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Art, Culture Making, and Representation as Resistance in the Life of Manuel Gregorio Acosta

Susannah Aquilina

University of Texas at El Paso, seaquilina@utep.edu

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ART, CULTURE MAKING, AND REPRESENTATION AS RESISTANCE IN
THE LIFE OF MANUEL GREGORIO ACOSTA

SUSANNAH ESTELLE AQUILINA

Doctoral Program in Borderlands History

APPROVED:

Ernesto Chávez, Ph.D., Chair

Michael Topp, Ph.D.

Yolanda Chávez Leyva, Ph.D.

Melissa Warak, Ph.D.

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

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2016

This dissertation is dedicated to Stone, Mila, Silver and all of you young ones who give us hope.

ART, CULTURE MAKING, AND REPRESENTATION AS RESISTANCE IN
THE LIFE OF MANUEL GREGORIO ACOSTA

by

SUSANNAH ESTELLE AQUILINA, B.A., M.A.

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation is a biography of Manuel Gregorio Acosta, an iconic Mexican American painter in the twentieth-century U.S.-Mexico borderlands. By gathering oral histories and examining Acosta's art, my study emphasizes his importance to the cultural changes of El Paso in the post WWII era. Acosta's biography yields a salient story about Mexican life in the U.S. Southwest and how Chicano/as contributed to American society. By exploring Acosta's expression of identity and tying his life to the broader border community that he represented, this study seeks to link his individual narrative with a more general comprehension of race, class, and sexuality. Art provided Acosta the agency to navigate the complex world of multiple marginalities addressed in this biography.

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A Note on Terminology

As this study deals with socially constructed identities, it is necessary to explain the various choices I make in describing them. Mexicans, as a mestizo/as, have always problematized racial categorization. Add centuries of multiple waves of colonization and terminology becomes even trickier. Manuel Acosta defied the boundaries usually highlighted to distinguish immigrant from native born in Mexican American history. He came to the U.S. as an infant and eventually earned his citizenship through his military service in World War II. His work aligned with the Chicano/a political struggle for equality and in this study I argue that the cultural changes that he helped manifest on the U.S.-Mexico border in the twentieth-century even contributed to fomentation of the *movimiento*. Acosta's work emphasized the people of the borderlands as singular, not characterized by nationalist distinctions. Therefore he is best described in this study as a Mexican-origin person, as an individual deriving from Mexico and being strongly oriented around Mexican culture despite growing up in the United States. As an eventual citizen he is also described here as a Mexican American, especially in the context of his experiences as a member of the Mexican American Generation.¹ I also use the word Chicano while referring to Acosta as it ties him to a particular pro-Mexican ethos that was taking shape in the twentieth-century borderlands during his adult years. While I sometimes use these terms interchangeably for the sake of variety in word choice, my use of each when discussing Acosta is intentional and depends on the context. I seek not to muddy the distinction and nuances between each but to highlight the ways in which he encompassed all three categories. His life and career were focused on overcoming the

¹ Mario García *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 13-15.

barriers dividing us while celebrating Mexican culture and humanizing Mexican-origin people. I therefore hope to use these terms in ways that reflect these complex and salient realities.

Introduction

Every friend of Manuel Gregorio Acosta has stories about him, almost each one jovial and lighthearted. Tom Diamond, the 1989 Democratic Party Chairman of El Paso, reminiscing upon Acosta's generosity and support of the party in an article written in the wake of his death, recalled having seen "Manny" at a Western art show. The artist was wearing an expensive sports-coat that still had the price tags and the size labels on it. When asked why, Acosta said it was because he was planning on returning the jacket the next day.² This is how Acosta performed a humorous and self-deprecating playfulness. He mocked status and prestige and reveled in the humble life of Chicano/as on the border. His humor and creativity were ongoing forces shaping how he performed his life. Known for his celebrations, his *joie de vivre*, and most significantly his prolific and singular career as an artist, Acosta played a significant role in the cultural life of his borderlands city in twentieth-century El Paso. His relationship with his community and his art became central to his work as a culture maker on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Manuel Gregorio Acosta was the foremost Chicano painter living and working in El Paso throughout the better part of the twentieth-century. His goal to represent his people, Mexican origin people in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, was fully realized throughout his generative and relevant career as an artist.³ He was a kind man, generous, loving, jocular, light-hearted and good humored—who sought to use his talents for the uplift of his community and benefit the world with his creative work. The consummate

² Robey Farley-Villalobos and Ellen Rocha, "Acosta's Love of the 'Fiesta' of Life Inspired Others," *El Paso Herald Post*, October 26, 1989.

³ "Acosta: A Man and His Art," *Nosotros 2*, no. 6, September, 1972, Tomas Ybarra Frausto Papers, box 1, folder 4, American Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

painter and partier, he combined his art with his love of social life through his lively celebrations. His role as a culture-maker in El Paso calls on us to recall his exceptional life and commemorate his contributions to American art in the twentieth-century.

Tragically, Acosta's life and work were cut short in 1989 when Cesar Najera Flores, a young man who Acosta had occasionally hired for modeling and odd jobs, murdered the artist in his home in Southeast El Paso.⁴ Najera Flores, a Mexican national in his early twenties, said that he was retaliating against Acosta for "sexual assault," describing a consensual relationship that had existed between them for four years.⁵ Through Najera Flores's claims, Acosta's sexuality was cast into the public discourse. Until that point, Acosta had lived a semi-closeted life as a gay man revealing this aspect of himself only to his closest friends.⁶ Therefore, publicly Acosta was not openly gay and communicated his sexuality to the world at large only through coded messages relayed in his paintings.

This study is a biography of Acosta's remarkable life. It examines the relevance of his work to both Chicano/a and queer art in the twentieth-century. By looking at the centrality of the borderlands as both a theme in Acosta's art and as the geographical context of his career, this dissertation highlights how the U.S.-Mexico border was a crucial force in his depiction of Mexican life in America. It asks in what ways he was able to use his art to convey the various aspects of his identity. Reading Acosta's multiple selves through his art provides a narrative about the intersection of race and sexuality in

⁴ Leticia Zamarripa, "Juarez Man Admits Killing Acosta: Suspect Accuses Artist of Sexual Assault, *El Paso Herald Post*, October 30, 1989.

⁵ "Mexican Citizen Charged in El Paso Artist's Death," *Kerrville Daily Times*, October 30, 1989.

⁶ Mago Oróna Gandara interview by author, El Paso, TX, October 10, 2013.

the twentieth-century borderlands. This biography therefore serves as more than the recounting of an individual life. Rather it asks what can be learned about the Chicano movement, Western and borderlands art, and queer expression more broadly from Acosta's story.

Drawing upon the new approaches to biography elicited in the June 2009 issue of the *American Historical Review (AHR)*, this study ties Acosta's life to a more general narrative about Chicano/a and queer art in the twentieth-century borderlands. David Nasaw's introduction to this *AHR* issue assures that more than simply a microscopic vision of a single life, biography might "deploy the individual in the study of the world outside that individual and explore how the private informs the public and vice versa," positing the ripeness of it as a subfield to social history in illuminating how race, class, and gender are at work in the lives of historical subjects.⁷ In her contribution to this issue, Lois Banner's develops this idea further by discussing the new biography's emphasis on how selves are performed, responding to cultural scripts and in turn informing and shaping society.⁸ Judith Brown's article "Life Histories" argues that biography holds the potential for subverting "master narratives" that privilege the artificial boundaries of nation-states and contained, neat identities that elude historical complexity.⁹ And finally, Alice Kessler-Harris's piece answers the question of "Why Biography?" by stating that:

My object is less an examination of the internal tensions and contradictions (those are my 'facts') that produced the experience of a relatively public person than it is an exploration of what those experiences can tell us about the American

⁷ David Nasaw, "Historians and Biography," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 574-6.

⁸ Lois Banner, "Biography as History," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 581-2

⁹ Judith Brown, "'Life Histories' and the History of Modern South Asia," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 587-8.

past. Rather than offering history as background, or introducing it in order to locate an individual in time, I want to ask how the individual life helps us to make sense of a piece of the historical process.¹⁰

She calls on biographers to see beyond the isolation of the personal in life-writing to broader social phenomena and to ask in what ways biography lays bare the over-arching historical forces at work in determining human events. Acosta's story presents an opportunity to qualitatively engage with a single person's life but as a means to understand race, sexuality, resistance, culture-making, community, expression, and identity in El Paso during the half century following WWII.

Acosta's portraiture comprised an empowering and empathetic narrative of Mexican America life through the rendition of Chicano/as in the post-WWII era. He brought to life the rich and varied world that he lived in as a *fronterizo* by painting the people of his city, the community that he knew and loved. The great artistic skill that Acosta had was a deep compassion through which he was able to see the true humanity in every person he met and then to relay that essence, that soulfulness, in his portraits of the everyday people who composed his social world. By painting his many friends and family members, as well as many of those who entered his milieu as acquaintances, Acosta created a visual history of his community in the borderlands in the second half of the twentieth-century. His artistic mission was to represent the Chicano/as of El Paso and in this work he succeeded immensely.

Beginning his career upon his return from serving in the United States Air Force during the Second World War, Acosta manifested a fruitful and inspired body of work that drew upon his love of his people and culture. He started painting Chicano/as before

¹⁰ Alice Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography?" *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 626.

many other artists were doing so and his particular style always sought to emphasize their dignity and pride in identity. His work is foundational to the Chicano/a art that would become more widespread during the later decades of Acosta's career. As part of what Mario García calls the Mexican American Generation, Acosta and his contemporaries were the children of the Mexican immigrant generation who came to the U.S. at the beginning of the twentieth-century when El Paso was a railroad international commerce and labor hub.¹¹ Acosta's generation, the generation of Mexicans who earned their American citizenship through service in WWII, preceded the following Chicano/a generation of the 1960s and 1970s.¹² His art thus marks a significant contribution to his culture, one whereby he influenced the following generation of Chicano/a art.

Acosta was therefore one of the forerunners of the Chicano/a art movement. He painted Mexicans into American art at a time that predated when it was more widespread to do so. His deeply humanizing and soulful representations of people through portraiture invoked empathy for Mexicans in America, underscoring their belonging and dignity. He celebrated Mexicans as WWII war heroes, rendered everyday life in the barrio, portrayed local and national Chicano/a leaders, idealized Chicana femininity and beauty, and fundamentally countered the erasure of Chicano/as from the American historical narrative. Doing all this at a time that preceded when Chicano-centric art became more prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, Acosta shaped a generation of Chicano/a artists. He received recognition from the Chicano/a art leaders of the following generation and was

¹¹ Mario García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 33.

¹² Mario García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 13-15.

dubbed the “*abuelito* of Chicano aesthetics” by Royal Chicano Air Force member, José Montoya.¹³

As one of the earliest Mexican American painters, Acosta came up within an American artistic tradition that sought to represent the American West. While Acosta was geographically an artist working in the Southwest, part of a larger community of Western painters, and drew upon some of the visual tropes of this genre, he distinguished himself from it.¹⁴ Painters who forged the Western art movement were part of a colonial legacy in which portraying the American West meant claiming it through the ongoing realization of Manifest Destiny. Railroad companies paid artists to move west, form art “colonies,” and promote the idyllic and picturesque Southwest to encourage white Americans to settle the region.¹⁵ The colonial underpinnings of the Western art movement thus defined how the indigenous people of this region would be represented, as painters indulged in what Renato Rosaldo describes as “imperialist nostalgia.”¹⁶ Rosaldo elicits “imperialist nostalgia” as a lamentation by the colonizer that the colonized is disappearing. According to Rosaldo, the colonizer demonstrates this faux regret as part of the process of domination and is exemplified in the Southwest art movement that established white American culture in New Mexico while rendering indigenous people in a romantic and idyllic past. Acosta, on the other hand, painted the border into this visual narrative from the perspective of a Chicano depicting his own people in a contemporary and multi-

¹³ Ricardo Sanchez, “‘Pinto Poet’ Bids Adieu to a Magical Sojourner,” *El Paso Herald Post*, October 31, 1989.

¹⁴ “Acosta: A Man and His Art.”

¹⁵ Keith Bryant, “The Atchison Topeka and the Santa Fe Railway and the Development of the Taos and Santa Fe Art Colonies,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (Oct. 1978): 438.

¹⁶ Renato Rosaldo, “Imperialist Nostalgia,” in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 68-70.

dimensional and realistic way. He intervened upon an artistic discourse that depicted Mexicans and Native Americans through stilted, two-dimensional stereotypes meant to romanticize a disappearing frontier and thus justify white American conquest.¹⁷ Acosta's career serves as an example of the manifold ways in which Chicano/as resisted white supremacy in the twentieth-century and worked to be represented in American culture.

Acosta experienced multiple marginalities as a queer person of color. Anti-gay hostility was an ever-present reality for someone like Acosta as the grizzly end to his life attests. For Acosta, a closeted life meant safety from violence and alienation. His art provided him the means to express his sexuality without fully disclosing publicly anything that could put him in harm's way. The large body of Acosta's paintings informs an understanding of the coded ways in which Acosta communicated his identity. By reading his paintings for these queer codes, this study of his life interprets the idiom that he developed through his art. Despite that living in a brutally homophobic world confined his experience as a gay Chicano, he manifested agency to resist being silenced. His art allowed him to craft a subtle language through which he could speak honestly about who he was. Living in a world in which being gay might be considered punishable by death, his art provided him some means to share his experience in a hostile and oppressive society.

The brutal end to Acosta's life shocked and deeply traumatized his community. The murder and its ensuing discourse stand as a testament to the violently hetero-normative context inhabited by Acosta. Najera Flores used the "homosexual panic

¹⁷ John Ott, "Reform in Redface: The Taos Society of Artists Plays Indian," *American Art* vol. 23 no. 2 (Summer 2009): 101.

defense,” elicited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, as his motive for murdering the artist.¹⁸ By vilifying Acosta’s alleged gay advance, Najera Flores sought to victimize and thus exculpate himself from killing Acosta.¹⁹ He also cast Acosta’s sexuality into the public discourse calling on the artist’s community to respond through their affirmation or denial that he may have been gay. A homophobic reaction emerged from the people of El Paso who then rushed to assert that Najera Flores’s claims were completely false.²⁰ It is implicit, then, that Acosta’s community feared that admitting he may have been gay meant accepting Najera Flores’s justification for killing him in the most violent way imaginable. Acosta’s relevant life and prolific career were thus brought to an untimely end through the homophobic violence that sought to silence him throughout his entire life.

This biography of Acosta therefore moves away from the typical chronological and hagiographical approach of such studies and instead inquires into his life thematically and conceptually. Rather than recall the minutiae of Acosta’s daily life or trace the major events that he underwent in a linear fashion, this study provides a critical look at his lived experience through his key contributions to borderlands, Chicano/a, and queer art in the twentieth-century. It examines the material conditions that shaped his experience and the development of his career. This biographical investigation of Acosta’s life also highlights how the El Paso community responded to him as an artist and asks in what ways he

¹⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 19.

¹⁹ Leticia Zamarripa, “Juarez Man Admits Killing Acosta: Suspect Accuses Artist of Sexual Assault, El Paso Herald Post, October 30, 1989.

²⁰ Leticia Zamarripa, “500 Bid Acosta a Bittersweet Farewell,” *El Paso Herald Post*, October 31, 1989.

shaped the culture of his border city. It links his life with the larger forces that were at work in fomenting the Chicano/a movement and transforming American art.

As a locally famous artist, Acosta had several biographers, people who recorded and sought to celebrate his life and career; however, as yet no book length study of his life exists. Articles about him in art magazines and online historical websites address the importance of Acosta's art and his creative influence on border culture. Acosta was considered important to the art of the Southwest and he appears in books cataloguing him as part of this canon. An El Paso Museum of art exhibit guide provides the most comprehensive biographic look at Acosta's life. The body of literature recalling Acosta's life is therefore scant and this study fills a gap in the historiography on Chicano/a biography in particular. Consequently, I approach Acosta's life through his work and situate him within a history of the borderlands, linking his life to a broader Chicano/a narrative and recovering his significance to the cultural life of his hometown.

The first attempt at a biographical sketch on Acosta can be found in *Harmsen's Western Americana: A Collection of One Hundred Western Paintings with Biographical Profiles of the Artists*. It was compiled and published in 1971. This volume, compiled and annotated by wealthy art collector, Dorothy Harmsen, included Acosta's *Wounded Bullfighter* accompanied by a short description of the artist's life and career. Although not concerned with his personal life per se, she concentrates on his art. However one can glean some important information from this entry. For example, she credits Acosta's teacher and employer, Peter Hurd (who is also featured in *Western Americana*), with having convinced him that "as a Mexican American he has a wealth of material to portray

about his people on the Rio Grande.”²¹ She goes on to discuss Acosta’s time in the Air Force during World War II and then his artistic training at UTEP, the University of California, and the Chouinard Art Institute. Harmsen’s piece affirms Acosta’s importance to late twentieth-century Western Art. While she evokes an imperialist nostalgia about a disappearing Western frontier and immortalizes the artists who managed to capture its essence,²² and deploys a patronizing tone that celebrates Acosta’s “ colorful Latin subjects . . . mariachi bands, weathered old Mexican women making paper flowers, the romantic bullfighter, and street urchins catching pennies thrown to them from the International Bridge,”²³ Harmsen’s sketch stands as a testament to Acosta’s unique voice in American art. It evidences the recognition that his career received while he was still living and offers a preliminary biographical examination of his life.

Another attempt at providing Acosta’s biography is journalist, Kendall Curlee’s piece in the Handbook of Texas published in 1996. This sketch draws mainly from Acosta’s oral history conducted by John McNeely for UTEP’s Institute of Oral History as well as periodicals and authors’ eulogies. Curlee emphasizes his public life, highlighting the career and artistic achievements that earned him regional and national acclaim.²⁴ Unlike Gerstheimer’s sketch, Curlee’s article refers briefly to Acosta’s untimely death; however, it only mentions it—almost in passing—providing the name of Acosta’s killer and the fact that he was a Mexican national. However, Curlee omits the pertinent details

²¹ Dorothy Harmsen, *Harmsen’s Western Americana: A Collection of One Hundred Western Paintings with Biographical Profiles of the Artists* (Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1971), 8.

²² *Ibid.*, 3-5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁴ Kendall Curlee, "ACOSTA, MANUEL GREGORIO," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fac04>), accessed June 05, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

surrounding how or why Acosta was killed. Curlee also discusses Acosta's importance as a Mexican-American painter, linking his accomplishments with his ties to the Chicano movement.²⁵ Thus, this attempt at rendering Acosta's life is short and ultimately relegates his sexuality to the closet. While it initiates a useful discussion on his relevance as a Chicano artist, my study of Acosta looks at the heretofore unexamined aspects of his identity by reading them through his life and death.

An entry for Acosta also appears in the *Dictionary of Texas Artists, 1800-1945*, compiled in 1999 by the art historians Paula and Michael Grauer. While the brief entry includes only a few significant facts on his life and career, it speaks to his relevance to American art in the twentieth century, situating him within a broader canon of Texas painters and sculptors. In addition to the basic information on his life, such as when and where he was born and died, it highlights where he studied and which teachers served as the most profound influences on his career as well as the major museums that currently house his paintings.²⁶ Peter Hurd and Urbici Soler are referred to as his primary artistic mentors, positioning him within a specific artistic legacy of Southwestern art.²⁷ Despite the inclusion of these details, the *Dictionary* provides but a few superficial facts on Acosta. Yet it places him within the art history literature and calls for a more in depth and extensive biography that might investigate his role in Chicano art and El Paso history.

As the above examples make clear, attempts at writing Acosta's biography have been brief and have not captured his multifaceted life. Literature concentrating on El

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Paula L. and Michael R. Grauer, *Dictionary of Texas Artists, 1800-1945* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1999), 3.

²⁷ Ibid.

Paso's art history briefly mentioned Acosta, such as the *American Art Review's* December, 2001 article on the founding of the El Paso Museum of Art (EPMA). The entire issue focused on Texas art museums, tracing their origins and their contributions to the cities that they call home. Art historian, William Thompson, discussed the EPMA's development from the early twentieth-century to the current era, outlining how major changes in its collections have reflected El Paso's cultural concerns. As he states, in 1991 the Museum initiated an effort to display art that would "increase the cultural diversity of the Museum's audiences and programs," and hence exhibited *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* that drew a record-breaking 35,000 visitors.²⁸ According to Thompson, this historic moment opened up EPMA to more inclusively represent its surrounding demographic, building collections of El Paso artists including the Tom Lea gallery, which was inaugurated in 1998 and currently houses Acosta's paintings.²⁹ More importantly, Thompson places Acosta in this history and demonstrates the need for further examination of his centrality to the culture of the U.S.-Mexico border. He describes Acosta's artistic renown as stemming from his "sensitive portraits of people from the border."³⁰

The most comprehensive collection of biographical information on Acosta is the museum guide accompanying his retrospective exhibit at the El Paso Museum of Art in 2009. Then museum director, Christian Gerstheimer and notable Chicano El Paso poet, Benjamin Saenz eulogized Acosta and recounted the significance of his artistic career. Gerstheimer stresses Acosta's independence as an artist and the commitment to his

²⁸ William Thompson, "El Paso Museum of Art," *American Art Review* 13, no. 6 (December 2001): 146.

²⁹ Ibid, 149

³⁰ Ibid.

community that superseded any desire he might have had for acclaim or material wealth.³¹ This short piece recalls his immediate family history, a short overview of his childhood and his time in the military as a young man, and covers the highlights of his artistic career that spanned nearly four decades—including his entrance into the art world, namely through his mentorship under Urbici Soler and Peter Hurd. Gerstheimer touches on the social and political importance of Acosta’s art remarking that while he “was not active in the Chicano movement . . . his work did contribute to the authoring of the place of the Mexican-American.”³² He goes on to assert his centrality to this historical context stating that Acosta’s art “serves to deconstruct mid-century stereotypes about Mexican-Americans by presenting them as straightforward, honest, hard-working individuals.”³³ While Gerstheimer mentions that Acosta never married or had children, he does so in the context of Acosta’s hosting of *Posadas* and his donations to the local orphanage, speculating that perhaps providing this paternal generosity to the city’s parent-less children filled a void left by his refusal to participate in hetero-normative family life. Despite any mention of the discourse that surrounded Acosta’s death, Gerstheimer hints at the artist’s queer lifestyle without discussing it directly.³⁴ My study of Acosta will move the discussion of his sexuality beyond the silence epitomized in Gerstheimer’s rendering of his life and those of Acosta’s other biographies. While Gerstheimer scratches the surface regarding Acosta’s importance as a Mexican-American

³¹ Christian J. Gerstheimer, *Manuel Gregorio Acosta: A Retrospective/Una Retrospectiva* (El Paso: El Paso Museum of Art, 2009), .

³² *Ibid*, 16.

³³ *Ibid*, 9.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 17.

artist, my study will deepen an understanding of his centrality to Chicano/a art in the twentieth century.

Fundamentally, this biography grapples with several questions regarding Acosta's story. It asks how the context of the twentieth-century borderlands influenced his vision of the world and his role as the city's beloved artist. How did the racialized socio-economic hierarchy that stood as the foundation of El Paso's commercial success inform Acosta's experience and thus shape his goals as a painter of the U.S.-Mexico border? In what ways did Acosta intervene on the Western art movement and expand its representation of the American West? How did his inclusion of Chicano/as in a vision of the U.S. impact Chicano/a art and culture? In what ways did he influence the political changes that lead to the Chicano/a movement in El Paso? How did he use art as a vehicle to deliver politicized messages about Chicano/a identity? In what ways did his expression of gay identity stand out as a part of his work? What can be gleaned through his representation of sexuality? How did the homophobic violence that Acosta faced in his life shape his coded expression of homosexuality in his art? In what ways did his art provide him with the agency to navigate a racist, antigay world? And finally, what do the circumstances surrounding his death tell us about homophobic violence in the twentieth-century borderlands? What discourse emerged as a response to his killer's "homosexual panic defense"?

