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Whispers of Joy:

Undocumented Trans Narratives

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Chicana and Chicano Studies

by

Adriana Silvestre

2017
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Whispers of Joy:
Undocumented Trans Narratives

by

Adriana Silvestre

Master of Arts in Chicana and Chicano Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2017
Professor Maylei S. Blackwell, Chair

In May 2014 Time magazine declared that we had arrived at the “transgender tipping point,” as visibility of the transgender community increased. Yet, this was hardly the tipping point as violence against transgender men and women had been part of the daily-lived experiences. Indeed, a month earlier the body of Zoraida Reyes, an undocumented transgender women and community activist from Orange County, California was murdered. Reyes’ death was certainly not the first of its kind but one that was followed by an unprecedented number of murdered transgender women in the year of 2015. This paper explores the pedagogical importance of queer and trans communities of color telling their own stories to create a counter narrative to the co-optation of trans narratives via a neoliberal framework of inclusivity that disregards the material condition that transgender woman of color face.
Through an analysis of the short-film *Afuera* (2016) directed by Steven Liang explores the lives of Jennifer an undocumented transgender women living in Los Angeles. The film portrays the constraint choices that undocumented transgender women face as they attempt to live their authentic self. This paper also examines what took place after a civil disobedience on May 28, 2015 in Santa Ana, California. The civil disobedience called for the release of all undocumented transgender detainees. Santa Ana, Ca. was targeted because the city at the time had a designated space for LGBTQ undocumented migrants. These counter narratives offer sites of epistemology grounded in their everyday experiences that offer both collective and individual stories that speak against power demonstrating moments of joy.
The thesis of Adriana Silvestre is approved.

Kyungwon Hong
Gaye T Johnson
Maylei S Blackwell, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2017
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Introduction

On June 12, 2014, the body of Zoraida Reyes, an immigrant’s rights community organizer from Orange County, California had been found dumped outside of a fast-food restaurant. Just a month earlier, May of 2014 Time magazine declared that we had arrived at the “trans tipping point” as visibility of the trans community increased. This was hardly the tipping point as violence against trans men and women had been part of the daily experience of trans communities. As trans visibility increases so does the murder rate of trans women also continues to increase each year. Mainstream media tends toward a focus on narratives of trans women like Caitlyn Jenner, centering white and wealthy experiences while marginalizing narratives of trans women of color. Narratives of trans women of color are often depicted through a hegemonic optic that categorizes them in a binary opposition of exceptional or tragic. This often neglects quotidian moments that point toward nuances, moments, silences, rebellions, resistance, sorrow, anger, joy, etc. Beyond the narrow frameworks that are facilitated and reinforced by the mainstream media, I center the short-film Afuera (2016) and the May 28, 2015 civil disobedience action in Santa Ana, CA in my research to focus on the everyday experiences of undocumented trans women.

My research reveals that studying queer and trans narratives of people of color points us toward different methods and spaces, allowing us to register various ways of existing that are often deemed indecipherable and are easily disregarded. The spaces I examine may not be considered radical sites of resistance, they may oftentimes may be problematized, and are complex but nonetheless, they offer new sites of inquiry showing us our own limited understanding of life, value, sexuality, and gender—these sites of inquiry are intimately tied to

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western hegemony. Ethnic Studies Scholar Lisa Cacho explains how the mainstream media limits legibility and renders black people and communities of color as irrecuperable subjects through racialized criminalization that subjects them to a continual state of rightlessness. Through the discourse of rightlessness we begin to understand the devalument of the other that make such violences not only possible, but that they are also carried out with impunity. The death of Zoraida received mainstream media coverage largely due to her own involvement in organizing in her community and the efforts of De Colores Orange County, a queer immigrants rights organization. De Colores O.C. organized and demanded justice in a way that challenged narratives of rightlessness that often denies undocumented trans people justice.

In this thesis, I draw from Cacho’s (2012) articulation of rightlessness to examine the ways trans and queer people of color create their own narratives about their communities that refuse the co-optation of trans narratives via a neoliberal framework of inclusivity. Limited versions of trans narratives often disregard the material condition that undocumented trans women of color face. Furthermore, these narratives speak to ways in which trans people of color are living their lives on their own accord. This thesis analyzes how undocumented trans women of color understand happiness, joy and freedom. In particular, I draw from black feminist scholars who critique theories of social death as a limiting analytic that in of it self restricts potentialities. Black feminist scholars such as Terrion Williamson, Sadiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers write about resistance, pleasure, and radical forms of resistance that challenge social order. By taking into consideration the work of Black feminist scholars, I situate the work to be

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2 Founded in 2009 De Colores OC is a DeColores Queer Orange County creates opportunities for social engagement, community visibility, and political activism by organizing cultural events, support groups, civic actions, and an annual conference. https://www.facebook.com/pg/Lafamilialgbtq/about/?ref=page_internal
in conversation with immigration scholars to analyze Latinx\(^3\) representations of undocumented trans women of color who contest homonormative representations and the ways in which abject narratives are centered.

The anchor of this thesis is grounded in the ways trans undocumented women are represented in the media and how queer and trans communities of color contest dominant narratives. As such, I will be focusing on the short film *Afuera* (2016) as well as both mainstream and local media coverage of the May 28, 2015 civil disobedience that took place in the intersection of Flower Street and Civic Center drive in Santa Ana, California. The civil disobedience was calling for the release of all undocumented trans detainees. The civil disobedience was organized by GetEQUAL,\(^4\) Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement,\(^5\) #NOT1MORE\(^6\) and community members. Reading these representations against the grain allow room to illustrate the everyday struggles and joys of undocumented trans women of color surviving a white supremacist heteropatriarchal society. The characters in *Afuera* (2016) and the protestors do not follow an “exceptional” or “normative” trajectory that is often placed on marginalized communities that repeatedly result in criminalizing representations in the mainstream media. Instead, these narratives make visible the systemic oppression that creates circumstances that force them into illicit behavior while also finding room for moments of joy in their communities. Thus, blurring the lines of *legality* and challenge notions of deservingness. Putting these narratives in dialogue with each other is significant to explore the pedagogical

\(^3\) Latinx is used to disrupt the gender binary associated with Latina/o.

\(^4\) http://www.getequal.org/

\(^5\) http://familiatqlm.org/

\(^6\) http://www.notonemoredeportation.com/
imperative of the film and the civil disobedience, particularly the connections between the
mainstream media and the state. This symbiotic relationship between the mainstream media and
the state sustains a white supremacist heteropatriarchal system that criminalizes and co-opts
queer and trans bodies through the enactment of state sanctioned violence, wars, and terror.

As a queer cisgender woman of color writing about trans women of color, I recognize my
limitations as a scholar who documents the experiences, stories and narratives of trans women.
The goal of my project is to understand and learn from trans communities’ ways of resistance
and survival. Initially, my research was focused on following queer undocumented organizers.
Through that research and my own organizing experience I became interested in how
undocumented queer women and trans women were marginalized within social movements,
including the undocumented youth movement. Through close friends and my participation in
organizing I was introduced to Zoraida Reyes. Although, our interactions were brief, Zoraida left
a lasting impression on me. I first learned about Zoraida’s death through a call from my best
friend where she shared with me the horrific news. I remember the sadness and pain in her voice
as she struggled to find the words. I had never heard such agony in my friends’ voice. We were
both in disbelief trying to make sense of something that was so incomprehensible. We had never
experienced loss in that way and did not know how to comfort each other. We were not the only
ones that felt the loss as Zoraida’s death shook the community that surrounded her. I began my
thesis by mentioning her murder because through all the rage, pain and mourning I wanted to
further understand the impunity with which primarily trans women of color were murdered. But I
decided to shift my focus and dedicate my research to narratives that uplift the lives of trans
women of color as a gesture to honor the vibrant life of Zoraida Reyes.
Although seemingly unrelated, *Afuera* (2016) and the civil disobedience are held together by the life and the afterlife of Zoraida Reyes. On Saturday September 10, 2016 I attended the screening of *Afuera* at the Long Beach QFilm Festival. Throughout the film there was something that felt familiar about the film. At the time I thought that perhaps the sense of familiarity was from the way the film captured parts of my community. Later, when I spoke with director, Steven Liang, he shared that initially he wanted to direct a documentary about Zoraida. That project never came to be but the spirit of Zoraida’s was still felt in the film. The lingering of Zoraida’s energy draws on what Avery Gordon (2008), describes as a haunting that, “is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely” (Introduction). In this way the inability to fully reckon with Zoraida’s death continually forces us to deal with the lasting effects of structural violences. Similarly so the civil disobedience in Santa Ana, CA felt important and again I could not shake away that feeling. I could not pin point why I was interested in the aftermath of the protest. But in spending time thinking about it I realized that the song “Todos Me Miran” by Gloria Trevi was one of Zoraida’s favorite songs. The song was played during the aftermath of the civil disobedience in Santa Ana CA. Again, the presence of Zoraida haunted us through sound but also the civil disobedience itself was possible because of her involvement in her community that included LGBTQ rights and immigrant rights organizations. At this point I felt that there was more to Zoraida than her death. There was the life and her spirit that captivated so many of us which is why her loss was so intensely felt by her surrounding community. Understanding Zoraida’s haunting as “producing a something-to-be-done” (Gordon 2008, Introduction) marked a shift in my analysis to focus on potential moments of joy that are not always visible, audible or decipherable.
Given the heightened state of violence that has been induced by the current political climate of the country it is important to center the stories that our communities share with us. Keeping this in mind, I center the civil disobedience in Santa Ana, CA and the film Afuera (2016) in my research to further focus on the everyday experiences of undocumented trans women. Centering everyday struggles that marginalized communities experience shifts our understanding of trans narratives presented in mainstream media that offer manicured images that have achieved a certain level of success and respectability. In a neoliberal historical trajectory, success and respectability cannot be separate from each other. For marginalized communities, this creates a binary narrative of deserving versus underserving, which is why Cacho’s (2012) emphasis upon the racialized criminalization that renders people of color ineligible for personhood is so crucial. Cacho (2012) notes that instances of integration are always conditional and highly dependent on the devalument of the other other. Moreover, Cacho (2012) argues that it is nearly impossible to recuperate the devalued without devaluing the Other. Yet, she simultaneously points towards realms of possibility through the visual and through queer temporality. The work of Kara Keeling (2009) points to how queer temporality disrupts colonial temporality that interrupt traditions of linear storytelling in film. Drawing from Frantz Fanon, Keeling is also interested in “exploding the temporality of the colonial mode of representation of otherness and in revealing a temporality that raises the possibility of the impossible within colonial reality, black liberation” (2009, 565). Considering rightlessness through a feminist and queer analytical lens, my research will explore the following questions: How do narratives, such as Jennifer’s from Afuera, exhibit alternative ways of living that disrupt temporality alongside notions of social death and rightlessness? How can we imagine other ways
of being free that are solely determined by how we choose to live our lives? What does it mean to live an authentic life?

