of coloniality.

Toward a Culturally Sustaining Shakespeare Pedagogy

Both *The Language of Flowers* and *El Henry* contribute to the decolonial project of the Chicanx speculative arts, which, as Merla-Watson and Ben Olguín demonstrate, "project a utopian spirit through the genre's capacity for incisive social critique that cuts to the bone of shared pasts and presents" (6). As they write, "the Latin@ speculative arts remind us that we cannot imagine our collective futures without reckoning with the hoary ghosts of colonialism and modernity that continue to exert force through globalization and neoliberal capitalism" (4). Shakespeare is one such ghost, as his works continue to be mobilized in the interests of coloniality and White supremacy in the United States–Mexico Borderlands. Rather than treating Shakespeare as sacrosanct, Villarreal, Siguenza, and their fellow Borderlands playwrights take what is of use from Shakespeare's plays, recycling them to meet the needs of their communities. They actively confront colonial power, simultaneously engaging with Shakespeare's nuanced explorations of political power and "delinking" from colonial canons in order to "build decolonial histories" (Mignolo x). In this way, Borderlands Shakespeare ultimately decenters Shakespeare, incorporating his plays into the hybrid histories, cultures, and languages of the region to create space in which to tell stories of and for La Frontera.

Because of its complex negotiation of – and resistance to – coloniality, Borderlands Shakespeare, like other postcolonial and decolonial appropriations, offers generative approaches from which we might learn as we seek to make English literary studies less colonial. Teaching Borderlands Shakespeare productions has become central to my own work at Texas A&M University–San Antonio, a Hispanic Serving Institution on the Southside of San Antonio, situated near the former Mission Espada on land that was home to the Payaya, Coahuilteca, Lipan Apache, and Comanche Peoples. Many A&M–SA students share these heritages, although their ancestral ties have in many cases been attenuated by the region's sequential occupations. On our campus, colonial histories are omnipresent, palpable in the lived experiences of students and in the curricula that we teach – particularly when White settlers like me teach Shakespeare, an author often viewed as the pinnacle of the White colonial canon.

Teaching Borderlands Shakespeare – and other Shakespeare appropriations by BIPOC artists – can contribute to our efforts to employ culturally sustaining pedagogy, described by Django Paris as an approach that honors students' languages, traditions, and experiences as vital funds of knowledge. Borderlands Shakespeare is rooted in the communities to which

many of our students belong, and it prioritizes place-based Indigenous and Chicanx epistemologies, languages, and practices. Reading Borderlands Shakespeare empowers students to do the same and to bring their own cultural, racial, and linguistic knowledges to bear on material often considered White property. Such culturally sustaining practices mitigate the epistemic violence so often perpetrated in English classes, which often implicitly devalue students' ways of knowing, speaking, and reading. Borderlands Shakespeare plays, moreover, offer methods – for both students and instructors – of engaging with canonical texts and colonial traditions. Guided by the rasquachismo of Borderlands Shakespeare, readers are empowered to decide which aspects of the colonial canon they wish to reject entirely and which they wish to repurpose for their own ends. Shakespeare becomes not an arbiter of personal taste or cultural value, but rather a potential interlocutor, one of many authors whose work may be revised and reconfigured in the interests of articulating decolonial futures.

Notes

1. For the community work performed by Borderlands, Chicanx, and Latinx literature, see Aldama, Sandoval, and Garcia; López; and Santos, "Surviving the Alamo."
2. For a fuller description of Borderlands Shakespeare, see Gillen, Santos, and Santos, "Tracing the Traditions of Borderlands Shakespeare."
3. For the role of Shakespeare in colonial education in India, see Viswanathan. For Shakespeare in the American Indian boarding school system, see Stevens.
4. See Grier; Yim; and Weaver on the colonial uses of Shakespeare to mediate encounters with Indigenous people in the territories now known as the United States.

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