To answer these questions, this study deploys a series of methodological approaches. It considers the borderlands as a colonized space and explores how colonial white supremacy conspired with capitalist forces to shape the conditions out of which Acosta's art emerged. Mario García's analysis of Mexican American history provides a

contextual foundation of my study. His “generational approach”³⁵ to Chicano/a history and his focus on the racializing and economic forces that shaped life for twentieth-century Chicano/as in El Paso are central to my look at Acosta’s life and work.³⁶ Drawing on Tomás Ybarra-Frausto’s discussion of *rasquachismo*, this biography underscores how Acosta’s art was part of this broader Chicano/a trope.³⁷ By celebrating the vernacular and self-made, Acosta and other Chicano/a artists used art to assert cultural autonomy and resist the white supremacist marginalization of Mexicans in the U.S. This study views Acosta’s art as part of an “alternative imagery schema” that countered hetero-patriarchal and white supremacist narratives in American art.³⁸ It uses the framework elicited by Jonathan D. Katz in reading twentieth-century American art for queer codes.³⁹ Reading the role of the closet in Acosta’s life and death, this dissertation views his story through the theoretical lens developed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.⁴⁰ And finally, Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* informs my inquiry into the role of discourse in Acosta’s death and how sexual violence and discursive mores are imbricated.⁴¹ Deriving from a variety of methodologies, I engage the larger forces that can be understood through Acosta’s life and death.

³⁵ García, *Mexican Americans*, 13-17.

³⁶ García, *Desert Immigrants*, 10-11.

³⁷ Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility,” *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo* (Phoenix: Movimiento Artístico del Río Salado, 1989), 5-8.

³⁸ Max Benavidez, *Gronk* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2007), 7.

³⁹ Jonathan Katz and David Ward, *Hide and Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 15-17.

⁴⁰ Sedgwick, *Closet*, 81.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1* (New York, Vintage Books, 1978), 69.

This study utilizes a broad range of primary sources to establish a complex and honest portrait of Manuel Acosta. Oral histories conducted with Acosta's family and close friends as well as fellow Chicano/a activists who were the subjects of his paintings provided the backbone of this study. Acosta's nephews and nieces, as well as several friends and protégés were extremely generous in sharing beloved memories along with papers and photographs of their dear friend. Through conversations with those who knew Acosta, I was able to glean a clear picture of who he was and what he did for his community. The oral history conducted with Acosta by John McNeely in 1973 and housed at UTEP's Institute of Oral History also leant a great deal of insight into Acosta's life. El Paso periodicals contributed a wealth of data examined in this dissertation. Document sources also inform this study, such as letters between Acosta and his teacher and employer, Peter Hurd, census records, El Paso city directories, USCIS documents, appraisal papers, and exhibit documents such as flyers and brochures. These papers were gathered from UTEP Special Collections and private papers such as those owned and generously shared by Hal Marcus. National collections also contributed to this study such as the American Art Archives in Washington D.C. as well as state collections such as the New Mexico Art Archives in Santa Fe. Most significantly, Acosta's art serves as a fundamental source in this biographical look at his life. By investigating his work for the ways in which he expressed his vision of himself and the broader world of which he was a part, this dissertation reads his paintings as autobiographical texts left behind by Acosta.

From this diversity of sources, an image of Acosta emerged as someone who was remarkable yet representative, influential yet humble, exemplary yet fledgling all at once.

This biography coheres a vision of Acosta as a central artistic figure in twentieth-century America. It seeks to show how he manifested agency through his art despite the variety of powerful forces that degraded and marginalized him as a gay Chicano *fronterizo*. This dissertation thus interprets Acosta's life as tied to broader hegemonic processes while simultaneously showing how Chicano/as shaped their communities in the twentieth-century. It situates Acosta within a larger movement that saw Chicano/as developing cultural resources and working to counter their oppression.

Acosta's biography is as much a story about the borderlands, the many fronts on which the Chicano/a movement was waged, and queer representation in American art as it is about him specifically. It illustrates these themes through the narrative of his life. In many ways, Acosta exemplified his generation, the Mexican American Generation, his parents having come to the U.S. fleeing the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution, and then going on to earn his American citizenship through his service in WWII. However, Acosta would go on to live an extraordinary life as El Paso's foremost Chicano painter, choosing always to remain in the border city and represent his own people. He played an active role in the cultural life of El Paso and used his creative abilities to enrich his community.

By drawing out this larger narrative, this biography strives to know Acosta through his relationship to his community as well as the influential force of his art. It frames the thematic exploration of his art with two chapters that deal with Acosta and El Paso. Chapter one examines the border city in the twentieth-century and how it shaped Acosta's identity and career while the final chapter deals with the discourse that emerged in the wake of his murder. In each of the three inner chapters, specific themes from Acosta's paintings are discussed, with the first being the border. His statements on both

Chicano/a and queer identity are the subjects of the following two chapters. This biography thus presents Acosta's life in layers, centered on what he communicated in his art and unfolding outward into the borderlands context that shaped his life. The chapters therefore are presented thematically with Acosta's expressions of his innermost experience positioned at the heart of this narrative and analyses of his relationship with his community situated at the beginning and end.

This study opens with a look at the importance of El Paso in shaping Acosta's life and career. In chapter one, the borderlands set the stage for how Acosta's story unfolds. The child of immigrants who fled Mexico during the Revolution of the twentieth-century, Acosta was a member of the Mexican American Generation who came of age in El Paso on the cusp of the Great Depression and WWII. This chapter describes El Paso as Mexican American city, one in which Mexican origin people served as an economic underclass that amassed wealth for the U.S. because of its centrality to the trade and labor networks of the American West. It draws upon Mario Garcia's *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso: 1880-1920* which provides the historical background leading up to his parent's migration to El Paso. His parents were part of the generation discussed in *Desert Immigrants* and exemplify those who fled political unrest in Northern Mexico to encounter racism and economic exploitation in the U.S. This chapter addresses how Acosta's parent's represented the city's Mexican underclass, yet managed to carve out a rich life for themselves nonetheless. Manuel's father, Ramon Acosta, was a laborer, first at the ASARCO smelter and then at Phelps Dodge refinery. Although earning a meager salary as a laborer he was able to support a family of five children and purchased a home for them on Hammett and Findley Streets in South Central El Paso, less than five hundred

feet from the border. Both his family's socio-economic status and proximity to Mexico defined Manuel's experience as Chicano in twentieth-century El Paso. His goal was to render the dignity and power as well as the humility and struggle of Chicano/as all at once. Acosta drew his inspiration from the Mexican origin people of El Paso and he sought to reveal the unique beauty of his community and landscape.

The second chapter of this dissertation examines Acosta's significance as a borderlands painter. It asks in what ways he intervened on the Southwest art movement as a Chicano artist who included the borderlands in this broader American canon. Acosta was considered part of the lineage of Western painters by virtue of his tutelage under Peter Hurd, the cowboy painter of New Mexico. Along with Hurd, Acosta was a part of the "San Patricio Five," a group of painters who spent time at Hurd's ranch near Roswell, and comprised an artist colony. This chapter reflects upon the ways in which Acosta wove *Chicanismo* into this community and broke with the colonial lineage of the Southwest art tradition. It goes on to look at his experience as a colonized subject of the borderlands through the loss of his home on Hammett and Findley to the militarization and development of the border. The U.S.-Mexico meeting point is thus seen as both the nexus of Acosta's life and the guiding force in his art as he crafted his own role for himself as a Chicano painter. His art sought to represent the borderlands as a unified place, filled with diverse, beautiful, humble people who had made their home in the colonized space on the edge of two nations, despite their marginalization.

In this study's third chapter, the relevance of Acosta to the Chicano/a art movement is discussed. As a member of the preceding generation to the Chicano/a generation who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, Acosta's art was the first of its kind.

He was one of the initial Chicano painters to portray life for Mexican origin people in the U.S. His art sought to capture the complexity, heterogeneity, resilience, and cultural autonomy of Chicano/as. He disrupted a vision of American society that either ignored Mexicans completely or rendered them in contrived, flat, and dehumanizing stereotypes. Acosta painted leaders of the Chicano/a movement to support their causes and bring attention to the struggle that Mexican origin people faced as an economic and racial underclass in U.S. society in the twentieth-century. This chapter thus seeks to reveal how artists contributed to the Chicano/a movement, extending an analysis beyond the art activism that is most typically covered in the Chicano/a art historiography. It highlights the role of culture making in the *movimiento* and contributes to the emerging body of literature on the multifarious aspects of the Chicano/a movement. Acosta's life serves as a salient example in which Chicano/as contributed to the uplift of their people in whatever ways they could.

Chapter four situates Acosta's work within the queer art world that came to define twentieth-century American art. Drawing upon the framework elicited by Jonathan Katz in reading queer codes in art, this chapter examines Acosta's work for autobiographical renditions of sexuality. Acosta created an alternative visual schema of gender and sexuality via the male gaze in his art. This chapter compares his portraits of men and women to show how Acosta inverted the hetero-patriarchal foundations of classical Western art. It demonstrates a clear trend in his paintings in which men are the focus of a kind of sexual objectification while women are portrayed always clothed, sometimes even shrouded, and convey a sense of independence and autonomy that seldom finds them the sexualized object of the male gaze. Acosta's paintings of bullfighters are also

dense with queer codes and are read for the ways in which they celebrate a masculinized Mexican sexuality. He also developed a surreal style later in life that richly conveyed a morose and tortured experience linked to his conflicted sentiments regarding his identity as a closeted gay man. Acosta's prolific body of work communicated his complex inner life and allowed him the means to express all of those aspects of himself that were unsafe to reveal to the world at large. This chapter reads the relevant text of his paintings to gain an understanding of how it must have felt to live in a world where homophobic violence could always be lingering around the corner, the prospect of its most deadly possibilities ever present in a gay person's mind in the twentieth-century.

The final chapter covers the brutal crime that brought Acosta's life to an untimely end. On October 27th, 1989, Cesar Najera Flores murdered Acosta in the most unimaginably cruel of ways. Forty years Acosta's junior, Najera Flores alleged that Acosta had sexually assaulted him. He conflated a consensual relationship which had existed between them over the four years in which they had known one another with an allegedly coerced sex act that initiated their affair. Najera Flores had done odd jobs for Acosta and modeled for his paintings, which according to the killer served as the space for their sexual encounters. This chapter thus examines Najera Flores's use of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the "homosexual panic defense." Sedgwick illustrates how such a defense normalizes antigay violence and creates a hostile world, the same one inhabited by Acosta until the end of his life.⁴² The looming threat of homophobic violence was a reality known to Acosta as Najera Flores's defense attests. Also discussed in this chapter is how Najera Flores's "homosexual panic defense" spawned a community wide

⁴² Sedgwick, *Closet*, 19.

discourse on Acosta's sexuality in response to the murder. Under this schema, admitting that Acosta may have been gay became equivalent to assuring that his death was somehow more justified. Chapter five therefore engages the relationship between homophobic violence and discourse in conspiring to enforce hetero-normativity.

I seek to understand the major historical and cultural forces that shaped Acosta's life and led to his career as well as the important events influencing his experience. As the borderlands' premier Chicano painter, Acosta profoundly influenced the life of the border city in which his story is set. He built a diverse social world and used parties as sites of the celebration of Mexican culture. It was always his goal to bring different people together, inviting guests from all socio-economic and racial backgrounds. He used pranks to perform the leveling of status by making his more privileged guests the butt of his jokes. Acosta was masterful at always conducting himself with such good humor and deep kindness that, of course, no one could ever stay mad at him. His parties were his jubilant means to collect resources for local charities and political causes that he supported. He used his art to defend the community in which he was raised by representing it in its humanized beauty. Acosta's life provides us with an example of an exceptional Chicano, yet one whose experience reflects that of his generation more generally as well. In addition, Acosta's life story augments the Chicano/a historiography. The social milieu that he was part of in twentieth-century El Paso allows us to see an artistic movement that has yet to be thoroughly studied.

This project was first envisioned as a comprehensive and detailed recollection of Acosta's life, yet I soon discovered insight into his deep and innermost world remained elusive. It seemed as though Acosta had intended to remain shrouded—perhaps because

he was in the closet even decades beyond his passing. What lingered on in those who remembered him was the happy and comedic host and artist. He provided his city a venue for community building and creative expression. As I sought to track him down through those who knew him—nephews and nieces, good friends, students, and Acosta’s art’s subjects—I encountered a rich world, one that reflected El Paso’s abundant cultural and social milieu that became clear through the lens of Acosta’s life. Almost every tale told about Acosta recounted either a funny joke or a clever use of props and art. The memories of Acosta by those who knew him conveyed a colorful world in which Chicano/a culture was flourishing in the 1960s and 1970s borderlands. Consequently Acosta’s life offers a window into that world.

My study thus became a story about El Paso in the twentieth-century, one that is framed around a critical look at Acosta’s life. It examines his singular artistic perspective and the many complex themes that he portrayed in his art. He painted the borderlands into an image of the U.S., represented Chicano/as as varied and dignified people, and expressed coded messages about sexuality. This biography is used to draw forth a more general story about Chicano/a culture making and art on the border. Nuancing the historiography of Chicano/a art, Acosta’s narrative also informs a richer and more complex understanding of the Chicano/a movement. Acosta’s life story reveals his importance to his community and the central role that he played there as its initial Chicano/a painter. It is rendered here primarily through the memories of his loved ones and his art.

Chapter One

El Paso and Manuel Acosta: The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands as Chicano/a Cultural Hearth

In the 1980s, the last decade of his life, Acosta completed an oil painting of an *acequia*, an irrigation canal, titled *Water Gate/la compuerta*. Not necessarily representative of his prolific and renowned body of work that consisted mostly of portraits, the demure landscape piece, demonstrates an essential element of his paintings that capture both the melancholic isolation and the warm familiarity that characterize the US-Mexico borderlands all at once. Cutting through the desolate, yet slightly verdant desert, the silver-blue water pierces a stark but grassy terrain before approaching a concrete and steel gate, the focal point of the painting's foreground.⁴³ The water gate is designed to hold back and release the water that surrounds it, regulating the flow of the canal's contents, just like the international crossing point in the border city that Acosta would call home after being born in an *acequia*, himself, in Villa Aldama, a small, rural *pueblo*, during the denouement of the Mexican Revolution in 1921 Chihuahua.⁴⁴

Acosta recalled having been born in a ditch with immense pride, a story that epitomized the humble beginnings that laid the foundation for his artistic aims and the role that he forged for himself as a borderlands painter. Rather than emphasize his family's economic plight or the political uncertainty that characterized Mexico during this era, in recounting his birth he affirmed his mother's joy and that it was a "very, very good day" as she had told him that "she was skipping and hopping across the . . . *acequia*

⁴³ Manuel Acosta, *Water Gate/la compuerta*, ca. 1980s, Ysella Fulton O'Malley Collection.

⁴⁴ Manuel Acosta, interview by John McNeeley, February 1, 1973, interview 63, transcript, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso, 2.

. . . playing around there,” when she went into labor and birthed Manuel “right there in the ditch.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the instability that characterized revolutionary Mexico was a major factor in pushing Acosta’s parents to the United States with their firstborn infant son in tow in 1922. He would become El Paso’s foremost Chicano painter who captured the essence of life for Mexican origin people in the region and painted them into its historical vision.

Acosta’s art expressed his love for the US-Mexico borderlands, admiration of its people, and representation of their culture. His portraits of El Paso’s diverse constituents were his main medium for conveying and celebrating Mexican identity in American society; however, the occasional still life or landscape, like *Water Gate/la compuerta* came out of Acosta’s work, pieces laden with symbolic meaning revealing his worldview and his portrayal of the unique beauty of the borderlands. The painting alludes to his modest genesis, his roots in rural Mexico and it also links them with the borderlands that he would call home for the rest of his life. The viewer cannot tell exactly where the *acequia* is located—it could just as easily be irrigating the fields of Southeast, rural El Paso where Acosta spent his childhood as it could those of Chihuahua. Its waters run like a thread of ancestral belonging through the bordered terrain and embody the region’s many contrasts—life thriving in the barren desert, the confluence of nature with human ingenuity, and the simultaneous separation and connection of two nations that define the US-Mexico borderlands.⁴⁶

Acosta’s life story is one of El Paso in the twentieth century. The border culture that emerged in the city did so during the years in which he lived and provided the

⁴⁵ Ibid, 1-2.

⁴⁶ Acosta, *Watergate/la compuerta*, ca. 1980s.

context for his artistic sensibilities. It is no wonder that his particular creative mission was so tied to the specificities of El Paso's cultural milieu. He was brought to the city by his Mexican immigrant parents in 1922—the onset of an era characterized by the immense influx of Mexicans into the United States, and he grew up in a time and place that epitomized the Chicano experience in the borderlands. By the time he came of age at mid-century, a Chicano consciousness was beginning to take root that would require an aesthetic depiction of Mexican identity in the U.S. Acosta took up the task of elucidating *Chicanismo* in the US-Mexico borderlands through his artwork.

The unique mark that Acosta made on the art world was tied to a broader Chicano Renaissance, the cultural counterpart to the political movement, and El Paso's role as an important locale in the manifestation of both in the twentieth-century. *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends*, edited by David Maciel, Isidro Ortiz, and Maria Herrera Sobek, charts the artistic contributions to the Chicano movement; however, the earliest period covered in the book is the 1960s.⁴⁷ This preliminary anthology points to a broad field of unexplored scholarship on the cultural aspects of the Chicano/a movement. Acosta's career demonstrates how Mexican Americans developed the cultural changes central to the Chicano/a Renaissance in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. His art was part of this broader movement and exemplifies how El Paso was relevant to these more general shifts.

To understand the relevance of Acosta's life to El Paso, it is necessary to present a comprehensive contextual background that elicits the cultural, political, economic, and social conditions out of which he arose. His representation of the borderlands city

⁴⁷ David R. Maciel, Isidro D. Ortiz, and Maria Herrera-Sobek, eds. *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), xiii-xiv.

reflected his humanizing vision of its people, one informed by his growing up, living, and working there. The expansion of El Paso's Mexican population throughout the twentieth century set in place the demographic shifts that would be fundamental to defining it as a Mexican American city. In many ways, Acosta's major life milestones mirror the formative events that shaped life for Chicanos throughout this era—the massive immigration of the 1920s, extreme poverty and transience of Mexicans during the Depression, recruitment of Mexican Americans to serve in World War II, the border culture that grew out of the post-war era, and the Chicano movement. This chapter thus situates Acosta within what we might think of as the Chicano century, the era in which Mexicans in America became a coherent population and built a formidable political consciousness, at a locale that underwent one of the most significant population upsurges of Mexicans, causing it to eventually serve as an important site of the Chicano movement's cultural developments. It does so by tracing these transformations and weaving Acosta's narrative among them.

Drawing on Mario García's "generational approach"⁴⁸ to periodize the social and political transformations that occurred for Chicano/as during the mid-twentieth century, this chapter looks at the significance of Acosta's life in relation to the concerns of the "Mexican American Generation." García composed an anthology to discuss the decades of the 1930, 1940s, and 1950s that are less covered than the preceding era of immigration or the subsequent period of Chicano/a activism. In doing so, he argues that this was a unique and relevant era in the Mexican American struggle for civil rights despite that it is often treated as a liminal time between the immigration of Mexicans to the U.S. and the

⁴⁸ Mario García *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 13-15.

period characterized by Chicano/as' most ardent and recognized fight against the nation's white supremacy. He counters previous studies that characterize this period as accommodationist and ultimately unsuccessful in achieving substantial change for Mexicans in the U.S.⁴⁹ García demonstrated that the leadership developed by organizations and unions in these years was foundational to the Chicano movement and argued that this era bridged the concerns of the immigrant generation of the early 1900s with those of Chicano/as in the second half of the twentieth-century.

The “generational approach” suits a recollection of Acosta's life because he began painting Mexicans into the canvas of American society during the period that García emphasizes. Given that Acosta's art was combatting the dominant discourse of the time in which he lived, his story offers key insights into the experience of Chicanos in the borderlands who were the children of the immigrant generation and crafted their own social, political, and cultural movement after being shaped by a common set of generational experiences from a particular ethnic perspective.⁵⁰ Acosta also serves as a link between those Chicanos who were old enough to have experienced the Depression and the Second World War and those whose radicalism manifested the most effective movement to end inequality in the 1960s and 1970s. Having been born in the later part of the immigrant generation era, he came of age during the Great Depression and Second World War and began his career and his contributions to the Chicano movement during what García calls the “Mexican America Era.”⁵¹ This chapter therefore argues that by affirming the presence of Mexicans in U.S. society through his artwork at a time that

⁴⁹ Ibid, 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 17-18.

⁵¹ Ibid.

preceded the Chicano movement, Acosta was one of the initial culture-makers of the Renaissance in the borderlands. He provides an example of the as yet uncovered artistic leadership of the Mexican American Generation in El Paso and the impact that it had on the larger Chicano movement. As an immigrant himself and a *fronterizo*, Acosta imbued this new cultural revolution with a deep identification with Mexico that reflected his roots there and his proximity to it throughout his life.

Ramón and Concepción Acosta, Manuel's parents, were part of a wave of immigration to El Paso that caused the city's Mexican population to swell during the 1920s as many forces conspired to attract people to the U.S. from their homeland.⁵² The most significant cause of migration was economic, conditions in both countries pushing migrants from one while attracting them to the other. Mexico had experienced a population explosion from 1875 until 1910, which combined with Porfirio Díaz's policies to create unstable conditions for Mexico's poorest rural class. The Díaz regime wrested communally held lands from peasant farmers and placed them in the hands of wealthy *hacendados*. *Campesinos* from the northern hinterlands were thus compelled to seek a living first in the urban center of Juárez, where they could earn four times what they had been able to in the countryside.⁵³ They would then cross the border and those who found work stayed in El Paso while others utilized the railroad and labor network located there to move on to other places throughout the U.S., usually for unskilled, low paying jobs

⁵² Historians of Mexican migration to El Paso—Mario García, Oscar Martínez, and Manuel Ramirez—agree that labor was the most important draw for the *campesinos* of Northern Mexico to the borderlands region during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

⁵³ Mario Garcia, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 34-35.

such as those in mining, agriculture, and smelting.⁵⁴ Ramón and Concepción Acosta were representative of this trend, coming to El Paso from their rural home in Villa Aldama in 1922 when Manuel was an infant.

Acosta's parents' motivations for leaving rural Mexico were likely partially economic but were mainly driven by the political turmoil affecting the region because of the Mexican Revolution. After having been recruited by the *Villistas*, Ramón became anxious when *Federales* raided their village. He sent Concepción ahead to El Paso with their first child, who had been born in May of that year. She stayed with relatives as they awaited Ramón's arrival.⁵⁵ El Paso was a refuge for Mexicans on both sides of Mexico's Revolution as people fleeing violence in Northern Mexico were able to escape while remaining a safe distance away. Periodicals of this era indicate that the people of El Paso demonstrated great concern over the struggles and outcome of the Mexican Revolution, usually marked by elite fears reflected in the city's journalism that the radical presence of revolutionaries would infect the city and jeopardize the emerging class hierarchy.⁵⁶

Later in his life Acosta would emphasize the Mexican Revolution as a major focus of his artwork. In *Canciones de la Revolución* a young man wearing a bandolier and a wide brim hat holds a bugle and stands beneath a florid trellis upheld by Corinthian columns while a guitar rests on the ground behind his feet, its neck propped against a bush growing at the base of one of the columns. Acosta's lyrical inscription of the painting draws on the memory of the war:

On quiet tender nights in the barrios of South El Paso, one can still listen to sentimental songs and poetry, reliving the clap and thunder of the Mexican

⁵⁴ Ibid, 16-19.

⁵⁵ Acosta, interview by McNeeley, 1973, 1-3.

⁵⁶ "Bolshevism is Mexico's Worst Enemy," *El Paso Herald Post*, December 2, 1920, 3.

Revolution. Grandfathers and fathers still complain in harmony that “with music, the moon stays out all night and the sun is late in rising.”⁵⁷

He expressed the inspiration that culture provided to the revolutionary struggle, of which his father was a *Villista*,⁵⁸ linking his own artistic purpose with his generation’s movement for social change. By drawing on the fight against the *Porfiriato* of his father’s generation in his portrait of a young revolutionary, he articulated the Chicano experience of the his generation that was informed by the resistance of their parents. He also situated these “songs and poetry” of the Revolution in the “barrios of South El Paso,” defining the border city as being rooted in Mexico’s history. The cross-generational thread that he wove between the Mexican Revolution and the Chicano movement manifested in this piece and expressed the importance of culture to the political transformations of both. Having been raised as a product of the Revolution influenced a fundamental aspect of Acosta’s identity and his aims as an artist.