This thesis is informed and guided by Black feminisms, women of color feminisms, queer of color critique, and the queer migrations to consider the questions proposed above forging new ways of listening and processing what often goes unnoticed. In building new ways of listening we give ourselves permission to attend to what may seem trivial moments and give them the attention they deserve. Afiura and the Santa Ana, CA. civil disobedience show that these seemingly inconsequential moments create spaces where joy is reclaimed. Yet these time suspending moments do not dismiss the intense political moment that undocumented trans women find themselves in, as precisely the precariousness is what drives the moments of joy and happiness. In the following sections, I will further develop notions of rightlessness, quotidian struggles, silences, gestures, and the whispers in between with the goal of imagining the unimaginable.

Social Death, Black feminisms, and Listening to the Whispers

The lives of undocumented trans women don’t usually come to our attention. We only hear about their stories when tragedy strikes. This leaves out nuances and gestures of joy. The erasure through omission is supported through a white supremacist heteropatriarchal hegemonic lens that operates linearly where anything that does not follow the “norm” automatically falls outside of our visibility resulting in marginalizing these narratives. Speaking against constricted stories, the way that undocumented trans women do provide us with a map that teaches us different ways of being, forcing us to reexamine what we know and how we know it. The challenge to register these narratives and to acknowledge the nuanced moments of bliss require a
multi-layered set of tools to get at the multidimensional experiences of undocumented trans women of color—this uplifts their stories and their voices. My research brings together various bodies of scholarly work that speaks to the nuances in my research. I draw from theories of social death, rightlessness, criminalization, black feminist thought on the interior, queer migration, and trans studies.

Cacho’s (2012) analysis of rightlessness serves as a theoretical framework to consider the ways that white supremacy continually works to uphold itself through the devaluation of the other. This is particularly useful for the analysis of the civil disobedience and the film Afuera as they differently center the narratives of trans women of color. Cachos’ theory of rightlessness rests on Orlando Patterson’s (1982) theory of social death, articulated through slavery positing that slaves were socially dead given that their ties to the social and kin were severed through the process of enslavement. Patterson also included that “general dishonor” through the process of enslavement was possible through the removal of black people from the category of human. His analysis provides a framework to understand the conditions created for slaves as not living, but also not physically dead. Cacho’s emphasis is on the historical and contemporary conditions that through racialized criminalization render people of color ineligible for personhood. Cacho defines the concept of ineligible for personhood “as populations subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them” (2012, 6). This space of illegibility through social death denies black people, and to some extent, people of color full value and incorporation. “These populations are excluded from the ostensibly democratic processes that legitimate U.S. law, yet

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they are expected to unambiguously accept and unequivocally uphold a legal and political system that depends on the unquestioned permanency of their rightlessness” (2012, 6). Rightlessness works symbiotically with the devalument of the other, other for instances of minimal incorporation. Through the diminishment of value the other, the other is sanctioned and controlled by the state with little to no explanation. This is needed because to devaluing of the other is seemingly inherent where we no longer need to be convinced of the conditions of criminality. Cacho understands value as “ascribed explicitly or implicitly disavowing relationships to the already devalued and disciplined categories of deviance and nonnormativity” (Cacho 2012, 148). Media and visual representations play a key role in ascribing value and devalument placing communities of color at odds with each other while always maintaining the category of black as the disavowed category. Yet, Cacho points to the importance of cultural production that nuances towards moments of possibility that speak against rightlessness, “When the story about the value of lives cannot be told, the visual can be an alternative mode of expression” (2012, 155). Feminist scholar Gayatri Gopinath (2005) also explains how the logic of patriarchy operates in the visual through silences and omissions that excluded and police queer diasporic narratives. Gopinath (2005) writes that a queer reading recovers the “desires, practices, and subjectivities rendered impossible and unimaginable” (11). Trailing the work of Cacho (2012) and Gopinath (2005) the civil disobedience and Afuera provide a visual, an insight into unimaginable possibilities that can easily be missed.

Critical ethnic studies and feminist scholar Jasbir Puar (2007) problematizes Western exceptionalism post 9/11 as a historical moment in the U.S. where, on the one hand, brown immigrant bodies were criminalized, and on the other hand, white, gay, U.S. citizens were

8 ibid
extended a seat in the table. Similar to Cacho, Puar makes clear that only through the disposal of a specific targeted group of brown people can room be made for white queer bodies. Post 9/11 the so-called need to protect and control the U.S. border against terrorism created a shift where queer exceptional bodies are recuperated to serve the needs of the nation that include reinscribing categories of race, whiteness, class, citizenship, and gender. The shift Puar argues opened up what she calls homonationalism, which “operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, and homosexuality but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects. There is a commitment to the global dominant ascendency of whiteness that is implicated in the propagation of the United States as empire as well as the alliance between this propagation and this brand of homosexuality” (Puar 2007). Homonationalism works by developing “non-productive” subjects, in this case gays and lesbians, into “productive subjects” that reinforce Western hegemony through the further criminalization of targeted brown communities such as Muslim men. Homonationalism functions through devalument of the Other but with a particular queer emphasis.

Black feminist scholars have developed the language and theories giving us the language to navigate rightlessness, devalument, and homonationalism while spending time in the in betweeness. Black feminist scholars have critiqued the limited analytical possibilities social death offers. For instance, Terrion Williamson (2007) refutes social death as a productive site of knowledge as she notes that social death situates black life as something that is tainted and an uninhabitable place where one should not intend to stay (11). Williamson critiquing of social death is not to negate its existence but rather her attempt is to move beyond the realm of social death. Instead, she is focused on other ways of existing for marginalized communities that could inform us of not just the confines of social death but also that we can come across examples of
living, finding joy, and loving. Williamson draws from social life and black feminist praxis as a way to read what is often regarded as illegible. As such, Williamson understands, black social life as, “fundamentally, the register of black experience that is not reducible to the terror that calls it into existence but is the rich remainder, the multifaceted artifact of black communal resistance and resilience that is expressed in black idioms, cultural forms traditions and ways of being” (9). Terrion’s insight provides us with the tools to spend time in what may seem to be contradictory spaces like complicated relationships with family and friends, moments of anger, and those devalued spaces found in Afuera and the civil disobedience. Staying in contradictory and problematic sites force us to reckon with our own western hegemonic ways of understanding happiness, freedom and resistance. A place of contradiction often stands in opposition to white queer and liberal feminist politics and they help to bring forward the shortcomings of queer theory—a discourse that asserts itself as pushing the boundaries but in itself creates boundaries around race, class, immigration status, etc. (Cohen 1997, Ferguson 2003.)

The work of Saidiya Hartman is often located within the discourses of social death, following Williamson’s I situate Hartman to consider her methods and analysis of the archive that she offers to be in dialogue with social life. Specifically, I am referencing her work in “Venus in Two Acts” as a critical site similar to that of Williamson, where Hartman points out the limitations of the archive and as such a different method is required to recover what has been silenced. In this essay, Hartman is interested in Venus by situating the archive as “a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body,” but she is interested in a recovery process that does not inflict more violence (2). Thus, Hartman warns us about the ways in which we long for certain stories to be told and warns us about moving quick to fill in the silences. Hartman writes, “but in the meantime, in the space of the interval, between two late and too early, between the no
longer and the not yet, our lives are coeval with the girl’s in the as-yet-incomplete project of freedom. In the meantime, it is clear that her life and ours hang in the balance” (14). She locates this ethereal space as a site for finding the joys, angers, and experiences of black women and social life. Furthermore, Hartman points to the difficulties and oppositions that this in between space may take us too. She offers, “the task of writing the impossible has the task as its prerequisites the embrace of likely failure and the readiness to accept the ongoing, unfinished and provisional character of this effort, particularly when the arrangements of power occlude the very object that we desire to rescue” (14). Lastly, Hartman evokes black feminist practice in also considering the so-called failures and “provisional characters” that we are seeking to recuperate. As such, the work of Hartman is in conversation with social life pointing to moments of possibilities, moving us beyond the dichotomy of life or death, while cautioning us to take our time in exploring such possibilities.

Similarly, Hortense Spillers (1987) like Hartman situates the experiences of black women as the archive that serves to rearticulate the importance of the self as site of knowledge. Spillers draws our attention to what she calls the flesh by articulating what comes before the body, “is the flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography…We regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and males registered the wounding” (1987, 67). Spillers is referencing to the moments after enslavement and the particular transformations it embarks on black body. Spillers notes that the manipulation required for slavery to be possible is through the use of violence that creates what she calls “markings” that are not visible but sustained through current undertakings of the study enslavement through a hegemonic lens. As such, she proclaims that, “In order for me speak a
truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. The personal pronouns are offered in the service of a collective function” (Spillers 1987, 65). These invisible markings that Spillers references attend to the core of her argument about undoing the “American Grammar” by contesting the very discourse that moves us away from the possibilities of understanding social life. Furthermore, Spillers is also suggesting that we create a new language to communicate various possibilities for gender and sexuality, but specifically focuses on the female as she writes, “this materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh “ungendered”—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations” (68). The “diverse meditations” she motions towards creating room for the articulation of sexuality of black women. In reminding us to return to the site of the “flesh,” Spillers is shifting our attention away to center different voices and narratives to engage in black feminist practice. Considering Spillers articulation of the flesh forces us to grapple with trans women of color to consider how their flesh, that is read as female but not feminine, is then also in conversation with being unprotected flesh. Undocumented trans women confront what are considered normative categories of gender, specifically the feminine. The normative assumptions of what is feminine in the U.S. has been traditionally reserved for white, U.S., cisgendered women (Collins 2004). Any other formation of feminity is excluded and for undocumented trans women this places them in the realm of rightlessness.

I return to Cacho as she also does not just sit with rightlessness but wrestles with the reckoning of irrecoverable and devalued lives, and turns to the work of Jack Halberstam (2005) on queer temporality where they write that, “perhaps such people could be called “queer
subjects” in terms of the ways they live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned, and in terms of the ways they might work in the domains that other people assign to privacy and family” (Halberstam 2005, 2). For undocumented trans women, they inherently fall into queer temporality through multiple axis including their sexuality, race, gender presentation, class, and immigration status that delay western ideas of adulthood. Such as obtaining a drivers license at 16, attending college, homeownership, marriage, having children, steady employment, etc. The instability created by xenophobic laws combined with heteropatriarchy place undocumented trans women into a temporal uncertainty as deportation and detention continually looms over them.

However, women of color feminist theory and queer of color critique have considered the liminal and or marginal sites of oppressions that queer subjects face but simultaneously there is also a rejection of the norm. Political scientist Cathy Cohen wrote, “one of the great failings of queer theory and especially queer politics has been their inability to incorporate into analysis of the world and strategies for political mobilization the roles that race, class, and gender play in defining people’s differing relations to dominant normalizing power” (1997, 457). While Cohen is interested in political coalitions, she rightfully warns us of the ways in which queer theory has fallen short in considering multiple sites of oppression that fall outside of sexual preference and how queer people of color are affected. Roderick A. Ferguson (2004), following the work of feminist of color is also interested in “how intersecting racial, gender and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital” (4). Furthermore, Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong (2011) examine “the ways in which racialized communities are not homogenous but instead have always policed and preserved the difference
between those who are able to conform to categories…and those who are forcibly excluded from such categories.” Queer temporality takes us outside the bounds of capital production and heteronormativity that interrupt both heteronormative and homonormative productivities. But feminist of color and queers of colors have also questioned the bounds of productivity and normativity and as Hartman suggest, we are challenged to grapple with being in between and finding balance towards the unfinished project of freedom.

Understanding the inextricable connection between gender, sexuality, class, race, and immigration status inherently calls for an intersectional method to read the narratives of undocumented trans women of color that traverse social life, rightlessness, “markings”, queer temporality and the interior. Following undocumented trans women I wrestle with both rightlessness and the interior to move in between and outside of the parameters. In doing so immigration status must be thoroughly examined and considered through the realm of rightlessness and social life in the context of the U.S. specially as the current immigration laws have become much more insidious and have curtailed a path to legalization. In what follows, I contextualize the current historical xenophobic and transphobic setting that criminalizes undocumented trans women through immigration laws.

The Page Law of 1875 prohibited the entry of undesirable immigrants, targeting Chinese women who were under suspicion of engaging in sex work. The field of immigrations studies has often glossed over the ways in which gender and sexuality informs U.S. citizenship. But as the Page Law of 1875 suggests immigration control has been intimately tied with sexuality and gender. In 1917, under the category of “constitutional psychopathic inferiors” gay men and lesbians were not allowed to enter the U.S. The bar on gay and lesbians was further institutionalized in 1952 with the Nationality Act or most widely known as the McCarran-Walter
Act, and again in 1965 entry was denied on the basis of “sexual deviancy” (Luibheid and Cantu 2005). In 1980, the Refugee Act allowed people who feared returning to their home country to petition for refugee asylum based on fear of prosecution. Then in 1990 the immigration ban on gays and lesbians was lifted which was followed with asylum petitions based on sexual orientation. However, in 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) implemented restrictions on asylum applications, where applicants had to apply within a year of arrival, and if their application were denied, the applicants would then be deported. Additionally, while waiting for the outcome of their applications, applicants could be held and detained in immigration centers (Randazzo 2005).

Furthermore, in 2006 the United States House Representatives passed H.R. 4437 The Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 that would have furthered increased the militarization of the border, criminalized migrants, and those who aid migrants along with other provisions (Gonzalez 2013). H.R. 4437 was very explicit in its intention to criminalize undocumented migrants. However, the criminalization of undocumented migrants dates back to 1965 with the Liberal Immigration Law that removed quotas while also creating restrictive conditions for Mexicans to obtain visas, forcing many Mexican migrants to cross the border illegally for employment opportunities (De Genova 2010). In the 1980s, xenophobic sentiments made undocumented migrants easy targets that were to blame for the social crisis facing the nation. Under this context the Immigration and Control Reform Act (IRCA) of 1986 passed and while it provided amnesty to undocumented migrants for the first time a pieces of legislation explicitly militarized the border. Ten years later in 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) criminalized undocumented and documented migrants by reclassified minor offenses into aggravated felonies, including past
offenses (Coutlin 2010, Golash-Boza 2013). Through a queer of color critique Reddy also offers that IIRIRA and asylum petitions based on sexuality were only possible within the context of “neoliberal restructuring of state power” that contradicts sexual freedom as brown relationships are propelled into heteronormativity (2005, 103). IIRIRA forced people of color into relationships reinforcing heteronormativity and homophobia. In addition, Section 287 (g) of IRRIRA allowed local and state police to act as immigration enforcement creating hostile environments in many communities for undocumented migrants and people of color. 1996 also introduced the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) along with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) that imbricated social welfare and criminality that negatively affected undocumented migrants (Lawston and Escobar 2010). Post 9/11 the Patriot Act continued to make life difficult, unbearable, and unlivable for migrants. The goal of these laws was to make the conditions so intolerable in efforts to deter migrants from migrating to the U.S. However, migration did not stop instead, what increased was the number of criminalized and rightlessness migrants and the death toll at the border has also increased (Bhartia 2010).