Acosta’s upbringing as a member of an economic underclass in the U.S. also informed his artwork. The large influx of Mexicans spurred by the Revolution provided the base of a developing caste system that relegated Mexican origin people to El Paso’s lowest paying jobs. The city’s centrality as a railroad hub amidst a vast web of mining towns in the U.S. Southwest and Northern Mexico allowed for the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO) to make lead and copper smelting foundational to the city’s industrial infrastructure by the turn of the twentieth century.⁵⁹ ASARCO employed a great deal of those Mexican immigrants fleeing the growing instability in Mexico, one

⁵⁷ Manuel Acosta, *Canciones De La Revolución*, text label, date unknown, Hal Marcus Personal Papers, El Paso, TX.

⁵⁸ a follower of Pancho Villa.

⁵⁹ Monica Perales, *Smelertown: Making and Remembering a Southwest Border Community* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2010), 39-45.

of whom was Ramon Acosta, quickly hired upon his arrival to the U.S. in 1922.⁶⁰

Throughout his life, he would remain a laborer working for the El Paso Electric Company after his time at the smelter and then Phelps Dodge Refinery where he remained until his retirement.⁶¹ His experience is illustrative of the broader trend that saw the great majority of Mexicans in El Paso used for cheap labor by the city's business leaders who were poised at the helm of a booming metropolitan economy. Ramón Acosta was a member of what Mario García refers to as the "Mexican proletariat" of El Paso, a class fundamental to the city's growing financial success.⁶²

El Paso's elite thrived off of a dichotomized workforce that depended on the racialization of Mexicans in order to maintain their position at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.⁶³ The stratified labor system that created the city's economy was enforced along racial lines as whites used their assumed inferiority of Mexicans as justification for the lower wages paid and the lack of opportunities open to them. Manuel Acosta came of age in a city during a decade in which Mexicans were the demographic majority in El Paso, despite their continued denial of access to the privileges enjoyed by the city's white minority. This was the formative aspect of his identity as both a *fronterizo* and a Chicano, inspiring his artistic mission to humanize his people and celebrate his culture. The circumstances shaping life for Mexicans in El Paso at the beginning of the twentieth-century came from the class exploitation they faced combined

⁶⁰ *El Paso City Directory*, John F. Worley and Co., 1922, 286.

⁶¹ U.S. Department of Justice Immigration and Naturalization Services, Alien Registration for Ramon Acosta, Form AR-2 3889560, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services, Alien Registration Division, Washington, DC.

⁶² García, *Desert Immigrants*, 65.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 84.

with the racial inferiority that whites attributed to them to explain their economic subjugation.

The city's business leaders made no attempts to hide the disparate wages paid to Mexican laborers. When a state minimum wage law was established in 1920 for women and minors in Texas, El Paso employers adamantly protested its enforcement because of the necessity of Mexican labor. They argued that an El Paso "zone" should be created, exempting the city from overseeing the minimum wage being paid to its workers.⁶⁴ A Chamber of Commerce meeting of "40 merchants, manufacturers, laundry owners, wholesalers and retailers" convened to respond to the Progressive Era legislation said that:

The principal complaint was that Mexican women and girls of El Paso cannot and do not perform as much work as American women in other parts of Texas and that to pay the scale to this help discriminates against El Paso factories working this help, which is about all they can get."⁶⁵

El Paso's elite rationalized lower pay to Mexican women by characterizing them as essentially inferior to their white counterparts as workers and therefore incapable of garnering the level of profits sufficient to sustain their wages. White entrepreneurs' racialization of Mexicans therefore served a very clear economic interest. Acosta's identification with the "Mexican proletariat" was a major focus of his artwork that was informed by his upbringing in the capitalist hierarchy dependent on the white supremacy central to its functioning.

⁶⁴ "The El Paso Zone," *El Paso Herald Post*, December 4, 1920, 6.

⁶⁵ "El Paso Employers Register Complaint at Minimum Wage Law; Say Unfair to El Paso," *El Paso Herald Post*, December 4, 1920.

Acosta's art resisted the degradation of Mexican culture that was fundamental to their racialization in El Paso during the early twentieth-century. By eliciting the beauty of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands his art affirmed the belonging of Mexicans and countered the demeaning stereotypes that contrasted them with white society. In doing so, he challenged the dominant discourse that deployed dehumanizing stereotypes against Mexicans in order to justify their position at the bottom of the city's hierarchy. The acceptable sentiment of El Paso's white leadership class during Acosta's childhood was the cultural backwardness and racial deficiency of Mexicans. This was expressed in the city's leading paper that accounted for the disparate cities developing across the border from one another in the voice of the Franklin Mountain who waxed:

yonder, across the river, you see a Gomorroh: Here you see a new Jerusalem of industrial and social life. . . It is simply a difference which results because the conscience of yonder race has not evolved as that of the Anglo-Saxons on this side. . . For thousands of years the natives roamed the land to the south in comparative peace and happiness. Then came the Latins to infuse their blood and ideals into these happy, naïve children and the result too often was that the mixture retained the vices of both and too few of the virtues"⁶⁶

The editorial echoed the eugenicist and Progressive capitalist views of the city's whites that immigrants like Acosta's parents faced as they fled political and economic turmoil in their sending country to confront racism and economic exploitation in the one receiving them.

By portraying a vision of Mexican origin people as dignified, complex, independent, diverse, and at home in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, Acosta crafted an artistic narrative that countered the racist stereotypes of the city's white elites expressed

⁶⁶ L.E. Claypool, "Mount Franklin Speaks When Man Leaves Turmoil Behind; Miniature World Lies Below," *El Paso Herald Post*, November 24, 1920.

in the passage above. Part of that entailed challenging eugenicist sentiments through his rendition of *mestizaje* in his subjects. Except that it is a watercolor (most of Acosta's paintings were oils), *Antonia* typifies his portraiture that worked toward this end in many ways. In it, an ageless woman with deep indigenous features sits defiantly donning contemporary Western clothes and a large turquoise bracelet. He captures an essence of this woman who inhabits many worlds and projects a strong sense of herself through her piercing stare. Antonia is compelling and intense; a woman who knows who she is and Acosta renders her power and beauty as a celebration of Chicana femininity. His portrait of her presents to the viewer a woman whose dignity and fortitude are unshakeable in a world that has tried to beat her down.⁶⁷ *Antonia* serves as an example of the ways in which Acosta refuted the white supremacist myths that were ubiquitous during his childhood by revealing indigenous people of the US-Mexico borderlands in their full complexity and humanity.

Acosta's paintings also countered the Progressive Era classism demonstrated in the *Herald Post* passage above. The artist crafted an alternative image of Mexicans as hardworking and resilient that directly opposed their depiction as languid wards wholly dependent on U.S. relief-rolls that pervaded the Great Depression.⁶⁸ He would go on to create portraits of working-class Chicano/as that resisted the racism that made Mexicans the scapegoats of the nation's economic failures in the decade preceding the beginning of his career. Forced repatriation of Mexican origin people wrought the nation and El Paso served as a major exit point on their route to Mexico. While some El Paso families were

⁶⁷ Manuel Acosta, *Antonia*, date unknown, University of Texas at El Paso Special Collections.

⁶⁸ Zaragoza Vargas, *Major Problems in Mexican American History: Documents and Essays* (Santa Barbara: University of California Press, 1999), 279.

economically displaced and forced to return to Mexico, Mexicans constituted the city's ethnic majority and vastly composed the labor force fundamental to the city's economic functioning. Still many El Paso families depended on welfare for survival. Acosta recalled the "drab green" of the government issued canned food that his neighbors and friends relied on throughout the Depression. He recalled that his father, however, expressly prohibited the acceptance of this public assistance and they pushed through the economic hardship living simply, "So we just made the best of it. We grew up on *frijoles* and *chile verde* and *tortillas*."⁶⁹ It is likely that even if Acosta's family had attempted to receive financial help they may have had difficulty doing so since in El Paso in 1936 there was an effort "made to relieve from the relief rolls any family in which either the mother or father was a Mexican alien."⁷⁰ Acosta's lived experience as a Mexican immigrant in the Depression went against the white supremacist sentiment that blamed Mexicans for the nation's problems as they made do with the least they could. The dignity and resourcefulness of working Mexicans would go on to be a major focus of his artwork in the following years when Acosta established himself as an artist.

Coming of age during the Great Depression in El Paso shaped Acosta's use of art to express a particular consciousness specific to his race, class, and citizenship. He attended Burlison and Bowie⁷¹, both El Paso's "Mexican schools,"⁷² Bowie being the only high school in the city located a literal stone's throw away from the border with

⁶⁹ Acosta, interview by McNeeley, 1973, 4.

⁷⁰ Cleofas Calleros, "The Mexican Expatriation, 1929-1937: An Unsuccessful Attempt to Solve A Social and Economic Problem," Oscar J Martinez Papers, MS278, University of Texas at El Paso Special Collections.

⁷¹ Acosta, interview by McNeeley, 1973 4-9.

⁷² Oscar J. Martinez, *The Chicanos of El Paso: An Assessment of Progress*, (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1980), 30-2.

Mexico. The militarization of the border had but barely begun within the previous two decades and Acosta reminisced about being able to cross the border both ways by crawling under a barbed wire fence. In such lean times he and his brothers would spend months in rural Juarez on his maternal uncle's ranch and received an agricultural education while there.⁷³ Even though he resided in El Paso for the majority of his youth, Acosta had roots on both sides of the border at least in his childhood. His experience shows that for many Chicano/as living on the border during the Great Depression, access to Mexico offered the means to survive the economic vulnerability that characterized life for Mexican origin people in the U.S. As he reached adulthood the following decade and the nation was bracing itself for its second World War, Acosta acquired his U.S. citizenship through military service in the Air Force like a generation of Chicano/as who affirmed their right to and defense of a nation that had sought to exclude them en masse less than a decade earlier through their forced repatriation.

Citizenship gained through service in World War II allowed for the emergence of what Mario García calls "The Mexican American Generation"⁷⁴ as the children of Mexican immigrants raised in the U.S. demonstrated their loyalty through their patriotic sacrifice. For Acosta and many like him, joining the military offered a means to become U.S. citizens but also to travel the world and visit places they otherwise would have never had the means. It was in Europe's museums that Acosta fell in love with art and decided he wished to be a painter, deriving his first art appreciation education from the experience.⁷⁵ Upon his return to El Paso, Acosta was able to naturalize and establish his

⁷³ Acosta, interview by McNeely, 1973, 5.

⁷⁴ García, *Leadership, Ideology, Identity, 1930-1960*, 5.

⁷⁵ Acosta, interview with McNeely, 1973, 10-11.

artistic career equipped with a renewed sense of belonging and creative mission.⁷⁶ He was part of a broader trend that saw the widespread incorporation of Mexican origin people into American society who, although having proven allegiance through military contributions, continued to be relegated to lowest rungs of the country's racial and class hierarchies. For the children of El Paso's "Mexican proletariat," military patronage allowed them the pragmatic means to achieve upward mobility as well as the direct path to naturalization. Additionally, it permitted them to prove their loyalty to the nation and to affirm their worth in deserving the full rights of American citizenship.⁷⁷

It was during his tour of duty in Europe that Acosta received his first commissioned artwork. He earned amenities copying images of pinup models for his fellow soldiers and higher ranking officers.⁷⁸ When the other members of his unit were on furlough, Acosta much preferred to spend his free time taking in the paintings and sculpture of Europe's museums. In fact, while recollecting upon his military service years later, Acosta set himself apart from his peers who used their free time for more base endeavors of boozing and chasing women.⁷⁹ From the very beginning of his career, Acosta's love of art was a means to justify his withdrawal from the heteronormative pursuits of his counterparts, a trope that he and others would return to in keeping from outing him.

Serving in the U.S. military in WWII was a formative aspect of Acosta's emerging Chicano identity as it not only afforded him the chance to attain his U.S.

⁷⁶ By the early 1950s, Acosta was listed as a painter by trade, *El Paso City Directory*, 1954, 88.

⁷⁷ Rivas-Rodriguez, Maggie, ed. *Mexican Americans and World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), xvi-xviii.

⁷⁸ Acosta, interview with McNeely, 1973, 12.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 13-14.

citizenship but also provided him with the educational opportunities he gained as a result of the GI bill that launched his artistic career. His involvement in the war thus epitomizes how the “Mexican American Generation” was made through their military service and through the changes that they created in U.S. society in the years that followed their return home. From the beginning of his career Acosta’s representation of Mexicans in the borderlands demonstrated their centrality to U.S. society and points to the importance of art to the cultural changes that preceded the Chicano movement. The life that he built for himself as a person of Mexican origin in the U.S. and the use of his career to advance Chicanismo was made possible by the opportunities he gained through his military service. He thus exemplifies a broader historical trajectory of Mexican Americans whose participation in WWII eventuated in the Chicano struggle for equality.

For a variety of reasons, the Chicano movement was directly shaped by the participation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican-origin people who had served in the military in the Second World War. In addition to the attainment of citizenship and the educational opportunities provided by the GI Bill, Chicanos were also influenced by the experience of defeating fascism and playing an active role fighting global white supremacy.⁸⁰ For many Chicano soldiers, such as the boys of Company E who hailed mostly from Texas and had grown up in a rigid racial hierarchy, killing Germans was a shock to the order with which they were most familiar. One soldier reported that he felt as though he had committed a grave sin upon seeing the blonde hair beneath the helmet

⁸⁰ Richard Griswold del Castillo, *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights* (Austin: University of Texas press, 2008), 99.

of the German soldier who he had just shot dead.⁸¹ Doubtlessly, fighting white supremacy provided a revolutionary transformation in the internalized oppression that they knew as a racial underclass back home. From the beginning of his career, Acosta's pieces reflect a pride in Mexican identity that would portend the coming radicalism of the Chicano movement.

Acosta's earliest paintings from the decade after his return from the war reflect his vision of the centrality of Chicanos to U.S. society. One of his first pieces depicted his brothers as military heroes and emphasized them as simultaneously culturally, ethnically and racially Mexican while nationally and legally American. *Cuatro Hermanos* marks a seminal painting in Acosta's career and is characterized by a style that Acosta would go on to describe as "too slick"⁸² in a kind of glossy, cartoonish look. In it he and his brothers stand and sit proudly in their military regalia each representing a different branch—Antonio and Porfirio don the army uniform while Francisco wears that of the navy and the young artist, Manuel, is in his Air Force bomber jacket adorned with a white scarf. The three brothers, except Manuel, smile proudly at the camera. Acosta looks on with a kind of somber melancholy, positioned directly in front an American flag hanging in the room in which they are posing for the picture. This painting was copied from a photograph and it looks as if the four brothers are in their parents' home with flowers and books on the table and a painting hanging on the wall behind them.⁸³ *Cuatro Hermanos* marks one of the initial statements of Acosta's career as a border artist. He and his

⁸¹ Gabriel Salazar, "A Bugler's Notes," unpublished memoirs of a Company E soldier, 1980, Gabriel Salazar Personal Papers, El Paso, TX.

⁸² Acosta, interview by McNeely, 1973, 20.

⁸³ Manuel Acosta, *Cuatro Hermanos*, 1947, Tony Acosta Collection.

brothers are American war heroes, Chicano U.S. soldiers beaming with pride in having defended the world from fascism.

This narrative of Mexican identity in an American context is part of a key development in the formation of a Chicano consciousness. Acosta's affirmation of Mexican origin people's commitment to the U.S. through their military service expressed in *Cuatro Hermanos* was part of a larger shift in the way that Mexican Americans would interact with U.S. society. While Chicano activists had been struggling to achieve equal opportunities throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the war provided a historical moment for them to hold American society accountable to make good on its democratic promises and to call into focus the contributions of Mexican origin people in the U.S. Fighting the Nazis in Europe equipped Mexican Americans with a discourse regarding the entitlements of American citizenship and it presented them the prospect of returning to the U.S. with a renewed commitment to their rights as citizens.⁸⁴ Acosta's artwork was his vehicle for democratic participation during the postwar era as he sought to craft a picture of American life that was more complete through its inclusion of Chicanos.

When he returned from Europe, the GI Bill afforded him an education that helped launch his career. At the Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy, now the University of Texas at El Paso, Acosta studied art under Urbici Soler, a student of Picasso and the sculptor who designed and built the statue of Jesus at the summit of Mount Cristo Rey that sits between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez.⁸⁵ Soler would go on to introduce Acosta to

⁸⁴ Castillo, *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights*, 20.

⁸⁵ Acosta, interview by McNeeley, 1973 19.

Peter Hurd who was instrumental in the early development of Acosta's career.⁸⁶ Hurd gave Acosta most of his initial paid work as an artist, hiring him for technical assistance on projects and murals. It was Hurd who assured Acosta should paint what was in his "own backyard," advice that proved foundational to his career.⁸⁷ After Acosta's study under Soler, he spent a brief period matriculating at the Chouinard Institute in Los Angeles before returning to El Paso to begin his career as a borderlands artist. He applied the skills he developed through his education funded by the GI bill to the artistic movement that accompanied an emergent Chicano consciousness during the mid-twentieth century.

The subfield of Chicano history that covers the movement's cultural transformations treats the 1960s and 1970s as a Chicano Renaissance. Acosta's life is relevant to this discussion both because he illustrates how this occurred on the U.S.-Mexico border and his career started before when most scholars note the onset of the Chicano art movement. Historians begin their investigation of the Chicano Renaissance in the 1960s, more than a decade after Acosta first worked as an artist, and they focus heavily on the relationship between the Chicano struggle's emphasis on protest politics and its use of mural, flyer, and poster art. While Acosta eventually would take part in crafting some murals and generating flyer art to promote various causes and events, from the beginning of his career he relied on more conventional mediums as his preferred expressive modes. He used mostly painting and some drawing and sculpture to depict Chicano life at a time that precedes when the Mexican American art movement became

⁸⁶ Ibid, 20-22.

⁸⁷ Hal Marcus, "Manuel Acosta," *Southwestern Art Forum*, March, 1976, Hal Marcus Personal Papers, El Paso, TX.

more widely recognized. Most noteworthy of the ways in which Acosta's work was imbued with a social purpose, however, was his hosting of parties to promote Mexican cultural life and to draw on his iconic status in the El Paso-Juarez community to bring different groups of people together.

Acosta used his art to reflect the cultural developments that were fundamental to the Chicano Renaissance.⁸⁸ The Pachuco aesthetic became popular among youth by mid century and although it was an act of rebellion against the conformity and obedience of World War II, even returning soldiers to El Paso indulged in the performative act of wearing a zoot suit.⁸⁹ Acosta rendered the Pachuco Chicano in an untitled painting of a young man leaning against a wall in a crisp yellow shirt and wide brimmed hat cocked on his head in the zoot fashion. The primary colors worn by the man contrast with a painting on the wall behind him consisting of a composite of Mayan images in muted hues. Leaning against the picture of indigenous Mexicans, pride emanates from the subject's eyes as he juts his head to his right. This piece exemplifies Acosta's celebration of the self-made Pachuco style embodied in the portrait's subject's dress and demeanor and it alludes to the mestizo roots of Chicanismo in the painting within the painting that the subject is propped against.⁹⁰

For Mexican-origin people in the twentieth-century, the zoot suit and *pachuco* aesthetic was central to the development of a Chicano/a consciousness. In the borderlands, *pachuquismo* provided Mexican American youth with the opportunity to

⁸⁸ David R. Maciel, Isidro D. Ortiz, and Maria Herrera-Sobek, eds. *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 195.

⁸⁹ Not owning a pair of wingtips upon returning from Europe, Private Salazar wore his army boots with a zoot suit he borrowed from a friend, "A Bugler's Notes," c. 1980.

⁹⁰ Manuel Acosta, Untitled, ca. 1970, Francisco Acosta Collection.

take pride in a coherent and identity that set them apart from Mexican and Anglo cultures. Catherine Ramirez elicits how the zoot suit provided a countercultural representation of Mexican American identity that cohered a sense of Chicanismo.⁹¹ Mauricio Mazón cites how the roots of the word *pachuco* were even rumored to be linked to El Paso as its nickname “El Chuco,” was part of the phrase “pa’ Chuco” meaning “headed to El Paso.”⁹² Acosta came of age during a time in which the zoot suit signaled a radical Chicano/a consciousness and he reflected this through his paintings. The cultural changes that were relevant to Mexican-origin people during this era were affirmed in Acosta’s representation of Chicano/a identity.

As one of the first artists to choose Mexican-origin people in the borderlands as his work’s primary focus, Acosta arguably played an influential role in the art that would be central to the Chicano Renaissance. He pioneered the use of portraits to elucidate Mexican identity in U.S. society at a time when Mexican Americans were still working to overcome their historical marginalization and yet were beginning to draw on Chicanismo as a source of political and cultural strength. It is notable that Acosta’s work precedes the era when Chicano art became widespread, placing him as one of the movement’s forerunners. Maciel et al. note that Chicano art has always been inherently political and has never been created as “art for art’s sake.”⁹³ While the initial art of the Chicano movement was wedded to its political purposes of spreading messages through flyers,

⁹¹ Catherine Ramirez, *Woman in the Zoot Suit* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 113.

⁹² Mauricio Mazón, “Social Upheaval in World War II, 1943” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1976), 2.

⁹³ George Vargas, “A Historical Overview/Update on the State of Chicano Art,” *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends* in Maciel, Ortiz, and Herrera-Sobek (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), xiv.

posters, and the urban forum provided by murals, Acosta's art carried with it a subtle yet deeply political message emphasizing mestizo ethnicity, Mexican belonging in the U.S., and the working class struggle for survival. Acosta's representation of Chicanismo was specific to the borderlands context.

The Chicano movement occurred along regional lines and Acosta's life aids in understanding how it uniquely shaped the border region, particularly its largest conjoined metropolitan centers—El Paso and Juárez. Acosta was a member of a community of artists and intellectuals who composed the cultural elements of the city's burgeoning creative movement. Among his contemporaries were writer Arturo Islas, poets Ricardo Sánchez and José Antonio Burciaga, journalist Joe Olvera, dancer and bilingual education advocate Rosa Guerrero, and sculptor Mago Oróna Gándara (among others).⁹⁴ The Chicano Renaissance in El Paso is yet to be covered by any study and Acosta's place in this context offers a key piece of the history of the cultural movement in the borderlands city. Acosta was one of the oldest of this generation of Chicano artists and intellectuals. All of them shared an ethic of pride in Mexican identity. The proximity of the two cities combined their fates and cultural exchanges, the interests of Mexicans in U.S. society being at the heart of the Chicano struggle in El Paso.

This generation of culture-makers forged a local movement out of which emerged an artistic revolution that was linked to a broader fight to gain recognition of Mexican origin people in the U.S. More historians have focused on the importance of Chicano art as the creative tool of the political movement which emphasized organizing, the art itself serving as a text for communicating messages of protest and militant resistance. This is

⁹⁴ "Capirotada," MECHA Papers, Box. 3 Folder 1, MS348, University of Texas at El Paso Special Collections.

the legacy of the Chicano Renaissance especially as its peak coincided with the most radical aspects of the political movement. However, the era that immediately preceded the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s is less well documented in terms of the relevance of art in helping shape a pro-Chicano identity. The coterie of Chicano artists and intellectuals in El Paso at mid-twentieth century helped shape the cultural life of the community by using various mediums to call attention to the conditions of Mexican-origin people in the U.S. For Acosta, as one of the harbingers of the Chicano Renaissance in El Paso, portraiture was the main means through which he worked to assert the agency and self-determination of Chicanos.