Turning to the field of queer migrations and the groundbreaking work of scholars such as Lionel Cantu (2002), Eithne Luibheid (2002), Horacio Roque-Ramirez (2003), and Carlos Decena (2008) who intervened in immigration scholarship by applying a critical queer lens that interrogated the ways in which sexuality informed immigration laws and ways that undocumented queers have always negotiated their sexuality in the U.S. Drawing from Cantu, Luibheid (2008) defines queer migration as a, “dense transfer point from relations of power” that structure all aspects of international migration [...] Queer migration scholarship, which explores the multiple conjunctions between sexuality and migration, has drawn from and enriched these
bodies of research—as well as feminist, racial, ethnic, postcolonial, public health, and globalization studies among other fields (Luibheid 2008, 169). Cantu began the work of queer migration with his trailblazing research by expanding an intersectional frame analysis that included an inquiry of sexuality and immigration. Cantu developed what he called a “queer political economy of migration” (Cantu 2005, 2) to understand how “sexuality shapes and organizes process of migration and modes of incorporation” (Cantu 2005, 21). Non-heterosexual migrants were influenced to shape their identity based on their understanding of U.S. sexuality informed by “structural variables, institutional policies, cultural influences, social relations, and the dynamics of migration” (Cantu, 2005, 21). In drawing connections between sexuality, migration and citizenship Cantu understood that immigration laws forced migrants into performing gendered racialized categories in order to be legible by the state, particularly around asylum cases based on sexuality. For undocumented trans people of color the surveillance of gender, sexuality, class and race create a precarious situation leaving them vulnerable to multiple forms of state sanctioned violences and also participate in the replication of gender binaries.

Following the work of Cantu, Luibheid traced the history of immigration laws that explicitly shaped gender and sexuality. Luibheid (2004) argues that “sexuality structures every aspect of immigrant experience” as these laws, reinscribed heteronormativity. As such, immigration laws create and maintain categories with intentions to exclude, resulting in what she calls the shifting line of legality (Luibheid 2002). This shifting lines points to the ways that legality is not a stable category and as such the fear of deportations is constantly imminent on the minds of migrants. Additionally, sexuality is understood as a category of difference that has been a point of exclusion and that has been explicitly used to maintain white hegemonic heterosexual relations. Race and sexuality have always been tangled to nation formation and immigration
control. Luibheid work is an intervention as the field of queer migration, “has consistently explored how overlapping regimes of power knowledge generate and transform identity categories’ (Luibheid 2008). Luibheid, like Cantu, also points to the ways that immigration laws aid to construct U.S. exceptionalism particularly around human rights discourses that often include LGBTQ rights. As such, Luibheid notes that it is important to examine immigration laws and in particular cases of asylum based on sexual persecution to interrogate how U.S. hegemony is reinforced (2008). What we learn from this case is that illegality and immigration are constructed and reconstructed in ways that reinforce “cultural knowledge” of gender and sexuality that create the possibility for precarious and a state of rightlessness for undocumented communities.

The ethnographic work of Decena (2008) challenges Westernized hegemonic ideas of sexuality and the LGBT community through his examination of gay and bisexual immigrant men from the Dominican Republic living in New York City. The men in his research did not follow the dominant Western narrative of coming out but were also not “inside” the closet. Rather Decena explains there is a “distinction between refusing to discuss an openly lived homosexuality and silence […] Sujeto tacito (tacit subject) is the subject that is not spoken but can be ascertained through the conjugation of the verb in a sentence” (Decena 2008, 340). Furthermore Decena writes that tacit subjects as also part of immigrant communities rely on economic networks of friends and family to find employment and or housing. Their network and kin may have different understandings of sexuality and as such “tacit subjects” negotiate their “coming out” in relation to economic and social survival. Decena’s analysis decenters ways that sexuality is understood in the U.S. for immigrant communities and points to the limitations of a
coming out narrative that may not be useful to people who are not from the U.S. and as such maintaining networks within their communities is much more import.

Most recently, the work of Karma Chavez (2014) has focused on potential moments of coalitional politics in the immigrant rights movements to think about the ways in which activist organize around differences and build coalitions, particularly those that are queer and undocumented. Chavez’ framework critiques the work of Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009) and his concept on queer horizons where “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Muñoz 2009). Chavez misinterprets Muñoz insistence in futuristic utopias arguing that he is not interested in the pressing issues currently facing queer and trans communities of color. Chavez, reads Muñoz queer utopia as lacking an analysis of the everyday lived experiences and realities of those who live at multiple spaces of oppression. Instead, Chavez argues that it is much more useful to focus on the present possibilities of coalitional work of activists, from this space she argues is where radical possibilities take place. Chavez notes that coalitional organizing requires substantial work to sustain “coalitional moment,” that then emerge “when political issues coincide or merge in the public sphere in ways that create space to re-envision and potentially reconstruct rhetorical imaginaries” (Chavez 2014, 8). Thus, Chavez views queer migrants as inherently coalitional subjects because they contest preconceived boundaries that allow them to move into and out of different spaces but also are in congruence with Muñoz as both are envisioning a queer future.

As mentioned the intervention by queer scholars in the field of immigration have disrupted a heteronormative paradigm that excludes a feminist and queer analysis. However, little attention has been paid to gender queer bodies, the experiences as those that identify as gender non-conforming, and trans people unless it is in relation to asylum cases. Immigration
research on asylum cases mention that desirability of the U.S. is constructed around the redeployment of Western hegemonic values. a de la maza perez tamayo (2013) writes, “Trans asylum seekers, lacking access to asylum by virtue of their gender identity, are thus compelled to navigate the terrains intelligible to the state (in this case, sexual orientation), regardless of whether those particular topographies are hospitable to their bodily ontologies” (240). The lack of development and analysis paid to undocumented trans women is in part due to the overall systematic marginalization of the trans community. There are many issues to contend in regards to undocumented trans women. On the one hand there are the legal limitations such as those mentioned by a de la maza perez tamayo on the other hand is the experiences of undocumented trans women living in the U.S. The mainstream immigrant rights movement has largely ignored the issues facing undocumented trans people. For example, in 2007 Victoria Arellano, an undocumented trans woman was detained for driving without a license and driving under the influence of alcohol. Arellano unfortunately died shackled to a hospital bed after being denied adequate HIV treatment in an immigration detention center in San Pedro, CA (Potts 2011). Although Arellano’s death happened only a year after the massive immigration march against H.R. 4437 but she received very little attention from immigrant rights organizations. In contrast, Elvira Arellano⁹ during the same time frame received substantial attention by immigration rights activists and the both the mainstream media and local media. Irina Contreras (2012) writes about the scheduled vigil for both women that were purposefully rescheduled to only focus on Elvira Arellano. As the visibility of trans experiences continues to grow there has been more coverage of actions in support of undocumented trans migrants, organizing, and the marginalization they

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⁹ Elvira Arellano and Victoria Arellano coincidentally share the same last name but are not related.
experience. In addition it’s important to keep in mind that trans women of color face high murder rates and are also at risk of incarceration, and to be held in immigration detention centers.\textsuperscript{10}

Keeping in mind the various immigration laws like IIRRIRA that have criminalized undocumented migrants various scholars in different disciplines have traced the proliferation of the privatized prisons and the ways that communities of color are particularly policed. For instance, Geographer Ruthie Wilson-Gilmore (2007), wrote about prisons and criminalization that create spatial unevenness of communities that are hyper policed, communities are torn apart, mental illness is exacerbated (111). Legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2010) through a historical analysis argues that the current state of mass incarceration is a contemporary version of Jim Crow laws that emerged out of the pretext of the need for “law and order.” Under this new regime of control Alexander argues that a new racial caste emerged composed of those that have been incarcerated and detained and labeled a felon, denying them access to basic needs such as shelter and food. Considering the imbrication of incarceration and immigration detention centers we can see how both reinforce criminalization that is sanctioned through cultural knowledge that maintain white supremacy. For undocumented trans women the combination could be lethal as demonstrated by the untimely death of Victoria Arrellano. In addition, considering the work on Dean Spade (2011) and the attention they pay to the role of administrative law we see how “modes of administrative governance produce what we come to think of as natural or pre-existing identities” (31). These “administrative systems that classify people actually invent and produce meaning for the categories they administer, and that those categories manage both the population and the distribution of security and vulnerability” (Spade 2011, 32). The multiple

regimes of criminalization through incarceration, immigration laws, and administration limit the access to economic resources for undocumented trans women that create rightlessness and precarious circumstances. However, it is important to consider both the material consequences that marginalized communities face while not losing sight of beacons of futurities (Stanley and Smith 2015).

An analysis of the narratives of undocumented trans women of color requires combining the work of black feminist theories, theories of social death, rightlessness, criminalization, black feminist thought on the interior, queer migration, and trans studies to understand how they intervene and form new epistemologies. But it also requires the willingness to listen, Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) in Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, asked us to “listen to what your jotería is saying” (107). Following the steps of Anzaldúa (2007), Francisco J. Galarte (2014) invites queers, jotxs, to listen differently, and us “Jotería, listen to what your trans* brothers and sisters are saying, and remember those long forgotten” (229). In this provocation Galarte is asking jotxs, and queers to listen to what often goes unregistered, that what is ignored, to what is considered indecipherable. More so Galarte is saying that “considering new reading practices means exploring what is announced, listening for the iterations of silences within the analytic boundaries between race and sexuality, which can push us to think of gender as much more dynamic and as spatially and temporarily contingent” (2014, 233). In this essay Galarte arrives to the importance of listening by evoking Gwen Amber Rose Araujo11 last words, “Please don’t. I have a family.” Galarte seems to feel the haunting through his inability to forget Gwen’s last words. Gwen like Zoraida haunt disrupting space and time, “is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially

11 Galarte draws this quote from the Lifetime television movie, A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story.
when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security)” (Gordon 2008, Introduction). Their haunting combined with our longing and refusal to forget forces us to reckon with the loss of both Gwen and Zoraida that don’t let us forget the tragedy and structural circumstances that made such violences possible but they also force us to imagine different possibilities. The haunting force new reading practices force us to grapple with the harsh realities in which racism, sexism, transphobia, and xenophobia operate to create precarious conditions for those that are most marginalized such as undocumented trans women. These conditions mark those that do not adhere to neoliberal accounts of value as unreadable and unworthy. But their haunting offers drive us towards finding and listening to different ways to of existing that disrupt our understandings of joy, happiness, and love.