Another way that Acosta contributed to the cultural life of the borderlands was by crafting a rich social scene that brought many different kinds of people together. He used his famous parties to make statements about power and prestige that challenged inequality in playful ways. One way he did so was by performing scenarios in which the elite and privileged guests were the butts of jokes and pranks. With the aid of friends and nephews as “bouncers” Acosta would not hesitate to dunk rich art collectors in the pool or put shaving cream on the hand of El Paso’s bishop of four decades when he was asleep on the artist’s couch.⁹⁵ Powerful people were defenseless in the face of Acosta’s pranks done always in “good fun,” his sweet nature and charm disarming them with his humor and kindness. He reveled in the opportunity to bring together people from all walks of life and make every gathering a forum for conveying important messages to the community. Frequently, Acosta hosted parties to support the local Democratic Party or collected

⁹⁵ Albert Jemente, interview by author, El Paso, TX, December 17, 2014.

canned goods as the entrance fee to be donated to an orphanage in Ciudad Juárez.⁹⁶

Annually, Acosta hosted *Posadas* at Christmas and Passion Plays at Easter, piecing together elaborate events that usually initiated at his neighborhood church and would then move to his studio where the celebration would progress through stages throughout the night ending in a late night “Ronchi Ronchi” dance party.⁹⁷

For Acosta, the party was itself a kind of public forum for affirming the belonging of Mexican culture in the U.S. In a flyer for an event that he dubbed *Oñate’s Piñata* (Acosta adored word play and puns), cartoon partygoers and musicians don the vestments of *bailet folklórico* dancers and bound excitedly around a man hanging in a piñata in the center of the drawing.⁹⁸ Photographs of the actual event indicate that the festivities were not unlike his picture, *mariachis* playing around a piñata while *folklórico* performers danced.⁹⁹ *Oñate’s Piñata* was one of many events that Acosta hosted in which Mexican history, music, dance, and art were the focal points of a performative event that he co-created with the community. He used these gatherings as a means to articulate a love for Mexican culture and to bring diverse constituents into conversation with that love as well one another. His parties were renown in El Paso, especially by the 1970s and 1980s, a period that coincided with the ongoing immigration of Mexicans into the U.S. accompanied by racist debates about their inability to assimilate into white American society. Acosta’s celebrations might be seen as a kind of resistance strategy to this

⁹⁶ Manuel Acosta, “Posada,” flyer, December 23, 1981, Hal Marcus Papers El Paso, TX.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Manuel Acosta, “Oñate’s Piñata,” flyer, April 1989, Hal Marcus Personal Papers.

⁹⁹ Photographer unknown, photographs of Oñate’s Piñata party, April 1989, Hal Marcus Personal Papers El Paso, TX.

discourse and indicate the multifaceted outlets through which he helped compose the border city's cultural milieu.

Being of the Mexican American Generation, Acosta was older than most Chicano activists by the 1960s and 1970s. He transgressed the boundaries dividing the artistic, political, and the festive through the unique life that he built for himself in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Utilizing the benefits he had acquired through the GI Bill, he forged his own way of giving back to his home city. His talent and his deep love for the people of El Paso and Juárez were his life's gifts to this particular historical moment. He was part of a broader cultural movement that composed the Chicano Renaissance on the border and saw an expansive cultural flourishing by the end of the twentieth century. Ultimately, he drew on his creativity and his love for the borderlands community as a means to resist the racism that confronted Chicanos.

Acosta was the premier Chicano portrait artist in El Paso and his life tells a story about the city's role in the movement's cultural changes. His work provided the border city with a reflection of its unique place in a global context. By painting what was in his "own backyard" he created a vision of El Paso's people that gave them a representation of their own diversity, complexity, and beauty. His art worked to combat the dominant discourse that marginalized Mexicans and rendered them in flat stereotypes. Because he was born at the onset of an age that would be characterized by committed and successful widespread Chicano activism, his life and career exemplify Mario García's generational model for the mid-twentieth century. As a member of the Mexican American generation, he was shaped by a set of shared experiences regarding the Depression and WWII that cohered around his Mexican ethnicity. The economic oppression that his family

underwent as well as the poverty and resilience that characterized their life during the 1930s caused Acosta to identify with the “Mexican proletariat.” Serving in the Air Force in WWII allowed him to gain his citizenship and return to El Paso where he established his artistic career. When Acosta came back to the U.S. he encountered an emerging Chicano cultural movement that was taking root by the mid-twentieth century and he played a seminal role in contributing to it. By composing a creative canon that established Chicano identity as central to the border, he provided representation to a marginalized people. His career demonstrates the fundamentally radical aspects of Chicano art that, even when not necessarily a part of the protest/popular message context, were inherently political. Acosta was a member of an artistic movement on the border that was part of the broader Chicano Renaissance.

Chapter Two

Acosta as a *Fronterizo* Artist

Barco de la ilusión/The Hope Boat bears a scene familiar to many border crossers. A family fills a small wooden rowboat just off the bank of a river—presumably the Rio Grande, a young man halfway submerged in the water hangs off the edge to push it into the current. However, Acosta's passengers share their boat with brightly colored paper flowers, clay water jugs, a cello, a bowl of fruit, and a trellis adorned with stars and doves. The river's waters glow with an otherworldly warmth reflecting a bright pink mermaid at the helm and convincing the viewer that the border the boat is crossing could be one between worlds rather than nations. In this painting, Acosta depicts the transgression of boundaries as an alchemical process undertaken with anticipation for something better despite all uncertainty.

Dense with symbolism, *Barco de la ilusión* communicates the importance of Acosta's context to his identity and work. The boat's contents represent what its passengers value and hold dear as they make their journey across the river. Flowers, food, and clay vessels evoke an indigenous and ancestral rootedness in Mexico despite their river-faring voyage to a foreign place. At the same time that they carry their culture with them (embodied in the material items in the boat), they are defined by their experience as border crossers, looking forward past the riverbank. The youngest passenger on the boat stands right behind its helm and points forward to what lays beyond the painting's frame.

This piece shows how the U.S.-Mexico border shaped Acosta's worldview and provided his major artistic impetus.¹⁰⁰

Throughout his career, Acosta drew upon the borderlands as a salient motif in American life. The border was ultimately the most influential contextual force in his art. He enriched the artistic paradigm of the American West through his creative work as a *fronterizo*. By reshaping the frontier art canon through his inclusion of Mexican origin people and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, Acosta complicated the American vision of conquest and challenged the Eurocentric teleology of westward progress through his paintings of Chicano life on the border. In this way, his art served as a counter-narrative to those artists painting the American West, most of who depicted Mexicans as savages and foreigners in their own land.

The imperialist nostalgia expressed in Western art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries drew upon the idyllic representation of Mexicans in bucolic timelessness. Alleged as a means to preserve the history of "Western Americana," this genre characterized the American art tradition that Acosta augmented with his inclusion of the borderlands. He did so at a time that preceded the Chicano art movement, crafting his own rendition of life in an American West that was fundamentally Mexican. His work pioneered the border art that would go on to flourish in the twentieth century. The vision of the borderlands that Acosta created revealed the region as a coherent place, united culturally and ethnically. This chapter explores how his art intervened on an artistic discourse that sought to erase Mexicans from the future of the American West by cementing them in an image of its past. By examining his portraits and still life paintings

¹⁰⁰ Manuel Acosta, *Barco de la Ilusión/The Hope Boat*, date unknown, Francisco Acosta and Family Collection.

in El Paso and Juárez, it situates Acosta among the Western art canon and shows how his paintings demonstrated the centrality of Mexican origin people to the borderlands in the twentieth century. Ultimately, this chapter sheds light on the salience of the border to both Acosta's life and his art and it examines the ongoing displacement and disfranchisement of Mexicans in the borderlands—a long historical trend of which Acosta was a part.

Acosta's love for the border was the foundation for his artwork; he painted his home into the cumulative vision of the American West and in doing so he emerged as a singular artistic voice. In a book chronicling Western art, a genre meant to capture the remnants of a supposedly nearly extinct world of "romantic and picturesque American life," he is the only person of Mexican origin in a collection of over one hundred artists.¹⁰¹ *Harmsen's Western Americana* presents a comprehensive anthology of Western artists and shows how this genre was a product of nineteenth and twentieth century colonialism whereby artists sought to apprehend what they described as a disappearing people. The volume celebrates the forerunners of this movement, one of whose "fresh and vital Indian portraits and depiction of ceremonies, dances, and hunts preserve for us the spirit and traditional culture of the Plains Indians before it disappeared forever."¹⁰² This memorialization of Native American life points to the relationship between imperialism and Western art as a tool for U.S. conquest. The art movement elicited by *Harmsen's Western Americana* reduces Native Americans and Mexicans to primitive people destined for displacement. Acosta's art disrupted this teleological narrative of

¹⁰¹ Dorothy Harmsen, *Harmsen's Western Americana; A Collection of One Hundred Western Paintings with Biographical Profiles of the Artists*, (Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1971), 3.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 2.

westward expansion and shifted the orientation of Southwest art, in particular, away from its colonialist beginnings.

Western art served as a visual history of the multiple waves of colonization in the part of the U.S. that had been Mexico prior to 1848. It is noteworthy that *Harmsen's Western Americana* excluded all other non-white painters besides Acosta, with the exception of one Native American. This demonstrates the limited perspective of this artistic canon in recalling such a history that might humanize the very native peoples that it sought to portray. As one of the early non-white artistic voices in this movement, Acosta contributed a relevant point of view uniquely informed by his experience as a *fronterizo* and a person of Mexican origin. He therefore crafted a viewable universe in which Mexicans—mainly those occupying the lowest socio-economic rungs of American society in the twentieth century—were at the center and carried an inherent dignity despite their subjugated status as colonized subjects.

Acosta's intervention in Western art challenged the imperialist nostalgia that the genre's artists had expressed throughout the preceding century. Anthropologist, Renato Rosaldo describes imperialist nostalgia as an ethnographic approach to indigenous people in which Westerners demonstrate a longing for the very cultures that they are destroying through colonial conquest. He notes that this trend developed "during the last decade of the nineteenth century, as the frontier was closing, racism was codified and people began to deify nature and its Native American inhabitants."¹⁰³ Describing how colonizers regret the changes they have wrought retroactively, he shows how imperialist nostalgia relegates indigenous subjects to nonhuman status by likening them to their natural

¹⁰³ Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 68-70.

environment and reifies the trope of the noble savage. Ethnographers thus played a role in conquest by lending genocide an ameliorative and apologetic face.¹⁰⁴ Western art emerged in tandem with this larger colonial project initiated by the U.S. government and then taken up by its intellectual and cultural elite. At the time when Acosta's art became part of this larger canon, few artists of Mexican origin in the U.S. comprised the Western genre or had the opportunity to discursively engage it.

An examination of artistic representation in the U.S. imperial venture points to the salience of culture-making in the creation of nation-states and the management of identities. Enabled by the American colonization of Mexico, white artists from the eastern seaboard moved west and settled primarily in Northern New Mexico where they established their careers and the genre embodied in *Harmsen's Western Americana*. These artists' depiction of the mestizos and Indians of the so-called frontier served the same purpose as their scientific counterparts elicited by Rosaldo. In fact, anthropology and art blended as photographers joined ethnographers in their endeavor to record "frontier Americans" in their unaltered state before their supposedly inevitable disappearance.¹⁰⁵ Artists saw it as their charge to benevolently render the memory of a primitive and unactualized West through their paintings and in so doing provided the justification for its seizure and development. This underscores art as an enterprise central to creating the myth of the American West.¹⁰⁶ Acosta, however, complicated the triumphalist history of Western American conquest announced by his artistic predecessors and contemporaries.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Barbara Haskell, *The American: Art and Culture, 1900-1950* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1999), 33.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 32.

By contributing border art to the canon of the American West, Acosta enriched the visual frontier manifested through the paintings of artists like Ernest Blumenschein, E. Irving Couse, Victor Higgins, Georgia O’Keefe, J.H. Sharp, and Walter Ufer. When asked how he saw himself in relationship to the Western art movement, Acosta said, “People often suggest to me that I put models on horseback so that my art can compete with Western art, but I prefer to paint the people of El Paso—the Mexican Americans.”¹⁰⁷ While his career was born of the Southwest art movement by virtue of his tutelage under Peter Hurd, Acosta forged his own singular artistic purpose tied to his identity as a Chicano and *fronterizo*. Acknowledging that he drew on the styles and themes embodied in Western art, Acosta claimed his own rendition of the border city’s Mexican origin people separate from the genre. He distinguished himself from those artists who had established Western art as part of the colonization of half of Mexico.

The U.S. imperial invasion of the West was closely tied to the establishment of the Taos and Santa Fe art “colonies.” White artists from the East were given lucrative careers by the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe Railway (ATSF), which commissioned them to paint the West for promotional murals, paintings and prints, brochures, and advertisements, and funded the settlement of the colonies.¹⁰⁸ By depicting the indigenous people of the Southwest and their supposed willingness to share their culture along with the picturesque landscapes of this region, artists encouraged other white easterners to move and travel west. The ATSF’s role in installing U.S. economic dominance in the

¹⁰⁷ “Acosta: A Man and His Art,” *Nosotros* 2, no. 6, September, 1972, Tomas Ybarra Frausto Papers, box 1, folder 4, American Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

¹⁰⁸ Keith Bryant, “The Atchison Topeka and the Santa Fe Railway and the Development of the Taos and Santa Fe Art Colonies,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 9, no. 4 (Oct. 1978): 438.

West was thus imbricated with the cultural aspects of conquest. Art and commerce blended in the appropriation of land, money, and representation through the relationship of the railroads and the New Mexico art colonies. That Acosta distinguished himself from this genre is significant given that he came up within it by virtue of being an artist in the Southwest. Taos and Santa Fe, just a few hours drive from El Paso and closer to the border city than any major metropolitan center in Texas, had become the main artistic outposts in the West by the time that Acosta was beginning his career.

Although linked to the Western art movement by virtue of his Southwestern context as well as his having been mentored by famed artist, Peter Hurd, Acosta set himself apart from this impulse. The establishment of the Taos and Santa Fe art colonies laid the foundation for painters like Hurd and Acosta to make a living as artists commemorating the visual history of the Southwest. While the Western art movement was directly linked to the broader political and economic aspects of the national conquest described above, those artists who founded the Taos and Santa Fe art colonies formed their own unique, local colonial relationship with New Mexico's people. White artists employed the Pueblo Indians as models and took on a kind of paternalistic activism in defending their right to land while pitting them against the region's native Mexicans/*Nuevo Mexicanos*. They supported legislation that favored Indian land claims over those of *Hispanos*, but also prevented Pueblo communities from accessing running water and electricity in order to preserve the "primitive" character of Native American life in Northern New Mexico.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Sylvia Rodriguez, "Art, Tourism, and Race Relations in Taos: Towards a Sociology of the Art Colony," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 45, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 88.

White artists therefore aligned themselves with the interests of Northern New Mexico's Native Americans only insofar as it served their colonial agenda, the relationship between the two being laden with oppressive dynamics. Irving Couse once chained a Pueblo boy down when he resisted sitting for a painting and Walter Ufer's regular model Jim Mirabal was known as "Ufer's Jim."¹¹⁰ These painters propagated an artistic discourse that depicted the region's Indians as sedentary agriculturalists who were rooted in the earth and Mexicans as shiftless laborers and nomadic herdsman, disconnected from the landscape. They did this to further their colonialist objectives to divest *Nuevo Mexicanos* of their ancestral land claims.¹¹¹ It is no surprise that Acosta did not see himself as descending from the legacy created by the colonial relationship that these artists had with the Indian and Mexican people of the Southwest. His affirmation to paint the Chicanos of El Paso, rather than emulate the tropes developed by Western artists set him apart from this genre and situated him within an artistic discourse that resisted the imperialism advanced by the Southwest art genre.

Peter Hurd, who grew up in Roswell, New Mexico and dedicated his life to painting the region's landscapes, supported Acosta's artistic mission to paint the people of El Paso.¹¹² He, like Acosta, was a member of the Western art movement by virtue of having grown up in and dedicated his life to painting the Southwest.¹¹³ Acosta's first major employment as a paid artist was assisting Hurd in his mural of Texas's history on

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ John Ott, "Reform in Redface: The Taos Society of Artists Plays Indian," *American Art* vol. 23 no. 2 (Summer 2009): 101.

¹¹² Hal Marcus, "Manuel Acosta," *Southwestern Art Forum* 1, no. 2, March 15, 1976, Hal Marcus Papers, Box 1, El Paso, TX.

¹¹³ Paul Horgan, introduction to *My Land is the Southwest*, ed. Robert Metzger (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1983), xx.

the Prudential Building in Houston.¹¹⁴ The two remained lifelong friends, Acosta helping to take care of Hurd during his retirement.¹¹⁵ Hurd guided Acosta in learning how to apply his craft professionally by finding commissioned work. He established an art colony of his own in San Patricio, New Mexico (about 50 miles west of Roswell) where Acosta joined him and other artists painting at Hurd's ranch and studio.

In some ways Hurd was an inscrutable figure. Having been born into the Southwest art movement and inheriting it from the previous generation of painters who founded the colonies in Northern New Mexico, his career had a different relationship with the region's Mexicans than artists like Couse or Sharp. Unlike his predecessors, his emphasis was the West's landscapes rather than portraits of its Native Americans or *Nuevo Mexicanos*. Growing up with Mexican-origin people in Roswell, Hurd spoke Spanish fluently and he identified with them in a way that recognized their historical belonging there.¹¹⁶ He was unique, a kind of cultured cowboy who loved art and letters as well as the outdoors and became a wartime correspondent illustrating the battlefields of WWII.¹¹⁷ However, by the last decade of his life he expressed adamant disdain for undocumented Mexican immigrants and petitioned the federal government to reinforce Border Patrol coverage of the borderlands to guard against "illegals."¹¹⁸ His love of Mexican culture was thus not equally matched in love for its people in his later years. By the end of his life in 1984 he suffered from dementia, having degenerated physically and

¹¹⁴ Manuel Acosta, interview by John McNeely, February 1, 1973, interview 63, transcript, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso, 22.

¹¹⁵ Albert Jemente, interview by author, El Paso, TX, December 17, 2014.

¹¹⁶ Horgan, *My Land is the Southwest*, xxv.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 258.

¹¹⁸ Peter Hurd to Clinton P. Anderson, San Patricio, May 5, 1970, in *My Land is the Southwest* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1983), 391-392.

mentally after a fall off of a horse in a polo game.¹¹⁹ Acosta treated Hurd like family and assisted in looking after him during this period.¹²⁰

Hurd's career represented a late era in the Southwest art movement and shifted its center of gravity away from the Taos and Santa Fe colonies. Establishing his career during the Great Depression, he was afforded a degree of professional advancement at a time when Mexican Americans could not as readily establish financial stability through painting. While his predecessors were initially funded by the ATSF, Hurd easily found employment as an illustrator early on due to his mentorship under artist N.C. Wyeth, who would also become his father in law.¹²¹ Through this connection to the working art world, Hurd was able to gain distinction as a painter. Even Acosta's career, arguably more significant than Hurd's in its singularity and relevance to a marginalized group, is not as widely recognized and did not garner the kind of commercial success as his teacher's.

Acosta first acquired opportunities to sustain himself through painting because of his relationship with Hurd. He was also brought into the Southwest art movement in part because of his membership in the San Patricio community where Hurd built his artist's colony. The "San Patricio Five" also included Hurd's wife Henriette Wyeth, John Meigs, and Peter Rogers. As the only Chicano in this ilk, Acosta saw it as his mission to paint the border and its Mexican-origin people into the visual landscape of the Southwest. However, the Southwest art movement tokenized Acosta and his work. In 1969 the Texas Fine Arts Commission nominated him as a member "to represent Mexican Americans in

¹¹⁹ Horgan, *My Land is the Southwest*, 394.

¹²⁰ Jemente, interview, 2014.

¹²¹ Paul Horgan, *Peter Hurd: A Portrait Sketch from Life* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 35.

Texas.”¹²² What his art meant to himself and the community that it portrayed differed from the larger artistic world that it was a part of by virtue of location and proximity to Western artists like the other members of the San Patricio Five.

Acosta’s career was truly important to the Chicanos of the borderlands as he forged a representation of the U.S. West that deviated from his predecessors and did not consist of a past lost forever to the march of white American progress. Even as late as the 1960s, when Acosta’s career was building momentum as was the larger Chicano struggle for civil rights, New Mexican artists and art promoters still relied on a discourse that cast the region’s Mexicans as a disappearing people in this region, as expressed by the Jamison Gallery of Santa Fe in its advertisement of an Acosta exhibit:

Manuel Acosta from his sun-drenched studio in El Paso, Texas, *tells of a time soon to be history...* ‘Manny’ paints the border country: the mariachi bands, the penny catchers under the International Bridge, the old woman making artificial blooms in the markets, and children and flowers. *American ways and habits are capturing Mexico*, but the ways of the land below the Rio Grande are here preserved in all their color, mystery and glamor.¹²³ [my emphasis]

Rather than “preserve” a vision of a people destined for extinction or fetishize his own culture in its “color, mystery, and glamor,” Acosta’s art was intended to craft a more complete picture of the U.S. West, one that acknowledged the border as its own culturally distinct region. His paintings were an affirmation of Mexican identity and belonging and thus resisted the artistic discourse that sought to recognize the place of Chicanos in the Southwest only in memory. Acosta combined portraiture and landscape paintings as his primary means to assert the contemporary presence of Chicanos in the borderlands while

¹²² Curry and Fran Holden to Peter Hurd, September 6, 1969, Peter and Henriette Wyeth Hurd Papers, Box 4, Reel 5128, American Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Microfilm.

¹²³ Jamison Galleries Flyer, July, 1967, Peter and Henriette Wyeth Hurd Papers, Box 2, Reel 5126, American Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Microfilm.

demonstrating the timelessness of their connection with the region and the endurance of Mexican tradition therein.

By situating his portrait subjects within borderlands' scenes and depicting Mexican tradition as wedded to the frontier landscape, Acosta's visual narrative of Chicanismo in the U.S. Southwest resisted the trope of Mexican extinction propagated by the Western art movement. He deployed a complex symbolic language that illustrated Mexican culture in this region and told a story that revealed its rootedness. The river was a motif that served this purpose and figured into many of his portraits of El Paso's Mexican origin people. As in *Barco de la ilusión* and *Acequía* (Chapter 1), Acosta used moving bodies of water as markers of life in the desert frontier—life that blooms through the enduring presence of Chicanos in this region. In several still life studies, he placed food and random items on a table (à la the *Bodegón* style initiated by the Spanish painters of the Baroque era) in front of the river. When the Rio Grande appeared in his portraits, the subjects were always Mexican (with the exception of his portrait of Bishop Metzger, “the people's bishop”)¹²⁴ and poised in proud and matter-of-fact stances that celebrate their belonging there.

The river plays a salient role in Acosta's portraits of the border. It is used as a marker for the distinction of both nations and can be read as both a uniting and a dividing force in Acosta's paintings. While he rarely makes a direct indication of which side of the border his subject is on, the presence of the river speaks to the international boundary's ubiquity in the lives of El Paso's Mexican-origin people. Acosta's rendition of the *Rio Grande* shows how for border Chicano/as, the experience of living in proximity to

¹²⁴ Manuel Acosta, *El Obispo del Pueblo/Bishop Sydney Metzger*, date unknown, El Paso Diocese Collection.

Mexico provided both a source of cultural rootedness and a sense of alienation all at once. Those paintings that elicit the river as a cultural context highlight the significance of the border to his experience and his art.

Both *The Banquet* and *Still Life with Landscape of Mountains and River* draw on a symbolic language that affirms Mexican culture on the border and situates his people amidst the *Rio Grande*.¹²⁵ Like the instruments, fruit, and other symbols that fill the raft in *Barco de la illusion*, in *The Banquet* Acosta put cultural items on the table—large paper flowers, clay vessels containing food and drink including sacramental bread and wine, and fruit that sit underneath a string of *papel picado* while two guitars rest on the ground next to the table in the foreground of the widening gray-blue river that bisects the composition.¹²⁶ This piece adapts a classical European style to his statement of Mexican identity in the borderlands. The still life objects come alive in Acosta's placement of them in front of the Rio Grande by lighting up the desolate landscape with the colors of the fruit, paper flowers, *papel picado*, and a large clear vessel of bright gold liquid—possibly *agua fresca de piña*—that all contrast with the muted gray-brown earth and the cool silver water behind the table. By juxtaposing the river with Mexican material culture in his landscape *Bodegón* paintings, Acosta envisaged the relationship between the Rio Grande and its surrounding territory with the ancestral symbols of Mexicans in the Southwest and Northern Mexico.

Acosta's portraits also utilized the river as a means to both celebrate the lives of Mexicans on the border and to illuminate the transience of belonging in a locale subject

¹²⁵ Manuel Acosta, *Still Life with Landscape of Mountains and River*, date unknown, Michael and Carol Bernstein Collection.