**The Erotic Joy of Self Love in Afuera**

*Afuera* (2016) is a 15-minute Spanish short film directed by Steven Liang and written by Steven Canalas.¹² *Afuera* (2016) tells the story of Jennifer (played by Jennifer London, a Mexican trans actress), an undocumented trans woman living in Los Angeles, California. The 2016 film release followed 2015 one of the deadliest and most violent year for trans women of color. Steven Liang is a cisgender man who identifies “as a gay man of color from a working class, immigrant family.”¹³ In his personal website he shared his intent behind making the film was guided by his interest to “explore the intersection between the immigrant and trans

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experiences, and the resilience of this community.”

Liang was very intentional in both the treatment of the storyline and also about the cast and crew of the production of the film. He specifically casted trans talent for the trans roles and his film crew was primarily composed of people of color, women, and the LGBTQ community. Liang shared that Canals, the writer met with Jennifer and the other trans actresses of the film to inform the storyline by incorporating their voices and experiences to portray the characters as accurate as possible. It is important to mention that while Liang recognizes his limitations as a cisgender director, as mentioned, he was intentional in casting trans roles to trans actors and also took direction from the trans actresses to tell a story as realistic as possible. This does not mean that the short is perfect and raises questions about who is telling trans stories this thesis does not resolve that issue but rather is focused on the stories trans women tell.

As I researched the short-film I came into contact with Liang and shared that I was interested in writing about Afuera (2016), over a phone call conversation I expressed that there was something about the short that resonated with me. As previously mentioned Liang shared with me that Afuera (2016) was developed after an unsuccessful attempt at filming a documentary about the life and activism of Zoraida Reyes. It is throughout Jennifer’s journey we learn of the constrained choices that undocumented trans women face in attempting to live their authentic self, a term which offers pedagogical lessons for trans people as it conveys the importance of living their life on their own terms. Afuera (2016) creates an epistemology grounded in the everyday experiences and narratives of undocumented trans women that offers both collective and individual stories that speak against power.

\[14\] ibid

\[15\] ibid
Jennifer’s story in *Afuera* (2016) exemplifies the harsh realities under which undocumented trans women live in the U.S. while simultaneously is presented with moments of happiness and love that are often excluded from mainstream trans narratives. Undocumented trans women find themselves under various harsh immigration laws that criminalize undocumented migrants and a heteropatriarchal society that continually and literally deny the existence of trans women. We see this violence erasure through “gay panic” and “trans panic” defense claims in the cases of murders trans women. Under the framework of democracy the U.S. posits itself as a liberal society that guarantees the rights of their citizens. Even though “freedom for all” is not practiced at its full extend the propagated discourse that further supports U.S. exceptionalism. Particularly, the U.S. postulates itself as exceptional in protecting the rights of the LGBTQ community this then sets other countries as un-democratic behind, backwards, etc. For example, through petition of asylum cases of persecution based on sexuality, their home country must them be set up as hostile, dangerous, as one that does not protect its citizens (de la maza perez tamayo 2013). In this way the U.S. sets up the discourse where other countries are perceived as homophobic, transphobic, and “backwards.” For instance, women of color feminist have written about the ways that liberal feminism often launch campaigns to “save” women in so-called “third-world countries” from oppressive their cultures and traditions (Mohanty 2003, Grewal 2005). In this way, the US positions itself as a place to be desired as one that is inclusive of the LGBTQ community and supportive of women’s rights. In creating this discourse of liberalism, the US simultaneously conceals the ways that it administers the law to deny personhood to marginalized communities. As previously mentioned 1994 was the first time that members of the LGBTQ community could apply for asylum based on sexual orientation but their petition had to be filed within a year of arrival. The strict deadline makes it difficult for people to
file for asylum, as many applicants are unaware of time limitations (Aizura 2012, a de la maza perez tamayo 2013, McKinnon 2016). Additionally, post 9/11 immigration laws have become much more stringent under the guise of national security resulting in the increased criminalization of brown bodies. It is within the convoluted legal and ideological context that Jennifer finds herself in. In her story we see the ways that laws impact her life by literally limiting her movement, employment and access to healthcare. Yet, Jennifer through extreme instability and suppression defines her own understanding of happiness and self-love. It is important for films like Afuera (2016) that demonstrate multiple and complicated narratives of trans women of color, undocumented people, and undocumented trans women that have a full range of voices representing multiple experiences.

The opening scene between Pedro and Jennifer demonstrates the constraints of Jennifer’s life while also showing us their romantic relationship. Jennifer frantically searches for her dosis, or “dosage” of estrogen while Pedro, her boyfriend attempts to lure her back to bed. Pedro is portrayed as a caring and loving boyfriend who is more than willing to give Jennifer money to buy another dosis. Jennifer takes the money but realizes that he doesn’t have enough money. This scene is significant in that it demonstrates that trans women have loving and supportive communities. But also that communal support and love are not enough to undo the systemic conditions that render LGBTQ undocumented communities in vulnerable positions. In particular for undocumented trans women their inability to secure stable employment and lack of access to healthcare affects their intimate relationships. Lack of access to healthcare forces many undocumented women to rely on the underground market for their estrogen and other cosmetic or medical necessities for their transition. In this scene the room is lit by a small lamp, a small window suggests that it is late at night, Pedro has difficulty adjusting his eyes to look at the time
on his watch. The dark tone of the film suggests a somber tone that will follow Jennifer throughout her journey. Jennifer experiences frustration, anger, and is continually worried about her “dosis.” However, Jennifer is also triumphant because she achieves her goal of taking her “dosis” and does not interrupt or delays her transition. In this way Jennifer holds in tension the differences and similarities between Muñoz’ queer horizon and Chavez’ insistence and urgency of coalitional organizing.

The film also exemplifies the complex relationships that are a result of structures of oppression. A scene between Jennifer and her roommates reveals how marginalized communities are unknowingly complicit in the devalument of the Other (Cacho 2009). Here we are introduced to Lisette (Ximena McDowell) Jennifer confronts Lisette about the missing dosis but Lisette denies any wrongdoing and instead suggests that Jennifer calls one of her clients. Xiomara (Johanna Padilla-Pineda) on the other hand suggests that Jennifer quit sex work urging her to find something less risky. Lisette reminds Xioamra of the limited choices Jennifer has because she is undocumented. This scene between Jennifer, Lisette and Xiomara is also important because it points to how they are keenly aware of their constraint choices and how they are rendered in the realm of rightlessness. They are aware of the consequences that criminalize them and place them at risk with very little means of protection (Cacho 2012, 6). Undocumented trans women find themselves in an axis of various forms of rightlessness that inhibit their ability to seek employment that could offer them legal protection and most importantly the relief that their lives are not at stake every time they go to work. The film offers ways to understand how underlying messages guised as advice, such as, Xiomara warning Jennifer of the risks and dangers in sex-work and/or “risky behavior” are enough to deter the occurrence of violence. The underlining is that sex-workers put themselves in dangerous
situations that may lead to rape, assault, and even murder. Also, this then places the responsibility on Jennifer where she is at fault if she experiences any form of violence. Through this exchange we see the ways that trans women are blamed for the violence that they experience and how they unwillingly also participate in the blaming or devalument of each other. The three women can also be understood by what Avery Gordon calls, complex personhood, “means that all people “remember and forget”; they are “beset by contradiction”; they “recognize and misrecognize themselves and others”; they get “stuck in the symptoms of their troubles.” Yet, they “also transform themselves.” Significantly, as well, they “tell themselves stories about themselves and their society’s problems” that “weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward” (Gordon 2008, 4). All three women in one way or another are fixated on what is currently troubling them, however, Jennifer as the main character in the film we see how she moves in and out of this place but also goes through a personal transformation. The film demonstrate how marginalized communities both understand their precarious condition while also finding themselves unable to move outside the neoliberal trap of the devalument of each other. Furthermore, the film problematizes the tendency to blame each other in that at the end it does not offer any solutions.

While Jennifer, Xiomara, and Lissete are only focused on the dangers of sex work there are also the unspoken acknowledgement that part of the danger lies in that the women are trans. Lack of access to documents, both identification cards that match their gender and citizenship documents, worsen transphobia in that is what also forces trans people into sex work. Mainstream media normalizes and reinforces the criminalization of the violence that trans women experience. For example, on 2015 the news outlet MSNBC reported that local media outlets not only misgendered trans murdered women but that they accompanied their story with
their mug shots.\textsuperscript{16} By misgendering and using mug shots, media outlets reinforce narratives that criminalize and normalize ideas about the devaluement of marginalized communities. The visual correlation of such reporting criminalize trans women and in doing so they dehumanize their experiences. Perhaps because the women are too familiar with that story they don’t need to speak it and they don’t need to explicitly mention it and the mainstream media has already done that for them.

Cacho (2012) primarily focused on rightlessness through racialized criminalization of people of color and undocumented people in the U.S., her critique of gender is focused on normative masculinity and her work helps unpack rightlessness and devalument. The work of Dean Spade (2011) addresses how the law is informed by heteronormativity and reproduces assumptions of gender and sexuality that shape the outcomes of those who fall outside the norm. Spade writes, “Legal systems are part of the distribution of life chances, and what role changing laws can and cannot have in changing the arrangements that cause such harm to trans people” (2011, 20). Spade is specifically focused on the ways that laws affect the trans community. Primarily he examines the way that administrative law categorizes people based on “indigeneity, race, gender, ability, and national origin to produce populations with different levels of vulnerability to economic exploitation, violence, and poverty” (2011, 20-21). Through administrative law, populations are controlled through what we think of as “pre-existing” identities (Spade 2011, 31). The law informs us in such a way that criminalized people are deemed disposable. For instance, mug shots then work as a visual stand in for the law that tells us how to feel about people. Spade argues that these identities are not inherent but are actually created by administrative laws and manage the survivability for the targeted communities.

\textsuperscript{16} “More trans people reported killed in 2015 than in any other year” http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/more-trans-people-reported-killed-2015-any-other-year
Combining the analysis on rightlessness provided by Cacho with the work of Spade on administrative laws, we see how both play a role in creating limited outcomes for someone like Jennifer who is an undocumented trans woman of color. What is so important about the work of Cacho and Spade is that they both point to how criminalization is normalized. This is evident in the way that Lisette and Xiomora so expressively point to the limited options that Jennifer has and that sex work will eventually lead to a negative outcome. This interaction between the women is important to demonstrate the ways in which hegemony operates where we become the one who devalue each other. Having Lisette and Xiomara as the antagonists of the film enhances the structural and ideological odds that are placed against undocumented trans of women of color. Spade considers how national origin as a category creates vulnerable populations and similarly Cacho also emphasizes rightlessness through racialized criminalization but what does it mean when race, gender, sexuality, and nationality intersect. What does racialized gender criminalization of undocumented migrants look like? Lisette, Xiomara, and Jennifer then all are examples of the ways that rightlessness based on gendered racialized criminalization operates to place them in vulnerable situation while simultaneously blaming them for their own precariousness.

At the end of the scene between Jennifer and her roommates, as Jennifer walks away Xiomara asks out loud, “where is she going now?” and Lissete responds, “she is crazy, I don’t know what is wrong with her, she is not doing well.” The questions initiated by her roommates are in conversation with the tension and argument they just had. However, these questions point to the limitations that trans, undocumented, poor, women, queer people face. Specifically, the question about where is Jennifer going points to the literal limited ways her physical mobilization is limited. We see Jennifer walking not driving, she doesn’t have safe and secure
employment, even her gender transition cannot move forward because she hasn’t had her “dosis.” These restrictions point to Jennifer’s intimacy with rightlessness as an undocumented trans woman. The films representation of Jennifer as walking away from her roommates, however, could potentially convey a speaking back to rightlessness and reclamation of agency, as she is not bound by her limited mobility. Even if Jennifer has to walk and take the slower road she is deciding to follow her intuition and do what she knows she needs to do for herself. When Lissete tells us that Jennifer is crazy and not well, this again signals to ways that we don’t always understand why people make certain choices that may be incomprehensible to us. This is not the first time that she is asked where she is going or what she is doing. Jennifer is clear in her message but no one is listening to her.

The film demonstrates the many obstacles that undocumented trans women like Jennifer experience but we are also offered a glimpse into her romantic life. We see the playfulness between Jennifer and Pedro as the two as they joke about their morning breath. However, the tension between Pedro and Jennifer over her “dosis” is a strong reminder of the ways that being undocumented and trans limits the accessibility to health care and employment. Spade (2011) writes, “Trans people’s gender classification problems are concentrated in three general realms: identity documentation, sex-segregated facilities, and access to health care” (77). While Spade is focused on the administrative limitations the scene between Pedro and Jennifer exposes the ways that legally created classifications permeate and affect the possibility for relationships to flourish. Yet, this scene is important because it takes the time to show the affection and love that Pedro and Jennifer have for each other. We are witness to the tender everyday moments between a couple that are often excluded in the mainstream media. They continue to go back and forth joking with one another, passionately kissing and cuddling. These moments of embrace and love
momentarily suspend time and Jennifer’s worries and stress until her phone rings and she gets up to leave. Again, the mainstream media often creates dichotomous narratives between tragic stories of trans women and the exceptional trans homonormative narratives. Here *Afuera* also takes the time to show us the embrace between Jennifer and Pedro that point to everyday moments of joy admits structurally oppressive systems.

In the closing scene we see the sunrise, we hear birds chirping, and dogs barking as Jennifer returns to her apartment, she looks tired and defeated. The camera then points to an image of Marylyn Monroe symbolizing the pinnacle of femininity. As the camera returns to Jennifer she is taking off the eyelashes and her wig. Jennifer is stripped of all her make up as she looks at herself in the mirror. She appears exhausted, as her quest to purchase estrogen pills was unsuccessful. Jennifer carries this exhaustion as she takes a shower. Pedro storms in asking Jennifer why didn’t she answer his call. Jennifer tells him that she was working and did not want to fight with him. Pedro is upset and begins to pack his bags while Jennifer is trying to have a conversation with him. He reveals that Jennifer’s engagement in sex work is causing an issue for him because in essence he feels a lack of commitment to their relationship. Like Xiomara and Lissete, Pedro also warns Jennifer of the dangers in sex work but also due to his own precarity because he is undocumented and he cannot offer Jennifer financial stability. In a last attempt to convince Jennifer that he loves her and wants a different type of love he suggest they leave and move somewhere else. But Jennifer knows this is not a realistic option for them because there is no escaping of their condition of rightlessness.

The heated and painful argument between Jennifer and Pedro again point to the ways that rightlessness and administrative law affects economic survival of undocumented trans communities and that it intervenes in the formation of emotional relationships. In *Afuera* we are
left with the impression that Pedro is the one to end the relationship and while he does leave it is important to pay attention to Jennifer’s decision, as ultimately she is the one that makes the choice to not continue her relationship with Pedro. In this move Jennifer contests notions of homonormativity as she does not ascribe to the neoliberal fairy tale that running away with her lover will provide a happy ending. For undocumented trans and queer people networks of friends and family are vital to in securing living arrangements, emotional and economic support. These networks often are often built in their country of origin, forging a transnational network that is established long before they migrate. Jennifer knows that leaving with Pedro would remove them from their network. Even though her relationship with Lissette may not be the most favorable it is important for Jennifer to maintain her network.

Most importantly the ending scene gestures to the radical unthinkable imaginaries, that Cacho, Spade, and Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009) suggest. While Cacho sets out the ways in which rightlessness creates impossible revolving doors of value and devalument she is ultimately asking us to think beyond survivability and over reliance on language and comprehensible frameworks to express how we value personhood and life. She writes, “To take unthinkable politics seriously, we need to entertain counterintuitive thoughts and practice imagining otherwise” (32). Spade also points to the ways that laws harm more than they help and as such that we should not put all of our efforts into changing them. Additionally, the work of Muñoz helps to articulate the possibilities of the unthinkable when he writes, “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Muñoz 2009, 1). The ending scene with Jennifer and Pedro first give us the impression of defeat. However, if we spend more time with Jennifer’s decision we understand that she is choosing to love her self and to do whatever it takes to achieve happiness as defined
by her. This is shown in the film as we see anguish in Jennifer’s face when she is trying to convey to Pedro how much she loves him but that she cannot “run away” with him because he would ultimately be unhappy. Jennifer knows that she doesn’t have a lot of choices and that means she cannot simply stop engaging in sex work this is expressed when she asks Pedro, “And go where? This is my life.” Here Jennifer is shown as gesturing to the intensity of her lived experiences but also reclamation of what she wants her to life to be. Financial independence is important to Jennifer because this means she can buy her dosis and continue her transition. Ultimately, this moment is powerful because Jennifer chooses herself over anyone and anything else. Jennifer’s story shows us that engaging both the present and the future is possible. Her character and the decisions push us to reconsider our own understandings of joy and self-love. Jennifer finds herself in a post 9/11 context where under the guise of national security and immigration laws have become much more stringent under the guise of national security immigration laws have become more stringent resulting in the increased criminalization of brown bodies. In her story we see the ways that transphobic and xenophobic laws limit her access to secure employment, which affect her access to health care yet there is an insistence presence of joy, pleasure, and love. Jennifer embodies what Audre Lorde (2007) describes as, “That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called marriage, nor god, nor an afterlife” (57). What we learn from Jennifer is to joy, to love ourselves and put ourselves first that we too have the capacity to feel.
Me Vesti De Reina: Trans and Queer Sonic Spatial Entitlement

In May 7, 2014 in Santa Ana Ca., Zoraida took to the streets and protested calling for an end to a contract the city had with Immigration Custom Enforcement. This protest took place about a month before her untimely death. Zoraida’s impact on her community is traceable through the various protests and events that have placed Santa Ana, CA on the map full of organizers that unapologetically mobilizes for the rights of their community that centering queer, trans, and undocumented folks. It then makes sense that when the Santa Ana activist community learned about her death that they had the resources and skills to organize a vigil for Zoraida that also called for justice. The civil disobedience described below is important to read next to Afuera as both capture moments of joy experienced by undocumented trans women in ways that push against precarious conditions informed by systematic forces of subjugation and limited mainstream media representations.