¹²⁶ Manuel Acosta, *The Banquet*, date unknown, Acosta Family Collection.

to a long colonial history. The *Rio Grande* can be read as either a uniting or dividing force in three portraits of Mexican-origin people in the borderlands—*Señora Maria del Carmen Rodriguez/Maria del Carmen, Red Bandana (Irrigator, Sunday Afternoon)/Panuelo rojo (el regador domingo por la tarde)*, and *Young Man by Rio Grande/Joven cerca del Rio Grande*. In two of them, however, canals cut through fertile fields in agricultural scenes that serve as the backdrop to the portraits' subjects. The canal in Maria del Carmen's portrait closely resembles that in *Acequia* and marks the landscape with her presence, as she reclines comfortably and almost defiantly in the rural scene that appears to be her home.¹²⁷ In *Red Bandana/Panuelo rojo* a man rests from his labor in the sun while stalks of corn tassel at his side, the canal bringing its life giving irrigation to the fields that he has been working. The ancestral connection with this land is embodied in the pastoral scene, especially the corn that was the pre-Columbian sustenance of Mexico and demonstrates to the viewer the indigenoussness of Mexicans.¹²⁸ In both of these paintings, the Rio Grande is present in the canals, which bring water from the larger river that cuts through the borderlands dividing both nations while sating the thirst of the crops grown by the region's Mexicans.

In *Young Man by Rio Grande/Joven cerca del Rio*, a teenage boy poses with his gaze cast downward in melancholy and a stalk of corn grows next to him in the foreground in front of the river while an adobe structure sits on the other side of it. Despite the painting's title's assurance that this is, in fact, the river that separates both nations, we are unable to tell which side is the U.S. and which is Mexico. This is a

¹²⁷ Manuel Acosta, *Señora Maria del Carmen Rodriguez*, date unknown, Lindsay Green Collection.

¹²⁸ Manuel Acosta, *Red Bandana (Irrigator, Sunday Afternoon)/Panuelo rojo (el regador domingo por la tarde)*, before 1975, Tres Featherstone Collection.

common artistic move by Acosta in portraits that he placed in front of the Rio Grande and emphasizes his vision of the connection of El Paso and Juárez through the Mexican origin people who called both cities home. For all three portraits, the river represents a link to a deeper history that is fundamental to survival in the desert landscape of the U.S.-Mexico border. Acosta employs cultural symbols that announce the historical existence of Mexicans in the borderlands, resisting the colonial legacy of the Western art tradition. He spoke to multiple audiences through his artistic idiom, reinforcing the love of Mexican culture for Chicanos and illustrating his people's history in their ancestral homeland to white American society.

While the timelessness of the Mexican presence in the borderlands is highlighted by his pastoral renditions, Acosta's artwork also shed light on the contemporary, urban lives of Mexicans there. Despite his frequent use of rural scenes to demonstrate the close relationship of Mexicans to this region's landscape, he also situated Chicanos in the barrios of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. His charcoal illustrations for the published collection of poems by poet, Ricardo Sánchez, *Canto y grito mi liberación: The Liberation of the Chicano Mind*, cohere a picture of life of Chicanos in South Central El Paso in the twentieth century. The first image in the book consists of a rock wall behind intersecting street signs that read "Hammett and Findley" (the location of Acosta's childhood home which was destroyed in the building of the international highway) while a small boy peaks out shyly from behind the wall.¹²⁹ Other drawings in *Canto y grito my liberación* include a portrait of Acosta's father, Don Ramón, in front of the *Segundo*

¹²⁹ Manuel Acosta, illustration in *Canto y grito mi liberación: The Liberation of a Chicano Mind* by Ricardo Sánchez, (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday & Company, 1973), 24.

barrio tenements that were the family's first home together in El Paso as well as children playing in the neighborhood's housing projects.¹³⁰ His representation of Chicanos in this historically Mexican neighborhood provides an affirmation of their belonging in the border city. The adobe wall on Hammett and Findley in the book's first illustration recalls a story of Acosta being forced from his home in El Paso, reliving a long history of colonial displacement for Chicanos in the borderlands.

Acosta's family home was located in a neighborhood situated directly on the border with Mexico known as the Chamizal. During the 1960s, U.S. and Mexican leaders resolved a century old dispute regarding the location of the international boundary.¹³¹ When the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo marked the Rio Grande as America's southernmost border with Mexico in 1848, the river's deepest channel, or "thalweg" was meant to represent the water's course.¹³² When the Rio Grande's path shifted, this waterway was meant to serve as the definitive boundary regardless of additional channels carved by the river. However, over the course of the twentieth-century the river's deepest channel found its way as far half a mile from its original course in some places, creating additional territory on the American side. Because the "thalweg" was eventually farther south than it had been in 1848, both countries disputed the land between the river's two main channels.¹³³ Since the water's path had moved throughout the twentieth-century, the U.S. side had gradually gained additional territory that was still officially part of

¹³⁰ Ibid, 110-11.

¹³¹ Gladys Gregory, *The Chamizal Settlement: A View from El Paso* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1963), 39-42.

¹³² Jerry Mueller, *Restless River: International Law and the Behavior of the Rio Grande* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1975), 15-20.

¹³³ Ibid, 121-5.

Mexico.¹³⁴ In 1963 Presidents Adolfo López Mateos and John F. Kennedy resolved the hundred-year conflict over the international boundary and a massive border redevelopment project ensued that over the next decade would spell the end the Chamizal neighborhood and the Acosta family home.

A huge swath of South El Paso was destroyed when local leaders used eminent domain to eject Acosta's and many other families from their homes to make way for the international highway in 1970. Losing his childhood home and his studio was overwhelmingly devastating and disruptive for Acosta, and in many ways he never fully recovered, he suffering emotionally and financially for the rest of his life. The Acosta residence at Hammett and Findley was the artist's place of work, his creative headquarters, and the first house owned by his family in El Paso. The city compensated him financially for his property but he underwent severe disappointment and depression as a result of the entire ordeal. In his family's history in the city, to have been ejected from the abode they had strived for so many years to make their own was a traumatic blow. Their immigration from Mexico in a time of turmoil, their ongoing survival and struggle to build their home there through hard work and sacrifice despite comprising a racialized economic underclass, Acosta himself having risked his life in world war, all constituted sacrifices that earned the Acosta family their rightful place in their beloved El Paso neighborhood. The loss of their hard won home bore heavy on Acosta's heart.¹³⁵

The story of the destruction of the Chamizal neighborhood and the eviction of the Acostas from their home was part of a larger endeavor of border development and militarization. When El Paso implemented a ten-year plan to resolve a century long

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Acosta, interview, 1973, 24-25.

dispute over the position of the international boundary line, dissenters from the Chamizal *barrio* attempted to save their homes and businesses from the march of “progress.”¹³⁶ County Commissioners and the International Water and Boundary Commission seized the opportunity to redraw the river’s channel and the transportation routes towards and across the border.¹³⁷ With the U.S. ceding over 600 acres to Mexico, the agreement allowed both countries to undertake the massive construction project of a highway that would level many additional homes besides those on the land slated to be returned to Mexico. Because the legislative proceedings that provided for these changes were tied up in the international resolution of the concern over the boundary, residents attempted to halt the ratification of the Chamizal Agreement.¹³⁸

While local and national leaders framed the plan as a great benefit to both nations, *barrio* members knew full well that their homes could all be subject to destruction once the treaty was ratified. The Chamizal Improvement Association organized to demand the transparency of proposed decisions about the area surrounding the border on the American side. They asked that the details of where the new boundary would be drawn and what transformations it might wreak on the remaining neighborhood be made clear before the treaty’s ratification.¹³⁹ However, city officials were careful to keep specifics out of the initial discussions of what was to become of the Chamizal neighborhood. Despite professed concerns by leaders that property owners be generously compensated for their losses, Chamizal residents resisted, knowing that as residents of a poor, Mexican

¹³⁶ Marshall Hail, “Transfer of Chamizal to Mexico Ends Old Dispute,” *El Paso Herald Post*, October 27, 1967.

¹³⁷ “Mayor Hurries Chamizal Plans,” *El Paso Herald Post*, July 16, 1963.

¹³⁸ “Chamizal Protest Placed in County Minutes,” *El Paso Herald Post*, December 9, 1963.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*

neighborhood, powerful interests would give little concern to them.¹⁴⁰ The city did not alert Acosta of their plans to take his family's Hammett and Findley residence for at least three years. He discovered its fate by accident when he went to apply for a permit to make additions to the property in 1966.¹⁴¹ Having no recourse to stop his family's eviction instilled in Acosta a deep sense of powerlessness and frustration.¹⁴²

Ultimately, there was little the residents of the Chamizal neighborhood could do to stop the local, national, and international forces that all but completely destroyed their barrio. While some residences closest to the boundary line were ceded to Mexico, the Acosta family home was razed to make way for highway columns upholding the new Cordova International Bridge. Local media sources described the neighborhood as a blighted community and lauded the widespread displacement of Chamizal residents as a boon for the city.¹⁴³ They highlighted the economic benefits and covered the sentiments of evicted residents in defeatist and concessive terms, ignoring the large fight by businesses, homeowners, and tenants to maintain their cherished Chamizal neighborhood.¹⁴⁴ While Acosta held out hope that his family would not have to face eviction, he was crushed when ultimately confronted with the reality that they would have to leave their beloved home on Hammett and Findley in 1970 when the city's construction plans were implemented.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ "Yarbrough Given Chamizal Credit," *El Paso Herald Post*, December 16, 1963.

¹⁴¹ Acosta, interview, 1973, 24.

¹⁴² Theresa Gallardo, interview by author, El Paso, TX, April 26, 2014.

¹⁴³ Editorial, "Chamizal Pact Opens Door to Progress," *El Paso Herald Post*, July 18, 1963.

¹⁴⁴ "Some Chamizal Residents Disapprove Settlement Plan," *El Paso Herald Post*, July 18, 1963.

¹⁴⁵ Betty Peirce, "'True Artist Reflects His Own Times,' Acosta Painting Offered at Sale," *El Paso Herald Post*, August 29, 1970.

The Acosta home on Hammett and Findley had been a landmark in the family's rich history—the scene of gatherings, food, cousins, music and dancing. Acosta's nieces and nephews reminisce with a wistful nostalgia about visits to their grandparents, who continued to live there with Acosta as he built his studio on their compound.¹⁴⁶ Don Ramón, as the family called him, kept a tab running at the corner store across the street from their house and it made his grandchildren feel like aristocracy when they went there to purchase items for the family without having to pay in cash.¹⁴⁷ Ramón Acosta had established himself in that neighborhood during the great economic hardship caused by the Depression on the border. He financed a home for his family as a laborer in El Paso and their place at Hammett and Findley represented a lifetime of hard work and commitment to their life in the city.¹⁴⁸

Acosta's life and work were severely disrupted by the changes wrought from the loss of his home and studio. When his family was finally evicted in 1970, Acosta knew he would have to start from scratch to build an adequate studio and accommodate the rich social world that was at the heart of his artistic life. It took him roughly three years to catch up to his schedule for shows and commissions, but the deeper feeling of having been ousted from a home he loved was a hardship that could not be compensated financially.¹⁴⁹ Still, he made the best of the situation and built the studio of his dreams on Buena Vista, about a mile east of Hammett and Findley. He was able to create the optimal conditions for utilizing natural light. His Buena Vista studio became the new site of Acosta's well-known parties. Despite the trauma and fecklessness he felt as a result of

¹⁴⁶ Irma Chavira and Ramon Acosta, interview by author, El Paso, TX, March 10, 2015.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ *El Paso City Directory*, John F. Worley and Co., 1932, 120.

¹⁴⁹ Acosta, interview, 1973, 24-25.

being forced to leave his home and disturb his work schedule, Acosta sought to push through and continue his mission rather than undergo any kind of lasting defeat.¹⁵⁰ In the decades following the ordeal, however, Acosta underwent a deep depression that was likely rooted in the frustration and sadness experienced by a poor Mexican community because of their powerlessness to maintain the neighborhood that they had held dear across generations.¹⁵¹

The Acosta family's loss of their home is part of a long history of colonial violence in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. At the El Paso-Juárez border in particular, multiple waves of conquest and oppression mark both sides and Acosta's story highlights this fact. As soon as talks began regarding the fate of the Chamizal neighborhood, low-income Mexican residents knew exactly what it meant for a more powerful entity to demand they yield their properties and to have little recourse to counter the injustice. They demanded a halt on the ratification of the Chamizal Agreement because they had no illusion about the transience of their rights to their homes in the face of the IWBC and County Commissioners who were seeking to garner approval for the plan.¹⁵² While Acosta's property was not part of the Cordova island tract that was used to mark the territory returned to Mexico, he still had no hold on his house and studio when confronted with the construction of the highway across the new port of entry created as a result of the project.

Viewing the Chamizal Agreement through the lens of Acosta's story, the event emerges as a part of a series of colonial incursions and important truths about race, class,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Jemente, interview, 2014.

¹⁵² "Chamizal Protest Placed in County Minutes."

and citizenship on the border are illuminated. The Chamizal residents, primarily Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, had lived in this South El Paso neighborhood for generations and were forced to give up not only their homes but the community that they had built with one another as well. When they left the *barrio*, the 3,500 Chamizaleños were scattered to different neighborhoods all over the city.¹⁵³ The Acostas stayed nearby, joining the adjacent Fox Plaza area, Don Ramón and Doña Concha moving into their own home separate from their son, whose property neighbored his sister's on Buena Vista.¹⁵⁴ Chamizal had been a *barrio* distinct in culture and history, occupying a liminal space between nations and cities.¹⁵⁵

When local and national forces colluded to destroy the Chamizal neighborhood, residents grated under a long legacy of displacement and disfranchisement. Losing the community that they had spent a century building was the most painful aspect of being forced to leave their homes in the area.¹⁵⁶ The eviction of those families whose homes had occupied Cordova Island could be rationalized as resulting from the precariousness of nature, the shifting course of a river arbitrarily changing in shape and depth in an undefinable way. But the Acosta family home was taken to build the international freeway at Cordova, part of the massive re-ordering of how people and commerce would flow across the border in the coming decades.¹⁵⁷ The confiscation of Acosta's home was part of a larger process of ongoing colonial oppression that marked the borderlands with the divestment of humanity from its Mexican-origin people. As the last frontier of conquest

¹⁵³ Jeffrey M. Schulze, "The Chamizal Blues: El Paso, the Wayward River, and the Peoples in Between," *Western Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 319.

¹⁵⁴ Jemente, interview, 2014.

¹⁵⁵ Schulze, "Chamizal Blues," 322.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ Peirce, "Artist Reflects His Times."

at the geo-political edge of the nation's bounds, the U.S.-Mexico border is the place where government power manifests the continued control of this territory.

Acosta's eviction was part of a longer historical trajectory of imperial authority in the borderlands. Because of his home's proximity to the international boundary, his story illustrates how governmental authority gets exercised most severely at its farthest reaches and defines the cohesiveness of the U.S. nation-state through its separation from Mexico. That their home was taken to build the new Cordova Bridge exemplifies how centuries of hegemonic power get enforced at the local level through systems of international diplomacy and commerce. The revolutionary changes in U.S. immigration policy that coincided with the decade preceding the culmination of the Chamizal Agreement doubtlessly influenced the desire for business and political leaders to develop the border and to gain a greater influence over the flow of people and money across it. Ultimately, it was these forces who stood to benefit from the re-arrangement of the Chamizal territory at the expense of those, like Acosta's family, who had built their homes there—this liminal terrain around and between a shifting river that altered the fates of thousands because of its relationship to a broader context of international relations and the colonial history of the U.S. in its dealings with Mexico and its people.

The border was the fundamental contextual force that shaped Acosta's art. His family's story epitomized the Mexican American experience but was unique in its extreme proximity to the actual international boundary line. Such closeness had a profound influence on Acosta's paintings, figuring prominently into his representations of Chicanos in the borderlands. He demonstrated that El Paso and Juárez were linked in a shared history and that the people of both cities had a common Mexican ancestry. In

doing so, he painted Chicanos into American history and established a creative mainstay in the borderlands of the Southwest. He therefore affirmed the belonging of Mexicans in the U.S. and highlighted their indigenosity in the bordered landscape that is fundamentally a colonized one.

Acosta was the premier border Chicano artist of the mid-twentieth century. By virtue of being a Southwest artist, he was born into a Western art tradition that had been part of a broad colonial project. White artists painted Native American and Mexican subjects in contexts that suited the U.S. political agenda to colonize the West. Funded by the railroads, they formed actual colonies and took a stake in the society of the indigenous people who they exploited to make their art. Acosta set himself apart from these artists in distinct terms, asserting explicitly his own goals to “paint the people of El Paso—the Mexican Americans.” Unlike the artists of the Santa Fe and Taos art colonies, Acosta painted his own people in their homeland. At midcentury when Cold War xenophobia and centuries of white supremacy meant little opportunity for Mexican-origin people to represent themselves, Acosta crafted his own vision of Mexican life in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands that upheld the humanity and belonging of Chicano/as.

A clear understanding of the border as a colonized space emerges when examined through the prism of Acosta’s story. It is in some way tragically ironic that the very border home that Acosta treasured so dearly was taken from him by the state as part of a more general project of border militarization and development. Being forced from their homes was more than an inconvenience for the members of the Chamizal neighborhood. They lost a unique and deeply treasured community built by a people who had occupied a liminal space in a very real way. Living in the Chamizal had been like living as close to

Mexico as one could get without actually being there. It was a truly Chicano/a neighborhood in its position between nations and provides a salient example of how Mexican origin people have been affected by U.S. colonial aggression on the border.

Acosta's life also offers a narrative of resistance and resilience. He built his new studio as close to the Rio Grande as his original one, maintaining his jubilant presence in the Lower Valley neighborhood of El Paso. Experiencing not only the professional setbacks from the ordeal, he also lost a cherished landmark in the Acosta family history. That his father, a Mexican immigrant could escape turmoil in his home country and build a home for his family as a low-wage earning laborer was a source of great pride for the Acostas. Their home had been a symbol of that story. It also represented a site of the art and celebration that Manuel made possible in El Paso. To lose it devastated him emotionally and psychologically. Still, he pressed on and turned his crisis into an opportunity to build a bigger and better studio—the scene of many more of Acosta's beloved parties and a venue to continue doing what he loved for another two decades—painting the Mexican people of the borderlands.

Chapter Three

Acosta as a Chicano Artist

As Manuel Acosta hurriedly painted César Chávez's portrait for *Time Magazine* one night in a New York hotel room it was not at all how he had imagined immortalizing him when first asked by the magazine's editors. Having arrived in the city that day with a version of the painting that he had worked on at a more leisurely pace in his home studio—using photographs as he was now doing, Acosta was drafting a second likeness because, according to *Time's* editors, the first one made the United Farm Workers (UFW) leader appear too young.¹⁵⁸ Months before, when a traveling exhibit of magazine's portrait covers came to the border city, *Time* scouted the area in search of a local artist to paint Chávez. Leonard Sipiora, the El Paso Museum of Art director, suggested they recruit Acosta for this task. They then attended a party at the artist's home and studio after he hosted an exhibit there and hired him immediately to produce the portrait of the UFW leader for the magazine's cover. Acosta's portrait, appearing on the front of its July 4, 1969 issue, which featured a story on the battle between farm workers and growers in California, not only provided the artist with the opportunity to represent Mexican American political and economic interests in the national arena, but also showcased his creative talent.¹⁵⁹

Acosta was overwhelmingly proud and excited to take part in something so historically momentous. For him it was a culmination of years of painting Mexican-origin

¹⁵⁸ Manuel Acosta, interview by John McNeeley, February 1, 1973, interview 63, transcript, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso, 53.

¹⁵⁹ Betty Peirce, "El Paso Artist Has Portrait on Current Time Magazine Cover," *El Paso Herald Post*, July 2, 1969.

people into American art and validation for his aims to depict them in their full humanity. The recognition that he gained from the opportunity signaled the crowning accomplishment of his career. During the months leading up to his first submission of Chávez's portrait, he had no idea how challenging it would ultimately be to please *Time's* editors. *Time* rejected his original painting and since the UFW leader did not want to participate in the magazine's story and was avoiding their personnel, Acosta had to rely on multiple, more contemporary photographs of Chávez taken remotely using a telephoto lens for the final product.¹⁶⁰ Acosta stayed up all night drinking a six-pack of beer as he rushed to finish the additional painting. Pleased with the second version, *Time's* editors accepted it, and paid Acosta rather matter-of-factly.¹⁶¹

To have experienced what he considered such a significant achievement so unceremoniously was perhaps the most appropriate finale to his work for *Time* in New York. The fundamental difficulty in depicting an accurate rendition of Chávez stemmed from the fact that Acosta was used to having his subjects sit for him, and thus enabling him to capture living people connected to his social world and the wider Chicano/a community. Chávez, however refused to sit for *Time* and retreated from the media spotlight, mistrusting how his people's struggle would be represented in the magazine's story.¹⁶² Years later, after Chávez and Acosta had been introduced and became friends, the activist lamented that he had made the artist's job more difficult by not agreeing to meet him as part of *Time's* commission.¹⁶³ In response to the New York-based magazine's request for a sitting Chávez wrote, "If you want to paint a picture of me, paint

¹⁶⁰ Acosta, interview, 55.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 55-56.

¹⁶² Peirce, "El Paso Artist on Time Magazine Cover."

¹⁶³ Acosta, interview, 56.

my fellow workers,” Based on this stance, Acosta admired the UFW leader, considering him a humble and principled individual, and did not hold the activist’s decision against him in the slightest. Acosta understood Chávez’s commitment to his cause for their struggle to gain equality for Chicano/as in U.S. society was one in the same, despite the differing fronts on which they waged this fight.¹⁶⁴

Acosta used his artistic talent and his love of his local borderlands community to uplift the Chicano/a cause. His story reveals how Mexican Americans took part in the *movimiento* in whatever capacities they could. As the historiography of the Chicano/a movement grows, the political aspects of it continue to be the main focal point of this scholarship and understandably so given that it was a political movement. However, looking at the cultural transformations that occurred alongside and in conjunction with the political ones demonstrates the ways in which Chicano/as like Acosta exercised agency as part of a broader struggle for the recognition of their humanity. He played an active role in the artistic life of his city and offers an example of how the Chicano/a movement manifested as a regional phenomenon. His story points to the ways in which the *movimiento* took on a distinct character in each region that it manifested. In the borderlands, specifically, Acosta epitomizes the cultural transformations that preceded and were fundamental to the Chicano/a movement. Acosta’s life demonstrates how on the border it was common for people to be a Mexican immigrant and a Chicano/a all at once. Therefore Chicanismo derived a kind of life force from the proximity of Mexico for the Chicano/as of El Paso. Acosta thought of himself primarily as a Mexican as evidenced by his referring to himself as a “wetback,” not necessarily identifying heavily with any

¹⁶⁴ Peirce, “El Paso Artist on Time Magazine Cover.”

specific indicator of his identity while re-appropriating the slur as means to reveal that he did not necessarily take such identification very seriously.¹⁶⁵ For him Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Chicano/as represented a singular people in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

While Acosta embodied Mario García's "generational approach" to Chicano/a history as a member of the Mexican American Generation, his life is remarkable because it transcends generational divisions in many ways. He worked across generations and embodied the values and experience of his own generation while collaborating with and supporting the Chicano/a generation as well. As a Mexican immigrant, a member of the Mexican American Generation and veteran of WWII, and a person who supported the Chicano/a cause of the subsequent generation, his life demonstrates the ways in which the Chicano/a Renaissance was truly intergenerational. Collaborating with other Chicano/a artist and representing the Chicano/a cause through his art, Acosta defied the conservatism associated with the Mexican American Generation as he contributed to the Chicano/a cause through his art. The work he had been doing since he returned to El Paso from his tour in Europe in WWII created an aesthetic that celebrated Mexican identity in the U.S. By portraying Mexican-origin people as beautiful, diverse, autonomous, and at home in the borderlands landscape, Acosta helped contribute to a cultural shift that allowed for the political aspects of the *movimiento* to be eventuated.

This chapter therefore focuses on Acosta's contributions to Chicano/a art and what is increasingly being studied as a Chicano/a Renaissance in the mid to late twentieth-century. It does so by looking at his paintings, reading them for affirmations of

¹⁶⁵ Manuel Acosta, interview, 2.

Chicanismo, and situating him among a broader movement in which the political and the cultural were fundamentally imbricated. By exploring how Chicano/a art developed as part of the *movimiento*, but also served as a specific component of it, I ask how the cultural changes that defined the Chicano/a Renaissance were inherently political. I seek to show the multifarious ways in which Mexican origin people resisted white supremacy in the twentieth century U.S. Acosta's life provides an example of an exceptional and under-recognized artist—a Chicano dedicated to his people and his community who crafted a vibrant cultural world on the U.S.-Mexico border beginning with his return from service in WWII until his death in 1989. Through the lens of his career as a painter, it is clear how a commitment to the aims of the Chicano/a movement was a part of daily life for Chicano/as and manifested in the work of everyday people.

A series of events signaled the onset of the *movimiento* in El Paso, the coalescence of the rise of the Chicano/a student movement, the class-consciousness that bore out in the strikes against the city's exploitative garment industry, and a cultural shift in which Chicano/a identity became more widely celebrated. Acosta contributed to the latter throughout his career as an artist which preceded the rise of the political aspects of the Chicano/a movement.¹⁶⁶ Characterized by the youth led movement for Chicano/a education that culminated in the student take-over of the administrative building at UTEP along with the Marxist underpinnings of the Farah garment protests, the radical aspects of the Chicano/a movement in El Paso did not begin until the 1970s.¹⁶⁷ The onset of

¹⁶⁶ "Martin Wilson, "The Week: Confrontation," *The Prospector*, December 9, 1971.

¹⁶⁷ Vicki Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 128-31.

Acosta's career predated these events by a generation. He had been painting Mexicans El Paso upon returning from his military service in WWII.

By the time that the Chicano/a movement gained momentum in El Paso in the 1970s, Acosta was already in his forties, established as one of the city's most treasured painters, and not given to going out and participating in the kind of activism that one typically associates with the *movimiento*. For example, he was not very likely to join the likes of the University of Texas at El Paso students who took over the administrative building in protest of the university's lack of Chicano/a studies despite being a border school,¹⁶⁸ however, he did look to the Chicano/a movement as a burgeoning source of something to which he had already spent decades devoting his career. His mission had long been to paint the Chicano/as of El Paso and the increasing pride in Mexican identity that was key to the *movimiento* helped bring to fruition what Acosta had been cultivating since the 1940s through his art. For example, *Four Brothers/Cuatro hermanos*, one of his first paintings upon his return from WWII, portrays him and his brothers as Chicano war heroes and asserts the importance of Mexican Americans in U.S. history. From the beginning of his career Acosta sought to develop a visual narrative of his people as central to American society despite the white supremacist insistence of their marginality. He made it his mission to counter a discourse that posited the foreignness of Mexicans in the U.S. and *Cuatro Hermanos* evidences that this was one of his fundamental artistic objectives from the onset of his career.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Bob Ybarra, "Reasons Outlined for UTEP Unrest," *El Paso Herald Post*, January 12, 1972.

¹⁶⁹ Manuel Acosta, *Cuatro Hermanos*, 1947, Tony Acosta Collection.

Representing Chicanos in their ethnic, cultural, and racial heterogeneity was essential to Acosta's aim to humanize his people through art. Often misread in the white, commercial art world as idyllic images of quaint Mexican life, his paintings revealed a narrative of resistance against the colonial violence and white supremacy that sought to erase Chicano/as from the historical landscape.¹⁷⁰ He did so by making Mexicans visible in American art. By the 1950s, his already prolific growing body of portraits developed a vision of the people of El Paso that reflected the city's demographics. Acosta reoriented a picture of Mexicans in the U.S. as culturally distinct and yet beautiful in their own diversity. As a culture-maker in El Paso, his life is an example of the ways that the Chicano/a movement fomented at the regional level. Like other Chicano/a artists, Acosta contributed to the changes in the life of his city in a way that was part of a larger *movimiento* to fight the marginalization of Mexicans in American society. His art nuanced a national discourse that cast Mexican origin people as perpetually foreign in the U.S.¹⁷¹

The community of artists that Acosta was a part of was linked to a broader Chicano/a Renaissance that was emerging out of the mid-twentieth century. While this cultural movement coincided with the political aspects of the *movimiento*, it was arguably more long lasting than the radical militancy typically associated with the *movimiento*.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Jamison Galleries Flyer, July, 1967, Peter and Henriette Wyeth Hurd Papers, Box 2, Reel 5126, American Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Microfilm.

¹⁷¹ "Acosta: A Man and His Art," *Nosotros* 2, no. 6, September, 1972, Tomas Ybarra Frausto Papers, box 1, folder 4, American Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

¹⁷² David R. Maciel, Isidro D. Ortiz, and Maria Herrera-Sobek, eds., *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), xviii-xix.

Acosta's artistic celebration of Chicano/a life in the U.S. began a generation before the political radicalism of the Chicano/a movement. By the early 1980s, long after the political efforts of the Chicano/a student movement of the 1960s and 1970s had reached their zenith, Chicano/a art had developed its multifarious components and continued to thrive through the work of Mexican American culture-makers like Acosta.¹⁷³ Chicano/a art historian, George Vargas, charts the trajectory of it across the twentieth-century as an inherently political and mobilizing force for the political changes that culminated in the 1960s and 1970s in the edited volume, *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends*. He explains that, "Chicano visual art intertwines Mexican and American history into a unique historical perspective that, by its very nature, is political and therefore provocative because it challenges our preconceived notions about Chicanos."¹⁷⁴ This chapter discusses Mago Orona Gandara, sculptor, mosaic artist, and Acosta's dear friend. It highlights her cultural importance to the borderlands city as well as her aims to create art that unified the American and Mexican sister cities in a shared experience as a single border community.¹⁷⁵ While this volume presents a much needed initial survey of Chicano/a art, it focuses mainly on that created after the 1970s, pointing to a need to understand the historical significance of Chicano/a artists working earlier in the century.

Acosta's story thus adds to the growing body of scholarship looking at the cultural aspects of the *movimiento* as his art proved that the Mexican experience was as

¹⁷³ Shifra Goldman, "Chicano Art Alive and Well in Texas: A 1981 Update," *Revista chicano-riqueña* (Bloomington: Indiana University, Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, 1981), 34.

¹⁷⁴ George Vargas, "A Historical Overview/Update on the State of Chicano Art," *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000), 195.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 216-18.

much a part of the fabric of U.S. society as that of any other group from as early as the late 1940s. By the 1960s, he along with other El Paso artists created a cultural life for the people of the borderlands city who had long been exploited as a racial and economic underclass. They thus resisted white supremacy through their art and contributed to the larger transformations that provided for the political pinnacle of the Chicano/a movement in the 1960s and 1970s. By mid century, Acosta and his ilk contributed to the cultural life of El Paso and used their art as radical celebrations of Mexican identity in the U.S. They actively participated in humanizing their people through art and developed a vibrant border community despite challenges posed by their ongoing subjugation in the American body politic.

Acosta was one of many artists in El Paso who established a creative life rooted in Mexican culture. Along with the likes of sculptor Mago Orona Gandara, poet Ricardo Sanchez, dancer Rosa Guerrero, and journalist Joe Olvera, Acosta helped shape El Paso culture in a way that laid a foundation for the Chicano/a movement. By complicating the teleological Anglo-centrism at the heart of the Texas history that they had learned as children, these artists cultivated an environment in which their Mexican heritage could be cherished and treasured.¹⁷⁶ In doing so, they fought a hegemonic system that rendered them a threat to the national security and cultural authenticity of the U.S. Chicano/a art in El Paso affirmed the presence of Mexicans in a society that racialized them as perpetually Other. Acosta was one of the first of this cultural movement that called for a new appreciation of Mexican origin people in American history.

¹⁷⁶ Rosa Guerrero, interview by author, El Paso, TX, October 28, 2015.

Acosta was therefore one of many artists who took part in a cultural Renaissance that took pride in Mexican identity in the mid twentieth century on the border and beyond. Artists used their creative platforms as a way to advance changes that were fundamental to the Chicano/a movement. Ricardo Sanchez was El Paso neighborhood, *Segundo Barrio*'s poet and narrated songs of rebellion against colonial white supremacy in the borderlands. Acosta illustrated Sanchez's *Canto y grito mi liberación: Liberation of the Chicano Mind* with images that relate his own childhood in *Segundo*.¹⁷⁷ Together the two of them made a powerful piece of literature that articulated the Chicano/a experience, particularly of Mexican origin people in the borderlands. By celebrating their youth as two *barrio* kids, their work together on this book serves as a key piece of Chicano/a literature that came out of El Paso as part of the Chicano/a Renaissance.¹⁷⁸ Their collaboration indicates how Chicano/a artists combined their efforts to produce a canon that addressed Mexican culture in U.S. society.

This collective work also shows how Acosta worked with Chicano/a leaders in an intergenerational way and learned from the radicalism of his younger counterparts. Sanchez was twenty years Acosta's junior when he collaborated with him on an important piece to the Chicano/a literary canon. Sanchez's and Acosta's collaborative development of *Canto y grito mi liberación* is an example of the intergenerational ties of Mexican-origin activists that historian Mario García has identified.¹⁷⁹ García's emphasis on Mexican American leadership from 1930-1960 underscores the significance of

¹⁷⁷ Manuel Acosta, illustration in *Canto y grito mi liberación: The Liberation of a Chicano Mind* by Ricardo Sanchez, (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday & Company, 1973), 80.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 98.

¹⁷⁹ Mario Garcia, *Mexican Americans, Leadership, Ideology and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1989), 13.

Chicano/as like Acosta who fomented the earliest changes preceding the more radical phase of the *movimiento* in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁸⁰ Acosta serves as an example of a cultural leader of the Mexican American Generation who learned from and cooperated with the next generation of Chicano/as as evidenced in his work with Sanchez, himself an important artist for his own generation of cultural leaders. They both show how Mexican origin people worked for change across the twentieth century as part of an ongoing work against racism through multifarious endeavors over time.

Canto y grito mi liberación narrates Sanchez's rendition of Chicano/a life in the borderlands in the twentieth century while Acosta's illustrations accompany the bilingual poetry. His charcoal drawings of children playing in *Segundo Barrio* tenements provide the visual representation of Sanchez's verse and reminisce upon his own childhood there, relating a common experience of border Chicano/as.¹⁸¹ These illustrations include images of young men being beaten by police and incarcerated as casualties to a white supremacist criminal justice system in the U.S. Acosta's artistic contributions to *Canto y grito mi liberación* present an image of Chicano/a life in American society and resist the systemic racism reproduced in his illustrations. His work here serves as another example of his multifarious participation in the Chicano/a movement in a way specific to his creative capacities.¹⁸²

The artists who participated in the Chicano/a Renaissance in El Paso made Mexican culture central to their work. Acosta had been celebrating Mexicans in American art with his paintings since the late 1940s. He painted other important leaders

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 18-21.

¹⁸¹ Manuel Acosta, illustration in *Canto y grito mi liberacion*, 98.

¹⁸² Ibid.

of the Chicano/a art movement in the border city including Sanchez. Dancer Rosa Guerrero was another favorite subject of Acosta's artistic study.¹⁸³ Guerrero was a known advocate for bilingual education. She brought to life a vibrant *baile folklórico* movement in El Paso and used her talent to make Mexican culture a source of strength and resilience for the city's Chicano/a youth. Guerrero and Acosta collaborated with one another on the Trinity Coalition of the Arts, a city sponsored art committee composed of Acosta, Guerrero and other Chicano leaders.¹⁸⁴ They were tasked with organizing a Mexican American cultural day at the El Paso County Coliseum as part of a larger citywide project to create a "cultural week," one that included an "African American day and a Pioneer Day."¹⁸⁵

That Acosta and Guerrero were selected by the city for this effort indicates their recognition as leaders in Chicano/a art in El Paso. The dancer recalls that they first spoke to one another at an event commemorating the most well known martyr of the Chicano/a movement, Ruben Salazar. She affirms that Acosta was the first Chicano/a artist in El Paso and remembers with great pride and fondness their friendship and work together. Both artists shared an ethos of bringing Mexican culture to the forefront of the Chicano/a struggle. Guerrero also frequented Acosta's parties, leading the crowd in lively dances. For Acosta and Guerrero, who had been educated in Texas schools during a time when white supremacist policy determined a curricula that shunned the majority of El Paso children's Mexican heritage, taking pride in their ethnic identity served as acts of resistance to their marginalization. They thus contributed to a cultural movement that

¹⁸³ Manuel Acosta, *Portrait of Rosa/Retrato de Rosa*, 1974, Rosa Guerrero Collection.

¹⁸⁴ Rosa Guerrero, interview by author, 2015.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

made the significance of Mexican art in America undeniable and called into focus the dignity of Chicano/as through their aesthetic achievements.¹⁸⁶

Acosta's portraits of important Chicano/a figures like Guerrero were central to his aims to advance his people's fight for equality. By conveying the fortitude of Mexican American activists through his portraiture, he drew attention to their causes. As an artist committed to expressing the beauty of the people comprising his community, Acosta called on his art's audience to be familiar with the radical work of Chicano/a youth during an era of great transformation. In his portrait of Sanchez, Acosta reveals the power and dignity of the Chicano poet whose piercing stare is the focal point of the foreground of a pastoral scene, a fine mist settled on the field behind him. Acosta relays the poet's intensity and depth and situates him in a landscape that suggests a respite from the urban neighborhoods so familiar to both artists having grown up in *Segundo Barrio*.¹⁸⁷ In his portrait of Rosa Guerrero, Acosta captures the wistful movement of her folklorico skirt in a few intentional charcoal strokes. He evokes the expressiveness and boldness of her dance in this drawing and somehow communicates the bright color of her dress with this monochromatic medium.¹⁸⁸ For Acosta it was essential to illustrate the face of El Paso and to highlight those artists who figured so prominently in the Mexican cultural revival of this borderlands city.

Painting Chicano/a youth activists was also one of the ways in which Acosta used his art to support the Chicano/a cause. His portrait of Carmen Felix is a salient example of the ways in which Acosta stood behind the political fight against inequality for

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Manuel Acosta, *Portrait of Ricardo Sanchez/Retrato de Ricardo Sanchez*, 1960, Margaret Belk Collection.

¹⁸⁸ Acosta, *Portrait of Rosa*, 1974.

Mexican origin people in the U.S. Felix was a leader in the movement to defend the people of South El Paso in the 1970s and 1980s from displacement and predatory development. She was thrust into the role as one of its leaders, somewhat reluctantly at first, in the campaign to improve substandard housing for *Segundo Barrio* residents.¹⁸⁹ Soft spoken and well mannered, she became the public face of the radical, youth led movement because of the respectability that she brought to it. Felix was instrumental in organizing tenants of *Segundo* to protest exploitation by slumlords and hold accountable city officials who failed to enforce renters' rights in El Paso's most indigent neighborhood.¹⁹⁰ That Acosta sought to draw attention to her leadership points to a feminist impetus at work in the Chicano/a movement in the border city that both Felix and Acosta exemplified. He called on people to recognize her as an important figure and the social justice that she fought for in defending South El Paso residents.¹⁹¹

Felix's significance to the Chicano/a community was the focus of Acosta's painting of her. The interest that he took in Felix as an individual with a story, one of courage and passion for organizing El Paso's most marginalized, indicates the depth with which Acosta approached the subjects of his portraits. It also shows his aims to uphold the work of his people for equality and to use his art and his voice to participate in it. He amassed support for Felix's activism through his painting of her, inviting guests to a party whose flyer beckoned "Girasol: Come celebrate the unveiling of a portrait 'Carmen' Do you know who she is?" Prompting the community that he cultivated to be

¹⁸⁹ Wayne McClintock, "City Unveils Rent Freeze Plans," *El Paso Herald Post*, June 10, 1977.

¹⁹⁰ Carmen Felix, interview by author, El Paso, TX, May 24, 2015.

¹⁹¹ Manuel Acosta, "Girasol" flyer, October 24, 1986, Hal Marcus Papers, El Paso, TX.

familiarized with Felix, Acosta used his forum to promote her cause.¹⁹² His painting of her also emphasized her traits that embodied what he valued—strength, independence, dedication, and beauty.¹⁹³

Acosta's support of Felix as a leader in the Chicano/a struggle points to his feminist impetus. Chicana feminists critiqued the movement's male leaders for excluding them from leadership positions within it. Anna NietoGomez and Marta Cotera, among many others, documented the particular struggles that Chicanas faced at the intersection of white supremacy and patriarchal nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹⁴ Felix's role as a leader among the radical movement in El Paso in the 1970s was unique and points to the importance of Chicanas to youth activism in the borderlands. Acosta's emphasis of her significance to the Chicano/a fight for justice in El Paso is a relevant example of his support for the women leaders of the *movimiento*. By spotlighting her activism, Acosta stood behind Chicana feminism as well as the radical effort to defend El Paso's poorest constituents against exploitation.¹⁹⁵

Acosta's contributions to the Chicano/a movement through his art are especially illuminating when considered through an inter-generational lens. As mentioned, Acosta began painting Mexicans into American art during a time that preceded the most radical political changes of the *movimiento*. By 1972 when activists like Sanchez, Felix, and other student organizers at UTEP were participating in a nationwide campaign against white supremacy, Acosta was already older—an established and independent artist who

¹⁹² Ibid

¹⁹³ Manuel Acosta, *Girasol, Retrato de Carmen Felix/Girasol, Portrait of Carmen Felix*, 1986, Estate of Manuel Gregorio Acosta.

¹⁹⁴ Alma M. Garcia ed., *Chicana! Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 142-49.

¹⁹⁵ Acosta, "Girasol" flyer, 1986.

used his unique role in the El Paso community to take part in this fight in his own way.¹⁹⁶ He learned from the younger people involved in this movement and upheld the Chicano/a cause in his support of their work. Acosta was willing to take the lead from his counterparts of the subsequent generation who took up the task of dismantling unequal conditions that oppressed Mexican-origin people who were oppressed in twentieth-century America.

It was not only Acosta's art, but also the social world that he built in El Paso that served as his means for advancing Chicano/a causes. His parties were the main medium through which he expressed his creative efforts to build community. In many ways, his events brought together many disparate elements and subverted norms and accepted hierarchies. He used this setting to challenge the prestige of power and office, prove the worth of the marginalized classes, and weave a Mexican cultural thread through celebration. For Acosta, every stage of a party—from drawing the flyers, to cooking the food, to dancing all night long—was a thrill for him to dwell amidst the beloved world he had helped create along with his beloved friends and family members. This world was as much a part of his artistic endeavors as his actual visual creations.

Acosta's parties provided him the venue to craft a social world that enriched his artistic life and advanced his political aims. When considered as a medium that performed a challenge to authority and privilege, his celebrations might be seen as radical expressions of resistance to the white supremacy and class based oppression that Chicano/as in El Paso knew so well. He was known for inviting people from all walks of life, particularly wealthy white El Pasoans, politicians, and local business and religious

¹⁹⁶ Bob Ybarra, "Reasons for UTEP Unrest," 1972.

leaders. Playing pranks on guests was a key feature of the playful, unpredictable, and adventurous experience that Acosta sought to create for partygoers.¹⁹⁷ Powerful members of El Paso's elite were not exempt from this and, in fact, Acosta targeted them as a means to enact a leveling of status and prestige. Most frequently, he enlisted friends to dump the most well dressed guests in the pool.¹⁹⁸ On one occasion, Bishop Metzger fell asleep amidst a get-together and Acosta put shaving cream on the his hand whilst tickling his nose. When the Bishop awoke with a fistful of shaving cream on his face, all laughed heartily, including Metzger.¹⁹⁹

The boyish mischief and sweet charm that characterized Acosta were disarming in the face of the discomfort that high status guests had to bear as the butt of these jokes. As important to the prank itself was its resolution. He challenged authority by pranking powerful guests but also conducted himself with such warmth and kindness that his victims could not help but be good sports and joke along with everyone else.²⁰⁰ His pranks were thus a clever means to subvert privilege and status while ingeniously making it impossible for anyone to fight against his subtle yet radical messages against the city's race and class hierarchies. They served as his way of saying that here in the space he created for Chicano/a culture, the prestige of affluence and whiteness did not hold the same currency as in the rest of the world. The amicable sentiment that prevailed afforded him the means to do this in a way that did not threaten the city's wealthy, white elite while effectively working against inequality in a performative way.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ Theresa Gallardo, interview by author, El Paso, TX, April 26, 2014.

¹⁹⁸ Jemente, interview by author, 2014.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Gallardo, interview by author, 2014.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

The broader culture-making project that Acosta's art contributed to was tied to his use of celebration. Mexican music, dance, food, and tradition were the focus of these parties' themes, challenging a historical legacy that had marginalized Chicano/as in the U.S. Acosta also took great joy in bringing people together and his parties served as a means to build community and celebrate El Paso's diversity. Even though he created Chicano/a spaces through the development of a context in which Mexican culture was central, he genuinely loved enjoying the company of people from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. His ability to paint portraits of people of all ages, races, sexes, and socio-economic classes was rooted in the human dignity that he sought to recognize in each person. He established a social world emphasizing the significance of Chicanismo in the borderlands but one that also countered divisions in a city with a long history of segregation according to citizenship, race, and class.²⁰²

Acosta's parties reflected the many facets of Mexican culture that he valued deeply. This was the most apparent in the preparation and excitement that went into his annual Christmas and Easter celebrations. These events would start early in the evening with religious dramatizations of *posadas*, performances of Mary and Joseph's search for a place in which to birth Jesus, and Passion Plays usually conducted at his neighborhood church.²⁰³ They would then be moved to Acosta's home for enjoying *antojitos* followed by a full night of singing and dancing that would carry on into the wee hours of the

²⁰² Manuel Acosta, *Pilgrimage to Cristo Rey/Peregrinación a Cristo Rey*, 1989, Valerie and Buddy Moras Estate.

²⁰³ Manuel Acosta, "Posada" flyer, December 23, 1986, Hal Marcus Papers, El Paso, TX.

morning.²⁰⁴ Through his yearly religious celebrations, Acosta combined Catholic devotion with raucous all night gatherings. His parties allowed him to create and live in a world that satisfied all of the ways in which he appreciated the company of his Chicano/a community. He exalted Mexican culture and called on the people of El Paso to do the same in a way that blended religious tradition with wild festivities. In many ways, the social realm that he cultivated through his parties was as fundamental to his artistic work as were his actual paintings.

Community and relationship were Acosta's primary objectives in the professional life that he developed for himself as a Chicano artist. Unlike the mainstream American and European commercial art world of his contemporaries, Acosta did not prioritize profit as the most important aspect of his artistic career. His creative work was focused on the uplift of his people through representing them in an honest and humanizing way. Painting portraits of El Paso's Chicano/as was part of that endeavor along with the social world that he developed described above. He was able to sustain himself financially through his artistic career until the last decade of his life. This was because over the years he let people have his paintings with the promise of future payment.²⁰⁵ Since he was neither a self-promoting entrepreneur nor a debtor, he would never call in what customers owed him. Over the years this added up until he was eventually broke and despondent over his precarious economic situation.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Manuel Acosta, "Noche de Paz" flyer, December 20, 1969, Hal Marcus Papers, El Paso, TX.

²⁰⁵ Robbie Farley-Villalobos, "Before Dying, Acosta Had Been Making Changes in Art, Life" *El Paso Herald Post*, October 27, 1989.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

The reasons that Acosta pursued a life as an artist went beyond careerist or materialist ends associated with the white American art world of this era. His passion for painting the Mexican origin people of the borderlands and contributing to the cultural life of El Paso lay at the heart of his artistic efforts. It is tragic that his generous spirit and willingness to give his paintings away for free were part of his struggles with money later in life. One purchaser of a painting recalled him dancing gleefully and singing “Beer and bologna, beer and bologna!” celebrating that he would have money to buy these otherwise modest and unassuming items upon receiving a check from the customer for his work.²⁰⁷ Acosta was happy to live the humble life of the starving artist, however, as he grew older, it became untenable as he grew older and he could no longer sustain himself. Consequently, depression sank in and to a certain extent he recoiled from his social world.²⁰⁸ In the years that immediately preceded his death, close friends noted Acosta’s melancholy and his withdrawal from the congenial setting that he had created as part of his work as a borderlands artist.²⁰⁹

Acosta’s relationship with his artwork was thus more process oriented than it was toward product or wealth. This can be said of the social world that he created through his parties in addition to his visual art. He reveled in the Chicano/a community that he built, cohering a love of Mexican culture and identity that included people of all racial backgrounds. In this way he actively challenged the white American art industry that was centered on profit and individualized success. His collectivist approach to his artistic career resisted the exploitation and materialism of his day and served his organizing and

²⁰⁷ Charlcie Joan Zavala, Anecdote on form for a gallery showing of Acosta’s art, February 20, 1999, Hal Marcus Papers, El Paso, TX.