(Image 1, Not 1 More, Personal Archives)
In the morning of May 28, 2015, a little less than a year after Zoraida’s premature death, community members and organizers from GetEQUAL,\(^{17}\) Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement,\(^{18}\) and #NOT1MORE\(^{19}\) staged a civil disobedience calling for the release of undocumented trans detainees by blocking the intersection of Flower Street and Civic Center Drive in Santa Ana, California (Image 1). The protestors targeted the Santa Ana police department because at the time it held a space inside the jail that housed LGBTQ undocumented migrants. The Santa Ana police responded by arriving in full riot gear and declaring that the civil disobedience was an unlawful assembly. Soon after the police began to arrest Isa Noyola, Sandra Jarariveros, Mariela Martinez, Jiselle Onell, Jorge Hernandez,\(^{20}\) who were sitting in the center of the intersection (Image 2). The civil disobedience drew attention from local mainstream media as reporters interviewed participants, gathered footage and left after the arrests were made. The organizers announced that they would not leave until all detainees were released. Yet, many of the local mainstream media news reporters left soon after.

\(^{17}\) http://www.getequal.org/

\(^{18}\) http://familiaqlm.org/

\(^{19}\) http://www.notonemoredeportation.com/

\(^{20}\) http://www.advocate.com/politics/trans/2015/05/28/five-arrested-california-rally-end-trans-immigration-detention
ABC 7\textsuperscript{21} the one of the local mainstream media news outlet covered the protest at the time it was happening and throughout the day broadcasted clips of the civil disobedience in the daily news hour shows. In the minute and a half clip they briefly described that around 70 protestors attended the civil disobedience and were “calling for an end to the detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants, particularly those who are part of the LGBTQ community.” The news report included the names and mug shots of the five protestors who were arrested. They were described as “suspect” and that were charged with obstruction and failure to disperse. The mug shots were accompanied by their “legal” names and in doing so ABC 7 and the Santa Ana police department missgendered trans and gender non-conforming protestors. While the practice of releasing “legal” names and mug shots appear to be following standard procedure they reproduce administrative violence towards the trans community by continually dismissing their gender identities.

The mug shots and legal names were placed alongside the same report where reporter Jorge Gutierrez organizer at Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement\textsuperscript{22} was quoted as stating


\textsuperscript{22} Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement was founded at the beginning of 2014 by trans and queer immigrants, undocumented and allies, youth leaders and parents.
that, “trans women are being thrown in solitary confinement. They’re still being sexually abused, physically abused. They’re not being respected for their gender identity.” Additionally, the ABC 7 news report included a statement from U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) saying that, “ICE has a strict zero tolerance policy for any kind of abuse or inappropriate behavior in its facilities and takes any allegations of such mistreatment seriously… committed to upholding an immigration detention system that prioritizes the health, safety, and welfare of all those in our care in custody, including lesbian, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) individuals.” The news report closed with stating that protesters would wait for all five detainees to be released.

While the news report showed footage of the protest it did not include any footage of the protesters waiting outside of the police department. Although this news report may seem like a generic news report in a minute and a half it reinscribes limited narratives of the trans and the LGBTQ community.

The local news paper the Orange County Register also reported the protest in their website. However, they started their story by centering the story of Luna Rivas who had been recently released from the Santa Ana jail. Rivas was detained for six months in the special designated area for the LGBTQ undocumented people and had been transferred among different detention centers after she was caught re-entering the U.S. The reporter also included that protesters would remain waiting outside the Santa Ana police department until everyone arrested was released. Rivas wrote, “They rallied and sometimes danced awaiting the release of those arrested.” The news reporter connected the protest to national movement working towards to end the detention of undocumented people who while waiting their immigration hearings they are detained. The article did not include mug shots of the arrested protesters instead it-included images of the protest and the dancing that took place. It could be argued that a written article
allows the news reporter more time to gather sources and that resulted in a much more informed article. In contrast to a minute and a half news clips that must be edited right away may not allow time for the story to develop. However, it is important to note that ABC7 also published an online version of the story on their website simply reiterating what was in the clip. What is distinctly noticeable between ABC7 news and the article in the Orange County Register is the treatment of the stories of undocumented trans and LGBQ communities. Rivas in her article does not reinforce gender binaries and did not correlate criminality through the habitual use of mug shots.

As previously mentioned until recently immigration scholarship has began to address gender and sexuality, however, the field of queer migrations has contributed to our understanding of the apparent ways that immigration consistently creates and maintains categories aimed to exclude bodies, which in turn constantly shift the line of legality and illegality through the disciplining of sexuality and gender. For trans bodies of color this surveillance of gender, sexuality and race create a precarious situation where they are left vulnerable to experience multiple forms of state sanctioned violences. Race as a “way of knowing” informs how we perceive what is generated in the mainstream media such as ABC7 that naturalize criminality making it familiar marking certain bodies in a permanent state of criminality (Cacho 2012, 2). Additionally, we know that trans undocumented migrants are disproportionately mistreated in detentions or jails. For instance we can turn to case of Victoria Arellano as one of the earliest reported cases where an undocumented trans woman died in an immigration detention center due to the neglicence and violence they experienced. Her case is important because it points to the ways that undocumented trans people are at the axis of multiple violences that are generated by the state through administrative law. As such different
expressions of gender outside the binary are rendered un-recuperable. Drawing from Luibheid it is noticeable that gender and sexuality are reinscribed through various institutions such as immigration laws that trickle down information to immigrations rights organizations and maintain the devalument of queer and trans bodies.

(Image 3, Santa Ana Police Station, Google Maps)

Returning to the civil disobedience that took place in Santa Ana, CA protesters marched from Flower Street and settled outside the Santa Ana police station (Image 3 & 4) and waited for the release of the five detainees. A group of undocumented trans women who had been recently released from a detention center in Arizona began to share the violent and inhumane conditions they experienced inside the detention centers. Like many undocumented trans migrants they shared that not only were they misgendered but were humiliated by the guards inside the detention center. Their testimonies were powerful in that they recounted the multiple abuses that they experienced inside immigration detention centers based on their gender identity.

23 I was in attendance at the civil disobedience and witnessed the testimonies
After they shared their testimonies there was a period of awkward silences and many of the community members and activists took this silence as a cue to leave. Suddenly, an iPhone was connected to a speaker and music began to play. Immediately the mood shifted and people began to dance. This important and moving moment of resistance was not captured by the mainstream media but is exemplary of the ways that mainstream practices of storytelling, such as ABC 7 in this case that miss opportune moments to shift the paradigm.

Gaye Theresa Johnson’s (2013) notion of “sonic expressions of spatial entitlement” is useful to understand how sound has the power to transform and reclaim space. Spatial entitlement is helpful for those who are systematically marginalized as technology serves as the
medium to build communities. Resulting in spatial entitlement is reclamation of both physical and imaginary spaces. Forms of spatial entitlement often go unnoticed because they happen everyday and are not extraordinary moments. Johnson describes that sonic spatial entitlement as “Constitute some of the most eloquent articulations of the right to space. Sounds have shared meanings that are informed by and give inspiration to the social, political, and economics power relations experienced by their products” (2013, 85). Considering the possibilities of sonic spatial entitlement has to suspend time and space we can consider how dancing and music has the power to erupt moments of joy and empowerment. The first song that was played was “Todos Me Miran” by Gloria Trevi, it was originally released in 2006. The song has been regarded as an anthem for the Latinx LGBTQ community24 as the music video shows a young man expressing their gender identity by dressing in woman’s clothing, make-up, and proudly walking down the street. The song starts up slowly in effort to build momentum, emphasizing the ways in which heteropatriarchy ways down on women and queer people. The beat picks up signaling a shift of empowerment and agency. The visual elements of the music video and the lyrics are in conversation with each other to convey their critique of heteropatriarchy. Trevi sings:

Tu me hiciste sentir que no valia
(You made me feel like I wasn’t worthy)

Y mis lagrimas calleron a tus pies
(My tears fell at your feet)

Me miraba en el espejo y no me hallaba
(Looking at myself in the mirror, couldn’t find myself)

Yo era solo lo que tu querias ver...

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(I was only what you wanted to see)

Y me solte el cabello, me vesti de reyna,
(I let my hair down, I dressed like a queen)
me puse tacones, me pinté bien bella
(I put on heel, and my make up made me look beautiful)

Y camine hacia la puerta te escuche gritarme
(I walked out the door and could hear you yelling at me)

pero tus cadenas ya no pueden pararme...

(But your chains can no longer stop me)

Y mire la noche y ya no era oscura era de lentejuelas...
(I looked at the night and it wasn’t dark it was made of sequins)

Without the visuals one can assume that this song is specific to the experience of women in an abusive relationships as the lyrics speak to the inability to recognize oneself through the eyes of their partner. However, the lyrics can also be applied to the unsatisfactory feelings one may have due to societal normative gender categories. The song moves the listener towards sentiments of empowerment as the lyrics shift when the beat picks up. Keeping in mind the context in which the song was selected it represents the ways in which a cold and sterile place such as the Santa Ana Police department provides sonic possibilities to inform and transform space.
Organizers specifically selected the location where the civil disobedience took place due to the multiple state agencies located within the same vicinity. In this area of the city you have city court, the sheriff’s department, immigration detention center, coroner and the city police department (Image 5). The concentration of state surveillance and power point to the significance and importance of the organic transformation that took place through the music that was played. Johnson writes that spatial entitlement is important because it provides a descriptor to the ways that, “marginalized communities have created new collectivities based not just upon eviction and exclusion from physical places, but also on new and imaginative uses of technology, creativity, and spaces” (x). Additionally, the reclaiming of space projects a new meaning into space that was intended for a specific purpose in this case state surveillance. As people were leaving the Santa Ana police department they where confused as to what was happening. This interruption of meaning of space creates moments of confusion and illegibility that speak to the possibilities to imagine alternate ways of living and existing. Furthermore, Santa Ana is an important place of
inquiry due to the current struggle to claim the right to space as the city is undergoing gentrification.\textsuperscript{25} Therefore sounds of Spanish pop music combined with the presence of trans and queer bodies of color further attest to the contestation over space taking place.

The festive mood, the dancing and music from a distance would suggest that a celebration was taking place. As the undocumented and documented trans women waved the gay pride and trans pride flags, we momentarily forget that we are at an immigration rights rally. However, the banners demanding the end to all deportations mark the important reason of the gathering. The gay pride and trans pride flags serve as important visual signifiers. The first is the use the flags as props to claim space by undocumented and documented queer trans women exemplify a temporary claim space accompanied by their dance adding an element of camp, the feminine and glamour. Additionally, the undocumented and documented trans women disrupt the perceptions of what a flag represents such as national pride or even imperialist claims of space. These undocumented and documented trans women shift the meaning by laying claim to space by smudging the boundaries of who belongs and who doesn’t belong against the narrative of racist, sexist, transphobic immigration laws, detention centers and police departments. Johnson speaks to this method of spatial entitlement and claiming space that “requires an alternative understanding and construction of the meaning of citizenship.”\textsuperscript{26} In this way the undocumented and documented trans women are directly challenging the arbitrary construction of citizenship as designed by the state through the use of flags that represent marginalized communities.


Some of the undocumented trans women who were recently released escaped transphobic and sexist violence that they experienced at their hometown and when they arrived in the U.S. they faced white supremacist, transphobic, and racist violence at the hands of the state when they were detained inside immigration detention centers. Yet, through their perseverance and continuous fight to share their stories of horrific violence these women still felt empowered again by temporarily unsettling the intended use of the front of the police department into a dance floor. The second song that they selected to dance to was “Who Runs the World” by Beyonce. Their assertion of spatial entitlement through the use of popular culture created space for everyone as Johnson theorizes that it provides an opportunity for coalitional and solidarity politics to form.  

My intent is not to center the English language as universal language that unites everyone regardless of country of origin but instead I would like to shift our focus to the ways that sonic spatial entitlement operate across popular culture and music. Additionally, José Esteban Muñoz observed how queers of color continually shift through what he called disidentifications as, “the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it…. This “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change which at the same time valuing the importance of local everyday struggles of resistance” (1991, 1). The language and lyrics become secondary as it the sound and what the pop star, in this case Beyonce represents. Furthermore, Muñoz would argues that queer people of color also create a “counterpolitics that contests the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere” and offer “the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus

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27 Ibid, 198.
seize social agency” (Muñoz 1999, 1). Beyoncé’s image provides the sonic space for such assemblage of solidarity to take place. These often missed and minute performances and actions are often ignored or viewed as superficial movements that are not “real” political actions. Yet precisely because of the superficial attributes towards pop-culture and music when people hear the music they feel at ease. This creates a space of comfort that enables people to connect on a different level and this human connection has the possibility to create moments of solidarities across difference.

My focus on the dancing that took place after the civil disobedience is not to deflect the importance of the events and sacrifice of those that were arrested but rather it my aim was to point towards nuance moments that can inform political subjectivity and challenge hegemony in different ways. The undocumented and documented trans women engaged in a trans immigrant spatial entitlement where they challenged multiple notions of space and right to space by contesting ideas about gender, race, class, nationality, citizenship through music and the waving of flags they also inspired creative community formations.

**Conclusion: The Memory of Zoraida Reyes**

The narratives of undocumented trans women of color in this thesis offer multilayered stories that show the small glimpses of joy. These multilayered stories are complicated and are not easy to describe and may seem insignificant. But the difficulty to grasp the stories is precisely why they deserve attention and why they offer different ways of understanding their suffering and joy. *Afuera*, demonstrates the difficult choices that Jennifer had to make in order to find happiness. She chooses to let go of someone that loves her in the hopes to achieve her transition and also remain as economically independent as she can even if it means that she
continues to do sex work. The civil disobedience demonstrates small moments of joy created through spatial entitlement for a moment suspend time and allow us to forget what is it that we are doing and even where we are at. Yet, these moments of sonic spatial entitlement are significant in that they are also speaking aback to power by disrupting the intended use of space through dancing and lip-synching to pop music. Both the film and the civil disobedience are both guided and haunted by Zoraida as her presence is consistently lingering and informing us.

I first met Zoraida after an event organized by De Colores OC we were all relaxing, telling jokes, and having drinks but Zoraida was also getting ready as she had a date later that night. I remember as she left we all teased her about her date. Because my interactions with Zoraida were informal it was only after her death that I learned more about what an amazing friend she was and all her accomplishments. I learned that Zoraida Reyes was born in Michoacán, Mexico, and migrated to the U.S. when she was young. She graduated from Century High School in Santa Ana. She briefly attended the University of California Santa Barbara majoring in gender studies but left without her degree due to the difficulty in paying for college tuition and expenses. When Zoraida was at UCSB there were not much awareness about the needs of undocumented students resulting in few resources for undocumented students. At the time the California Dream Act had not passed or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals otherwise known as DACA was non-existent. The structural barriers affected her ability to complete her education at UCSB but also informed Zoraida’s activism. However, Zoraida returned to Santa Ana where she lived with her chosen family and received an associate degree from Santa Ana College. While she was in community college she began organizing with El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanos de Aztlan (MEChA), on behalf of the DREAM Act with

http://familiatqlm.org/zoraida/
Orange County Dream Team, and De Colores Queer Orange County. Her involvement in these multiple organizations were also informed by Zoraida’s own experiences as a trans person of color. Zoraida was well known in her community and was a fierce activist who was at the forefront of immigrant and LGBTQ rights. On June after the news of her untimely death became public community members organized a vigil in remembrance of Zoraida where over 100 friends and family members gathered in Santa Ana, Ca. The vigil was also accompanied by a small procession that remembered Zoraida but also called for justice as friends and family were held signs, sage, flags, and pictures of Zoraida. At the end of the vigil as mentioned “Todos Me Miran” by Trevi blasted through the city of Santa Ana. This sonic memory ties the two events, the vigil and the civil disobedience, are both marked by pain, suffering, and joy as all emotions were simultaneously expressed in the face of white heteropatriarchal supremacy that with impunity creates physical and ideological barriers to the lives of undocumented trans women of color.

In taking up Galarte’s (2014) challenge to listen to our what our trans community is telling us this thesis uses multiple instruments to take up a different ways of reading that allowed for a distinctive registers of happiness. Doing so, creates the time and space to listen to what may at first appear to be trivial moments and decisions that may seem unimportant. But as Jennifer’s story and the civil disobedience demonstrate that these moments offer the possibility to reclaim space and our joy. In intense political moments it becomes much more so important to stop and to intentionally listen to our gestures of joy.
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