²⁰⁸ Farley Villalobos, “Acosta Had Been Making Changes in Art.”

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

political aims. Acosta often raised money for the Democratic Party and collected canned goods for the San Juan Orphanage in Ciudad Juárez as the entrance fee for his parties.²¹⁰

The trope of *Rasquachismo* played an important role in Acosta's work as a Chicano/a artist. *Rasquachismo* seeks to celebrate the "low" and to subvert hierarchies that oppress Chicano/as as a statement against white supremacy.²¹¹ By creatively making do with limited resources and developing an iconography of popular imagery, *Rasquachismo* celebrates Chicano/a identity and serves as a cultural reserve for Mexican origin people.²¹² Acosta took part in the *Rasquache* use of art in manifold ways. His representation of El Paso's poorest classes, his playful self-deprecation, and pride in his own modest life as a starving artist were all ways in which *Rasquachismo* figured into his life. He creatively placed Mexican cultural items in contexts that epitomized *Rasquachismo*. Acosta was part of this cultural movement that emerged out of the first half of the twentieth century.²¹³

Tomás Ybarra-Frausto elicits the framework used here in addressing *Rasquachismo* in Acosta's artistic life.²¹⁴ He defines it as a deep source of resilience for Chicano/as. A picaresque playfulness and willingness to create abundance out of scarcity is fundamental to a *Rasquache* approach to art. Describing the transitory and inventive quality of *Rasquachismo*, Ybarra-Frausto says:

this utilization of available resources makes for hybridization, juxtaposition and integration. *Rasquachismo* is sensibility attuned to mixtures and confluence.

²¹⁰ "El Paso Artist Beaten to Death in his Studio," *The New Mexican*, October 27, 1989.

²¹¹ Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo* (Phoenix: Movimiento Artístico del Río Salado, 1989), 5.

²¹² *Ibid*, 7.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 6.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

Communion is preferred over purity. Pulling through and making do are not guarantors of security, so things that are *Rasquache* possess an ephemeral quality, a sense of temporality and impermanence—here today gone tomorrow. While things might be created *al troche y moche* (slapdash) using whatever is at hand, attention is always given to nuances and details.²¹⁵

He goes on to say that as a “highly evolved decorative sense” derived from the improvisational experience of the *barrio*, *Rasquachismo* inverts a power structure in which Chicano/as are relegated to the bottom rungs. It does so by turning markers of unworthiness from the dominant society into “signs and symbols” of cultural coherence and firmly rooted pride.

Acosta’s performance of *Rasquachismo* as illustrated in the quote above is most evident in his paper bag hat motif. He would frequently wear a brown paper bag as a hat, resembling a fast food chef’s hat. After he finished a painting, he would often place the hat on the corner of the frame to mark that it had been completed.²¹⁶ By turning an inexpensive, unassuming, simple, brown paper bag into a Chicano/a artistic representation of culture, he created a *Rasquache* iconography specific to his own work. The bag is valueless, needed for quick tasks and then easily disposed of, much like the Chicano/o proletariat of El Paso according to the race based socio-economic hierarchy fundamental to the city’s history. He alchemically breathes life into it as he drapes it, crumpled with the shape of his head, onto the corner of a given painting fusing the two items—one the graceful product of hours upon hours of creative attention, laborious devotion, and expensive materials like oil paints and canvas and the other a piece of

²¹⁵ Ibid, 6.

²¹⁶ Rose Hartnett, “Acosta’s Death Stirs Thanks, Memories,” *El Paso Herald Post*, October 27, 1989.

otherwise trash—into a singular work of art. Acosta therefore manifested a *Rasquache* signature specific to his art through his use of the brown paper bag hat.

Playing with space by situating cultural items in alternative contexts was another way in which Acosta integrated *Rasquachismo* into his creative world. In 1969, Acosta requested that Peter Hurd, Acosta’s mentor and one of his first employers, install a *puesto* in the middle of the apple orchard at his San Patricio home, the site of an art colony, as part of a surprise for Henriette Hurd Wyeth’s birthday.²¹⁷ Henriette Hurd Wyeth was Peter Hurd’s wife and a member of the “San Patricio Five,” an art colony established by the pair that included Acosta and two other artists. A booth used in Mexican fairs and market places, the *puesto*, Acosta instructed, was to be set up and adorned beautifully with “paintings, corn husks, and dried flowers,” then revealed to Henriette while Peter walked her around their apple orchard.²¹⁸ Acosta’s use of an item commonly found in popular Mexican society and its placement within the context of the artist collective embodied *Rasquachismo*. As the only Chicano artist amidst the otherwise all white “San Patricio Five,” he took advantage of the opportunity to bring Mexican culture into the American artistic discourse. He placed the *puesto*, something he associated with festivity and community, outside amidst an orchard on the ranch, as a way to create a Chicano/a space at the art colony. Enlisting Peter in his presentation of this gift intended for Henriette, Acosta engaged the Hurds in his *Rasquache* mark on the San Patricio landscape.

²¹⁷ Manuel Acosta to Peter Hurd, December 27, 1968, Peter and Henriette Wyeth Hurd Papers, Box 2, Reel 5126, American Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Microfilm.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

By developing his own radical symbolism that subverted the dominant culture's devaluation of Mexican culture, Acosta helped contribute to a broader Chicano/a Renaissance. In doing so, he weaved El Paso into this more general cultural movement that was taking place across the U.S. in the twentieth century. This demonstrates the regional nature of the *movimiento* as local cultural and political leaders developed it within their home communities. Acosta's inventive and playful relationship to his lived-in world provided him the means to adapt his own *Rasquache* sensibility. He serves as an example of the unique cultural milieu that existed on the U.S.-Mexico border and reveals how borderlands artists integrated *Rasquache* themes into the Chicano/a movement. Acosta's life demonstrates how local Chicano/a leaders took part in the broader *movimiento* and made its general themes specific to different contexts.

Resistance to a commercially oriented career was another way in which Acosta embodied *Rasquachismo*. Rather than seek lucrative work in economically dense urban centers like his contemporaries, he looked toward his local community as both a source of inspiration and purpose. Ybarra-Frausto illuminates how for Chicano/a artists "turning inward to explore, decipher and interpret elements of the Chicano/a cultural matrix, artists and intellectuals found strength and recovered meaning sedimented in layers of everyday life practices."²¹⁹ Acosta derived such meaning from his everyday practice of representing the Mexican people of the borderlands through his art and by building community. For him, financial success would have been welcome. Indeed, he was able to sustain himself with his artwork until the last decade of his life. However, profiting from his art was secondary to his aims of rendering a vision of Mexican American life. He

²¹⁹ Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo," 7.

cared more about his people and culture than he did achieving a commercially competitive career and he poured his efforts into bettering the world around him in a variety of capacities. His resistance to the capitalist thrust of American art in the twentieth century affirmed that his own Chicano/a community was a much greater source of wealth than any monetary amount. By refusing to make material concerns central to his artistic career, Acosta shunned the capitalist framework that defined contemporary art and put his own people above the standards for success created by the white American art world.

The history of Chicano/as in El Paso was refracted through Acosta's art. He drew upon imagery from his parents' generation, making links between the Mexican Revolution and the Chicano/a movement. In paintings like *Song of the Revolution/Cancion de revolucion* and *The Green Hat/El sombrero verde*, he situated the Revolution of 1910, in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and binds the anti-authoritarian impulse of his people across generations. Both paintings depict young men in the vestments of revolutionary Mexico. *El Sombrero Verde* is positioned in a scene that clearly resembles urban Juárez or downtown El Paso. His vision of the border as the site of the revolution depicts the two cities as a coherent community, occupied by a shared culture and history of resistance. For him, the history of Mexicans in the borderlands was a source of inspiration and was tied to a political radicalism fundamental to Chicano/as. By portraying his people and city as unified through Chicano/a identity, Acosta affirmed the indigenouslyness of Mexicans in the U.S.

Ultimately, Acosta's career provides a salient example of how the Chicano/a Renaissance was developed by artists who celebrated Mexican culture in America. He

painted, “the people of El Paso... the Mexican Americans,” to represent the beauty and dignity of his people and counter a vision of U.S. life that either erased Mexicans from it or depicted them in two dimensional, dehumanizing stereotypes.²²⁰ The diverse aspects of Chicano/a life on the border were reflected in his art, both rural agrarianism and urban *barrio* scenes appearing in his paintings. Growing up among the Mexican proletariat of El Paso, Acosta emphasized the concerns of working class Chicano/as. He fundamentally challenged nationalist definitions that separated Chicano/as from Mexicans by painting them as a unified people amidst a shared landscape—the ambiguity of country and citizenship pervading his artwork. Acosta painted his people into American art and relayed an image of El Paso that rooted Mexicans in the U.S.

Looking at Acosta’s life reveals his agency as a Chicano artist to represent Mexican origin people and to serve as the city’s celebrated host and beloved painter. He pioneered a focus on Mexican American life painting Chicano/as into American art before many other artists were doing so. The Chicano/a Renaissance that emerged on the border as part of the larger movement in other cities during the second half of the twentieth century had its roots in Acosta’s work. His impact on Chicano/a art in El Paso might be considered by virtue of his place in this history. Even though he never achieved wild commercial success nor did he belong to a recognized movement such as the Chicano/a artists of later years, his significance to this cultural movement cannot be denied. His commitment to the uplift of the borderlands’ most economically and politically downtrodden was evident in his art.

²²⁰ “Acosta: A Man and His Art,” *Nosotros* 2, no. 6, September, 1972, Tomas Ybarra Frausto Papers, box 1, folder 4, American Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

By portraying Chicano/as, Acosta painted Mexican origin people into American history. From the start of his career upon his return from service in WWII, Acosta devoted his life to humanizing his people by illuminating them in their dignity and affirming their belonging in the United States. His focus on the most oppressed groups in El Paso contributed to a wider movement for social justice. Acosta's art rendered the beauty and humanity of immigrants, workers, radicals, indigenous people, women, and Chicano/as and in doing so he advanced his political goals. His preference of these subjects for his portraits speaks to the partisan impetus of his work. Acosta painted the members of his world, his family, friends, and the circle that he cultivated—all those who comprised the Chicano/a experience on the border. The beauty that he depicted defied racist, classist, and sexist values in American society in the twentieth century.

Acosta's Chicano/a community in El Paso was his source of inspiration. He developed a social world that reflected his focus as an artist. The local work he did to empower the Chicano/as of El Paso through their representation in his art was part of a broader cultural movement that saw Chicano/as claiming and developing their culture as a means to resist the white supremacy that marginalized them in U.S. society. By asserting *Rasquachismo* into the American creative canon, Acosta brought Chicano/a culture into a wider artistic discourse. Not only his paintings, but the community that he built and his performance of *Rasquachismo* in it, were Acosta's expressions of Chicano/a art.

Given the relationship of Acosta's art to his subjects and the community they comprised, he had trouble painting César Chávez in a way that captured him accurately in his initial portrait. Acosta knew his subjects, he fed and entertained them when they came

to his home, and he derived his inspiration from the shared world that they inhabited together. To not have the opportunity to have the activist sit for him must have been a bit disappointing but Acosta understood Chávez's motivations for refusing to pose for the painting. Their mutual goals to represent Chicano/as in Americans society lent Acosta insight into Chávez's intentions. Ultimately, Chávez was one of many Chicano/a leaders who Acosta represented in his art.

Acosta's artistic mission was focused on the Chicano/as of El Paso. He rendered a history that affirmed their presence in American art and brought Chicano/as to the forefront of this discourse. Having begun his work for this effort so early in the Chicano/a movement's history points to his importance as one of the first Mexican American painters of this era. By crafting a community in the borderlands that cohered around Mexican culture, Acosta played an important role in the Chicano/a Renaissance in El Paso. He was part of a larger movement to end inequality that was comprised of many necessary elements. While his commission from *Time* was a moment in his career that filled him with great pride, the course of his work over decades speaks to his influence on Chicano/a art in the twentieth century. Acosta's art serves as his mark on the Chicano/a movement as he painted Mexicans into U.S. history.

Chapter Four

Acosta as a Queer Artist

In the summer of 1983, Acosta displayed a painting titled *Fronteras* at the El Paso Civic Center as part of an exhibition of Southwestern art that was commissioned by the Women's Department of the city's Chamber of Commerce. He was dismayed that during an American GI Forum convention hosted in the same venue, his painting was taken off of its easel by an unknown critic and placed on the floor facing the wall. The painting depicted a naked man crouched on the desert ground, peaking out of a wooden box with an open door and leaning forward with his forearms on the ground, his rear thrusting upward into the box's interior. His ambiguous expression belies his vulnerable, prone position as three strips of barbed wire line the top opening of the box just above his head.²²¹ Someone had taken offense at the male nude enough to remove it from its display and obscure it from view.²²²

Along with José Cano, the national director of the American GI Forum, who relayed remorse at the anonymous act of censorship that occurred during his organization's event, the El Paso Chamber of Commerce's Blanca Orona and director of the city's Art Resources Department, Steven J. Schmidt, were baffled over the matter. Acosta ordered that *Fronteras* and another of his paintings that were part of the exhibition in the Civic Center lobby be removed from display and returned to his possession. Still, he approached the entire circumstance with his typical good humor and chalked it up to a provinciality that he observed in the border city. "Amused" by what

²²¹ Manuel Acosta, *Fronteras*, date unknown, El Paso Museum of Art Collection.

²²² Peter Copeland, "Naked Illegal Alien: Unknown Art Critic Removes Painting," *El Paso Herald Post*, August 12, 1983.

had happened he remarked that it made “the horrible, sultry days of August more interesting.” Laughing at the insult, he said that it was “funny because sometimes the mentality in El Paso creates funny incidents.”²²³

In response to the statement against the piece, Acosta explained the painting’s symbolic meaning. He said that its subject represented “an illegal alien anywhere, on any frontier,” and that “he carries a crate like a snail. It is his secret identity that he can never get rid of. Where ever he is, because he is an illegal alien.” Justifying the nudity in the piece he stated that, “he is naked because illegal aliens don’t take anything with them. When they leave, it is like taking off all their clothes.”²²⁴ Relating its themes to an issue that many El Pasoans could relate to, Acosta tied the identity of the painting’s subject to his humanity, despite the submissive and defeated condition in which he found himself. He rendered it legible to most people on the border city who at one point experienced the precariousness of migration and the continuation of oppression as a racial minority in the U.S. thereafter.

Fronteras is dense with coded imagery, the provocative position of the subject indicating multiple layers of meaning. Given the subjugating experience, his expression is surprisingly calm and his gestures even appear nonchalant as he leans on his forearms. In the desolate landscape surrounding him, his vulnerability gives the entire scene a melancholy tone evoking loneliness and longing.²²⁵ This man’s crate, his proverbial closet, is his only protection against a hostile world that criminalizes his identity. In addition to protecting him, the barbed wire shows that he is a prisoner to his crate,

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Acosta, *Fronteras*, date unknown.

recoiling from the outside and held hostage in his cage all at once. This painting reflects a deep sense of isolation and juxtaposes it with the subject's sexual posture.²²⁶

Reading pieces like *Fronteras* for coded queer imagery, this chapter looks at the ways in which Acosta's work allowed him to express the various facets of his identity. It examines how he was able to communicate his sexuality to the world through his paintings. Using the theoretical framework elicited by art historian Jonathan Katz, I situate Acosta's art within a more general discourse in the twentieth century U.S. The violent hate crime that brought an end to his life, discussed in the next chapter, cast his sexuality into the public discourse. Up until then, painting had provided him with a coded language through which he had the agency to control what he allowed for the public to understand of his private world. Katz shows how within this codification, silences can provide a means to resist the definitions and often violent enforcement of heteronormativity.²²⁷ Acosta's art thus serves as the primary means to contemplate messages that he put forth through his work regarding his sexual identity as well as his use of silence as an act of resistance.

Acosta made his artwork for the purpose of conveying his multiple selves by imbuing his paintings with several meanings to be read differently by each viewer. In doing so, he was part of a broader creative movement in which queer voices shaped American art in the twentieth century. This era saw the widespread "queering" of the art

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Jonathan Katz, "John Cage's Queer Silencing or How to Avoid Making Matters Worse," Queer Cultural Center, <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzWorse.html> (accessed December 8, 2015).

world.²²⁸ At the same time as the U.S. rose to global prominence as the forerunning cultural and military industrial power at mid-century, a postmodern discourse was developing in the art world that was tied to a queer sensibility.²²⁹ Such a trope disrupted simplistic binaries and traditional definitions of normativity that had formerly governed the art world as a bastion of power's representation.²³⁰ Acosta's art was part of this trend and is explored in this chapter as such.

Postmodernism and alternative sexual discourses emerged in tandem and found voice through twentieth century art. The influence of postmodernism can be seen in Acosta's work especially through the idiom of symbology that he used to relay coded messages. Katz traces the evolution of American art in relationship to the edification of a coherent and specific homosexual identity by mid-century. He shows how reading art for queer codes provides a text through which to glean a history of homosexuality in the U.S. that could not always be rendered obvious in the written word.²³¹ His comprehensive *Hide and Seek*, written with David Ward, presents a survey of the imbrication of a queer discourse with the postmodernism that developed in American art. In it, he illustrates a useful methodology for examining art for queer signifiers. He fundamentally lays bare the inextricability of alternative sexual schema with artistic representation during the years coinciding with the emergence of Acosta's career. Katz points to the post WWII era

²²⁸ Jonathan Katz and David Ward, *Hide and Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 15-16.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

as a crucial moment in which such themes began to unfold serving as a backdrop against which to comprehend the development of Acosta's art.²³²

Situating Acosta's career among this context, this chapter seeks to link his work to the broader trends in queer American art that were occurring at this time. It builds on the framework established by Katz and Ward in *Hide and Seek*. In it, the authors show how during this period, the lens used to understand homosexuality shifted from an emphasis on gay acts as isolated moments not substantiating a fixed identity, to a focus on the individual being characterized by a distinct sexual orientation. While Katz and Ward's survey is comprehensive, its major shortcoming is that it seeks to relay only the mainstream artistic discourse. In doing so, its inclusion of non-white artists is admittedly scant.²³³ Studying Acosta's art in conversation with the discourse elicited by Katz and Ward thus augments the historiography of queer artists of color.

Katz and Ward demonstrate how queer art essentially defined the main contours of American art during the twentieth century. In *Hide and Seek*, they show how an historical narrative of queer art in this context is "by and large the story of American art itself, one in which the cliché of the art world as peculiarly hospitable to sexual minorities is amply realized."²³⁴ The alternative lifestyle afforded by an artistic career presented an outlet for queer cultural workers to refuse a hetero-normative experience while simultaneously living under the scrutiny of a homophobic society. Acosta's biographers always note his artistic career, almost discussing it as a kind of devotional practice for him, as his reason for never having married or fathered children. This

²³² Ibid, 36.

²³³ Ibid, 15.

²³⁴ Ibid.

discourse asserts that while always paternal and generous, his focus had to be his art, first and foremost, and he could not have a wife and family getting in the way of it.²³⁵ His talent therefore offered him the means both to express the many facets of his identity while providing him a nontraditional career and life existing outside of the bounds of hetero-normativity. Fundamentally his artistic life afforded him the means to engage in what Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as performing the closet.²³⁶ Her work helps shed light on how Acosta was able to construct a persona that reflected who he had to be in the public eye while maintaining a lifestyle that let him be himself privately and simultaneously expressing his sexuality through his art. The life that Acosta built as an artist served as his means to perform the closet in a severely antigay context.

In *Hide and Seek*, Katz and Ward also illuminate how queer codes allowed artists like Acosta to speak at multiple levels through twentieth-century American art. They lay out a useful framework for reading the different meanings layered into images such as those depicted in Acosta's paintings. The methodology that Katz and Ward convey is especially useful in considerations of masculinity and the male gaze expressed through art like Acosta's. By showing how twentieth century American art fundamentally was queer art, *Hide and Seek* solicits useful examples that can be applied to read queer codes in Acosta's paintings.²³⁷ This chapter thus draws heavily upon Katz and Ward's work while augmenting it by including the experience of a borderlands Chicano in this comprehensive, but exclusive, history.

²³⁵ Manuel Gregorio Acosta, *Manuel Gregorio Acosta: a retrospective = una retrospectiva* (El Paso: El Paso Museum of Art, 2009), 17.

²³⁶ Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Closet*, 9-12.

²³⁷ Katz and Ward, *Hide and Seek*, 15.

Applying Katz and Ward's methodology to Acosta's paintings, allows us to read them for multiple meanings. By looking at the different ways in which Acosta portrayed gender and sexuality, we might glean insight into how art served his contribution to a queer discourse in American art. While Acosta rendered a diversity of people in their unique beauty, some common themes in his depiction of gender and sexuality are relevant in two separate types of paintings looked at here. Portraits are the primary means through which we can understand Acosta's representation of femininity, masculinity, sexuality and how they relate to one another. In addition, some of Acosta's surrealist and semi-surrealist pieces, much like *Fronteras*, demonstrate his troubled relationship with multiple identities and how his art served as his own therapeutic means to reconcile these subjectivities.

Several of Acosta's paintings inform this analysis. Of his portraits, *Red Bandana (Irrigator, Sunday Afternoon)/Panuelo rojo(el regador Domingo por la tarde* and *Young Man By the Rio Grande/Joven cerca del Río Grande* are of a specific trend in Acosta's depiction of male sexuality. The raw and primal way he relayed men versus the often shrouded and respectable way Acosta rendered women provide examples of a queer impulse in his work. By shifting the male gaze from the objectified female body to the male body, Acosta challenged a hetero-patriarchal artistic discourse. Comparing his portraits of women versus those of men gives us an understanding of his portrayal of sexuality and gender. His bullfighter series also offers a rich range of images through which to gain insight into Acosta's portrayal of masculinity, a particularly male sexual sensibility, and its status as the object of the male gaze. The surrealist and semi-surrealist still-life pieces also include coded imagery through which to understand Acosta's

messages about gender, sexuality, and identity. Utilizing the symbological idiom that he created with his art, he communicated an alternative perspective to the already established hetero-normative artistic sexual universe.

The representation of gender and sexuality in Acosta's portraits provides cogent examples of what Chicano artist Gronk's biographer, Max Benavidez, calls an "alternative imagery schema," or the use of images to disrupt the dominant mode of seeing and defining identity and sexuality.²³⁸ Acosta's paintings of men and women are distinct and serve as examples of the queer codes in his art. Women are most frequently depicted in admired and respected visions, while men are often the objects of sexual desire. Comparing his portraits of women and men informs our understanding of how he used his paintings to represent sexuality. By subverting the typically patriarchal rendition of men and women in art, Acosta created such an "alternative imagery schema" with his portraits.²³⁹ While his portrayal of men and women in portraits was in no way monolithic and adhered to the standard of conveying the beauty and humanity of his subjects, certain trends are observable in the different ways that he rendered men and women.

Both *Red Bandana (Irrigator, Sunday Afternoon)/Panuelo rojo(el regador Domingo por la tarde* and *Young Man By the Rio Grande/Joven cerca del Río Grande* are paintings of young men that exemplify Acosta's representation of male sexuality in his portraits. In both pieces, Mexican origin men stand shirtless outdoors in front of pastoral scenes and bodies of water. The youths in both are poised in front of the river next to growing stalks of corn (an important and recurring symbol for Acosta) implying

²³⁸ Max Benavidez, *Gronk* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2007), 7.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

the Mexican ancestral connection of these men with their surroundings as well as their sexuality. Not only does the corn carries with it a message about Acosta's ethnic identity it is also a sign of virility and male sexuality in the contexts of both paintings. With red bandanas tied around both of their necks, the subjects of *Red Bandana (Irrigator, Sunday Afternoon)/Panuelo rojo(el regador Domingo por la tarde* and *Young Man By the Rio Grande/Joven cerca del Río Grande* gaze alluringly away from the viewer and embody a deep sexual potency that Acosta captured in many of his paintings of men. These pieces render men the subject of a sexualizing representation, and in doing so reflected a broader shift in American art in the twentieth-century in which men more readily became the object of the male gaze, a trend that had been unpopular in Western Art after Classical Antiquity.²⁴⁰

The subject of *Young Man By the Rio Grande/Joven cerca del Río Grande* is, true to the painting's title, quite young, a teenager wearing a sombrero, a red handkerchief around his neck, and sagging blue jeans, the waist of his underwear exposed.²⁴¹ His view is cast downward as he leans suggestively in contrapposto, eyes averted with an almost defiant expression. Immediately behind him grows the aforementioned cornstalk and behind that, the river runs placidly across the landscape, separating the young man from an adobe building in the far background. The painting's evocative portrayal of this young man's stance, his half-clothed body, and his coy gesturing convey a sexualized masculinity, one in which a man is vulnerable and submissive. By linking the subject's youth and virility with his ancestral connectedness to his surroundings, Acosta unifies

²⁴⁰ Katz and Ward, *Hide and Seek*, 18.

²⁴¹ Manuel Acosta, *Young Man By the Rio Grande/Joven cerca del Río Grande*, ca. 1955, Hal Marcus Collection

Mexican and queer identity in this piece. Binding the source of survival that Mexican culture provided him with coded messages about sexuality, the painting's symbology provides a rich and textured representation of Acosta's inner world and how he communicated it publicly through his art.²⁴²

Red Bandana (Irrigator, Sunday Afternoon)/Panuelo rojo(el regador Domingo por la tarde subject is a bit older than the *Young Man By the Rio Grande/Joven cerca del Río Grande*, maybe by about ten years. Also distinct from the youthful expression of the subject of the painting discussed above, the man depicted in *Red Bandana (Irrigator, Sunday Afternoon)/Panuelo rojo(el regador Domingo por la tarde* looks confidently into the distance rather than downward shyly.²⁴³ He too has a brightly colored piece of cloth tied around his neck, the only thread of clothing on his entire upper body, just like the subject of *Young Man By the Rio Grande/Joven cerca del Río Grande*. The subject of the former is also amongst symbols of virility and ancestral rootedness. His masculine power is the object of the painting's sexualized perspective, even more so than *Joven cerca del Río Grande* who is subdued and uncertain unlike *Red Bandana's* subject whose confident stare pierces the painting's foreground with potency.²⁴⁴

Both paintings were part of a particular trend in Acosta's portraits of men that show them either at least partially or completely shirtless, the objects of a sexualizing gaze. This style of painting was one of the ways in which Acosta layered queer codes into his work. The subtle expressions of these painting's subjects, their subdued, sometimes *Odalisque* postures (discussed more thoroughly below), and their partially clothed bodies

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Manuel Acosta, *Red Bandana (Irrigator, Sunday Afternoon)/Panuelo rojo(el regador Domingo por la tarde*, before 1975, Tres Featherstone Collection.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

indicate, not only a gay sensibility at work in Acosta's art but also a shift in normalizing the sexual objectification of men, especially when compared to his portraits of women. In *Formalwear/Atuendo formal*, for example, a young man stands leaning against a wall wearing a cowboy hat and the formal jacket worn by Mexican *trio* musicians that is unbuttoned, his bare chest exposed beneath a sultry glare towards the viewer.²⁴⁵ Acosta shifted men into suggestive and submissive roles and altered the hetero-normative schema of Western art that had traditionally only rendered women as sex objects. His representation of men as the focus of a male sexual gaze wove a queer thread into twentieth-century Chicano art. The deeply human way that he depicted all of his subjects, whether or not through a sexualized lens, distinguished his art and defined his artistic approach.

Odalisque, the reclining pose of women meant to convey sexual submission, is a trope described by Jonathan Katz in which twentieth-century queer artists depicted men in coded sexual postures that lends insight into Acosta's portraits of men.²⁴⁶

Thoughts/Pensamientos shows a man reclining suggestively; a large coat rests on his shoulders as he gazes away from the viewer. While not fully reclined, his casual posture as he slumps back into the chair evokes an *Odalisque* rendering.²⁴⁷ This portrait serves as an example in the way Acosta drew upon imagery that was part of a broader trend in queer art. It is worth noting that he never painted women in *Odalisque* postures.

Acosta's portraits of women, in fact, relay a kind of power and independence. He never placed them in subdued or sexualized poses. His female subjects were nearly

²⁴⁵ Manuel Acosta, *Formalwear/Atuendo formal*, 1986, Estate of Manuel Gregorio Acosta.

²⁴⁶ Katz and Ward, *Hide and Seek*, 22.

²⁴⁷ Manuel Acosta, *Thoughts/Pensamientos*, ca. 1975, Estate of Manuel Gregorio Acosta.

always fully clothed and sometimes even veiled, the shroud a common motif in his paintings of women. It is remarkable that Acosta very rarely painted nude women. A comprehensive survey of his prolific canon of work indicates that the only exception is one of the charcoal drawings in *Canto y grito mi liberación* of a nude woman.²⁴⁸ His female subjects, while depicted in their complete beauty, sometimes even alluringly, carry a dignity and self-possession that preclude their sexual objectification. The focus of Acosta's paintings of women is not their sexuality, unlike many of his male portraits. He created a divergent sexual schema through his work and countered the hetero-patriarchal traditions of Western art in his portraits of women.

Besides his portraits of Carmen Félix and Rosa Guerrero discussed in Chapter 3, *Yolanda* is an excellent example of how Acosta represented feminine beauty. Yolanda Alvarado was Acosta's dear friend, here shown as a woman in the prime of her youth and the full beauty of her womanhood.²⁴⁹ Wearing a red dress and surrounded by symbols of fertility Yolanda sits proudly, a morning glory vine growing up alongside her right side and a pink and purple seashell on her right.²⁵⁰ Even though Acosta renders Yolanda's sexuality, it is all through symbol, her posture sitting upright and looking dead on at the viewer. Her bobbed dark hair, fashionable fifties dress, and indigenous facial features reveal a feminine aesthetic ideal of Chicana beauty.²⁵¹ It is remarkable that even in paintings where Acosta illustrated female beauty, he did not sexualize women as he did men.

²⁴⁸ Manuel Acosta, illustration in *Canto y grito mi liberación: The Liberation of a Chicano Mind* by Ricardo Sanchez, (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday & Company, 1973), 102.

²⁴⁹ Manuel Acosta, *Yolanda*, 1956, El Paso Museum of Art.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

The many portraits that Acosta painted of women provide insight into his representation of gender and sexuality. While he portrays women of all ages, races, and classes, they are never the objects of a sexualizing gaze. *Cantinera/Barmaid* shows a young woman working in a bar, her black eye-liner and serious expression are framed by her dark hair. Standing behind a bar, she stares intensely and appears as a woman worn from a life of hard work. The woman in this painting, like the aforementioned portraits, exemplifies an ideal of Chicana beauty that is marked by an intense stare and a feminine toughness that distinguishes Acosta's work.²⁵² All of the women who were a part of Acosta's social milieu, his friends and family, comprised the rich visual tapestry that he wove. His female portraits indicate a complete representation of Chicanas in his paintings that emphasized their non-sexual qualities and disrupted hetero-patriarchal and white supremacist discourses in art.

Many of Acosta's portraits of women also sought to dignify them through their role as mothers. His focus on their sexuality celebrated women with reverence in a way that idealized their reproductive and nurturing capacities. The shrouded portrayal of women was part of a particular trope that was central to his depiction of them and was often tied to his maternal representations of them. His use of the shroud in his paintings of women is ubiquitous, sometimes appearing alluringly on lovely young ingénues²⁵³ but more often on older women in maternal roles.²⁵⁴ In a sculpture series of women giving birth that he carved out of marble, the pieces are meant to depict the various stages of

²⁵² Manuel Acosta, *Cantinera/Barmaid*, date unknown, Estate of Manuel Gregorio Acosta.

²⁵³ Manuel Acosta, *Portrait of Carmen (Age 19)/Retrato de Carmen (19 años)*, 1958, Carmen Stearns Collection.

²⁵⁴ Manuel Acosta, *Concepción Sanchez Acosta*, date unknown, Maureen Clark Collection.

pregnancy, birth, and motherhood. They are simple yet graceful and expressive shapes that frame women in veils reminiscent of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. This sculpture series exhibits the contrast between Acosta's representations of femininity and masculinity.²⁵⁵ His rendition of women portrays their sexuality in a way that exalts them as mothers. The maternal aspects of female sexuality are here celebrated and made central to his rendition of femininity. He often represented beautiful young women in appealing and attractive ways as well, however, they were never unclothed, sexualized, or objectified. The way in which Acosta painted men, on the other hand, indicates the queer portrayals of sexuality exemplified in his bullfighter series.

Acosta's bullfighter paintings expressed a motif dense with queer codes about masculinized sexuality. This collection of art depicts bullfighters as the focus of a sexualizing gaze. He uses both portraits and still-life pieces to convey a male sexual ideal through the Mexican masculinity of the bullfighter. By making the macho symbol of the bullfighter the submissive object of a sexualized masculinity, he wove queer messages into his work. In this series, Acosta created coded imagery through his paintings that used subtle indicators of this nuanced artistic discourse.

The most obvious representation of these themes in Acosta's bullfighter series is evidenced in portraits of men. In these paintings, men appear fully and partially clothed as well as almost completely naked. Nudity, suggestive poses and facial expressions exemplify a sexualized rendition of Mexican masculinity. In *Meditación del Torero/Bullfighter Meditating* and *Bullfighter Dressing/Torero vistiéndose*, bullfighters are the objects of the sexual gaze and more subtly so in his other paintings of this series,

²⁵⁵ Manuel Acosta, *Untitled*, date unknown, Hal Marcus Collection.

many of which are all titled *Torero*. These portraits illustrate the queer codes in Acosta's paintings of men. Both paintings demonstrate how Acosta was a creator of queer Mexican American art.

In *Meditación del Torero/Bullfighter Meditating*, a bullfighter stands facing away from the viewer, alluringly glancing back over his shoulder, revealing the back of his body cutting off at his upper thigh. He is shirtless, wearing only white pants, staring down toward his hand that is holding a red cape in a subdued and coy expression accented by his upright and lithe posture. His high-waisted, white pants highlight his buttocks, which are in the foreground of the painting and angle back toward the viewer. In contrast to the lower half of his body, his upper body and face appear entrenched in shadow composed of darker, more muted colors.²⁵⁶ The twisted stance of his torso renders a physical dynamism that underscores his sexualized body, posed submissively yet enticingly. This portrait exemplifies Acosta's centering of the male sexual gaze on bullfighters as symbols of Mexican masculinity.²⁵⁷

Bullfighter Dressing/Torero vistiéndose is one of Acosta's most provocative paintings in his bullfighter series. The subject sits nude on a bed putting on a bright pink stocking, the only article of clothing he is wearing.²⁵⁸ He is the focus of a rare scene, his vulnerability rendered legible in his private nakedness in this room, outside of the public eye in which the bullfighter must maintain his unquestioned masculinity. His posture is much different than the confident and agile motion shown in *Meditación del*

²⁵⁶ Manuel Acosta, *Meditacion del Torero/Bullfighter Meditating*, date unknown, Juan A. Sandoval Collection.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Manuel Acosta, *Bullfighter Dressing/Torero vistiéndose*, date unknown, Gertrude A. Goodman Collection.

Toro/Bullfighter Meditating as he hunches forward to pull on his sock facing downward reflectively. By offering this window into the exposed moment of this man dressing, In contrast to the performance of masculine power that characterizes most of Acosta's bullfighters, *Bullfighter Dressing/Torero vistiéndose* revels in his solitude, almost dejected in his motion to put on his costume once again. His nudity and submissiveness are the object of a sexual gaze and simultaneously symbols of the bullfighter's relationship with his identity that depends on the performance of hyper-masculinity.²⁵⁹

The use of portraiture as a means to represent sexuality in Acosta's bullfighter series was not relegated only to his paintings of partially clothed and nude men. His renditions of clothed bullfighters also exemplify this trope in this body of work. The watercolor, *Bullfighter/Torero* depicts a bullfighter in the same posture as the subject of *Meditación del Toro/Bullfighter Meditating* but the frame is extended to include his entire body. Also glancing back over his shoulder, his buttocks angle toward the viewer, amplified by his white pants as he stands in contrapposto.²⁶⁰ This piece evokes an allure that pervades his portraits of men. It shows the masculine performativity embodied in the bullfighter in full regalia and includes the *Torero's* performance of masculinity as the object of sexual desire.²⁶¹

Los Matadores is a portrait of three bullfighters that is reminiscent of the queer codes elicited by Katz in his look at twentieth-century art. The painting depicts the bullfighters in intimate yet ambiguous poses. Three bullfighters stand in a row while light shines on the foreground illuminating one of the *Toreros'* faces while the other two

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Manuel Acosta, *Bullfighter/Torero*, date unknown, Sherry Brown Collection.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

remain in shadow. The illuminated bullfighter's expression indicates a mix of flirtation and satisfaction while another bullfighter standing behind him who is cast in shadow rests his hands near the front *Torero*'s hips. Even though the bullfighter in the back stands in darkness, his eyes are visible and are wide with surprise and wonder, the silhouette of a third man stands behind both of them in the darkness.²⁶² Their position intimates a deeply sexual interaction between the three men. The *Torero* in the foreground holds a bright pink-red cape that takes on a phallic shape in the way that it falls off of his arm.²⁶³ *Los Matadores* is masterful in its coded conveyance of queer imagery shrouded in the masculinized persona of the *Torero*. These men literally exist in shadows while those whose faces are illuminated express flirtation and the positions of their bodies implies sexual interaction. This piece speaks to the queer impetus at work in Acosta's bullfighter series.

Acosta also used still-life images to communicate queer codes in which the bullfighter was the focus of sexual desire through the depiction of his vestments. The clothes worn by bullfighters symbolized the masculinized persona that defines the *Torero*'s work, Acosta idealizing a rare vulnerability of them undressed. He did so by portraying sex scenes where capes, *chaquetillas*, and pants have been strewn about. Often these clothes include women's nightgowns portraying hetero-normative sex while still making masculinity the object of sexual desire. The entire bullfighter series, when viewed as a collection, reveals a narrative that idealizes the hyper-masculinity of the bullfighter and Acosta's still-life paintings were part of that story.

²⁶² Manuel Acosta, *Los Matadores/The Matadors*, date unknown, El Paso Museum of Art.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

Toreros are thus cast as a sexual ideal that is represented in the performance of masculinity symbolized by the items of clothing that the *Torero* wears. In a painting titled *Seduction/Sedución*, a bullfighter's bright red cape and a woman's nightgown are thrown on a chair implying the heterosexual encounter.²⁶⁴ The bullfighter's vestments are symbols of the masculine performance embodied in the *Torero*. In an untitled still life, a velveteen *chaquetilla*, ornate with gold thread, rests on a hanger. The *chaquetilla* is the symbol of the *Torero*'s outward identity represented by the appearance that the *Torero* gives to the public.²⁶⁵ These still-life paintings contribute to the narrative of masculine sexuality that Acosta conveyed through his art.

Acosta's bullfighter series was an important aspect of his expression of sexuality through art. By applying the male gaze of the artist to the male subjects of paintings that idealize masculinity, he created work that could be read at multiple levels. Queer desire is visible in his portraits that not only make men the object of sexual desire but depicts men in intimate poses with one another. His work can be read for the queer impulse made legible when considering his portrayal of sexualized masculinity. The still life paintings that were part of his bullfighter series idealized the *Torero*'s sexuality and contributed to his narrative about queer desire. Acosta deployed a variety of styles and approaches to communicate queer codes in his bullfighter paintings by making masculinity the object of sexual longing. By crafting a queer idiom through his art, Acosta was able to communicate gay identity through his paintings.

Acosta also used his art to relay the pain accompanying having to live semi-closeted during a time when hostility and violence toward homosexuality was widely

²⁶⁴ Manuel Acosta, *Seduction/Sedución*, date unknown, Frank Ribelin Collection.

²⁶⁵ Manuel Acosta, *Title unknown*, date unknown, Estate of Manuel Gregorio Acosta.

accepted and normalized. The difficulty that characterized this aspect of his life is highlighted in a surrealist style that he developed. Images that represented the conflicted aspects of his identity subtly reveal a depression and deep melancholy at work in many of Acosta's paintings. The sadness that Acosta experienced because of this is expressed in his surrealist and semi-surrealist paintings. Some of them even carry portentous tones regarding the brutalizing of the physical body that reflected the potential violence that was a pervasive reality for queer people living in the twentieth-century as Acosta's demise indicates. These painting contain symbolism that informs an analysis of his work for coded messages about his identity and experience.

During the latter half of his career, Acosta developed a rich body of surreal and semi-surreal paintings, many of which speak to the queer themes in his art. These pieces include sexual imagery consistent with his "alternative imagery schema" discussed above. *Big Apple/Gran Manzana*, *Mascaras/Masks*, and *Self Portrait as Scarecrow* all illustrate a conflicted sense of identity and pain linked to closetedness, sexuality, and vulnerability. He painted them during a phase in his life in which he experienced a series of disappointments, namely the loss of his family's home discussed in Chapter 2 and the ensuing financial stresses that accompanied the emotional burden of displacement. Combined with the pain of living in a homophobic society, Acosta's losses sent him into a deep depression, one reflected in the narrative universe created in his paintings. He began to withdraw during the years following his family's eviction from their home on

Hammett in the Chamizal neighborhood. His art during this time expresses his inner emotional turmoil.²⁶⁶

In *Mascaras/Masks*, Acosta experimented with surrealism as a way to discursively engage a conflicted identity and deep melancholy. On a dark and ethereal wall a series of masks seem to float, some facing in profile and others looking dead on at the viewer.²⁶⁷ Two of the masks are Acosta's face, one looking in each direction. His expression appears a kind of emotionless "poker face." The other masks are traditional Mexican folk art style renditions of the devil and other characters from Catholic mythology. Acosta reveals a conflicted experience of identity in his placement of his own face among the other masks. He communicates his depression and need to hide his inner emotional turmoil from the world that he loved to entertain as the jovial host.²⁶⁸

Big Apple/Gran Manzana is another example of the surreal and semi-surreal style that he developed drawing on traditional Mexican imagery. It is a painting of an *Arbol de la Vida*, a candelabra adorned with Biblical scenes in bright colors meant to instruct Christianity for indigenous Mexicans in the colonial era. The *arbol de la vida* is flanked with miniatures of the painting's Biblical namesakes. Small renditions of Adam and Eve rigidly stand on opposite sides of the *arbol* while a snake menaces on the latter's side. In this piece, the naked couple's faces grimace anxiously appearing exposed and vulnerable despite that they are but images of dolls. This painting expresses a subtle critique of

²⁶⁶ Robbie Farley-Villalobos, "Before Dying, Acosta Had Been Making Changes in His Art, Life," *El Paso Times*, October 27, 1989.

²⁶⁷ Manuel Acosta, *Mascaras/Masks*, ca. 1970s-1980s, Dr. and Mrs. Steinhauer Collection.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

hetero-normative sexuality through coded symbols that Acosta developed.²⁶⁹ The angst implied in their expressions, vulnerable nudity, and placement on opposite sides of the *arbol* evokes a kind of disdain for the Judeo-Christian sexual moral schema.

Self Portrait as a Scarecrow is one of the darkest of this series, revealing a deep foreboding about mortality. In it, Acosta's face on a crucified scarecrow appears disturbingly lifeless and portentously communicates his own physical pain and the helplessness against anti-gay violence that was an ever-present reality for queer men in the twentieth-century.²⁷⁰ His iconic paper bag hat rests atop his emotionless face, not unlike his ambiguous expression in *Mascaras/Masks*.²⁷¹ This portrait of Acosta shows the brutality that queer people of color face in their experiences as people marginalized at multiple levels. The tragic and inhuman crime that brought his life to an end was a part of the hetero-normative enforcement that had threatened and endangered him for his entire life. *Self Portrait as a Scarecrow* is part of the queer Chicano narrative that Acosta created with his art in which he relayed the vulnerability to violence that gay bodies face. The brutal manner in which Acosta was killed attests to this and is discussed in the following chapter.²⁷²

Acosta's art became increasingly dark in its surreal representation of identity, sexuality, and mortality during the last decade of his life. The loss of his home on Hammett and Findley set him back financially and emotionally.²⁷³ His sadness took form in his surreal and semi-surreal paintings. *Big Apple/Gran Manzana*, *Mascaras/Masks*,

²⁶⁹ Manuel Acosta, *Big Apple/Gran Manzana*, date unknown, Max and Sylvia Muñoz Collection.

²⁷⁰ Manuel Acosta, *Self Portrait as a Scarecrow*, date unknown, El Paso Museum of Art.

²⁷¹ Acosta, *Mascaras/Masks*, ca. 1970s-1980s.

²⁷² Acosta, *Self Portrait as a Scarecrow*, date unknown.

²⁷³ Farley-Villalobos, "Before Dying."

and *Self Portrait as Scarecrow* all exemplify this moment in his artistic career. They, along with his prolific body of portraits, convey a rich and densely coded queer narrative in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. His paintings served as the means through which he was able to communicate a narrative about those aspects of his life that he was unable to express publicly.

The various artistic techniques that Acosta employed to convey his identity were effective in drawing upon a coded symbolism as part of a more general queer art movement. His pieces contributed a singular voice to the broader gay artistic canon. As a Chicano, his life provides an example of the intersectional experience of queer people of color at the juncture of race and sexuality. Reading his art for queer codes yields a complex vision of his experience as a gay Chicano in the twentieth-century borderlands and indicates the difficulty he faced in a deeply homophobic context. Nowhere else in the narrative of Acosta's life is the violently anti-gay world he inhabited seen more than in the tragic crime that killed him. That hostility toward homosexuality could be so severe so as to justify the cold blooded murder that ended the life of one of El Paso's most beloved figures is evidence of the struggles that he must have faced. This anti-gay discourse is the subject of the following chapter.

For a queer Chicano in twentieth-century El Paso, the terror of hetero-normative violence would have been an ever-present reality. Acosta's means of coping with this painful context were the paintings that he created to express his inner experience. He bore his soul through his art revealing rich layers of his identity while simultaneously crafting a symbology of queer codes. By speaking at multiple levels through his art, he was able to communicate his identity through an idiom that he developed. His work thus richly

informs the comprehensive look at twentieth-century queer art history elicited by Jonathan Katz and augments it with the life of a border Chicano.

Acosta's prolific body of work offers a reservoir of imagery through which to understand his representation of his sexual self. This chapter derives such an analysis from a comparison of his male and female portraits, a queer reading of his bullfighter series, and through the coded messages that he included in his surreal paintings regarding identity, mortality, and sexuality. These various works serve as a resource to glean insight into Acosta's reflections on gender and sexuality and their effects on his lived reality. Art provided him both the means to express the part himself that he had to keep closeted in public and it also allowed him to forego a hetero-normative lifestyle while evading scrutiny. His commitment to his art was seen as the primary focus of his life and was thus an acceptable excuse for him to remain unmarried and without children of his own, despite his generous and paternal spirit.

In Acosta's distinct approaches to portraying men and women he developed an "alternative imagery schema" that subverted the traditionally hetero-patriarchal sexual objectification of women. He turned the standard rendition of women as sex objects on its head by sexualizing men instead, but notably always in a way that affirmed their humanity, depth, and complexity. His portraits of women were often shrouded, depicting them as ideals of purity, motherhood, and beauty but also embodying strength, independence, power, and the beauty of Mexican femininity. Men, on the other hand, appear in Acosta's paintings as the masculine objects of the sexualizing male gaze. His use of the *Odalisque* depiction of the reclining object of sexual availability in his portraits of men exemplified the coded representation of queer sexuality that Acosta included in

his art. Acosta's nuanced depiction of gender in his portraits of men and women points to the ways in which his work reflected his vision and experience of the world.

The bullfighter paintings, that were part of an iconic style developed by Acosta, are dense with queer codes. Partially dressed *Toreros* are the sexual objects of a romantic narrative created by Acosta to idealize masculine sexuality. Clothed *Toreros* also embody a masculine sexual appeal as the representation of masculine performativity. Here the *Torero's* clothes symbolize the outward projection of the masculine persona, that when shed reveals a deep vulnerability. Still-life paintings also render these tropes regarding masculine performance represented by the bullfighter's vestments. Acosta developed a rich vision of Mexican masculine sexuality in his bullfighter series.

Surreal and semi-surreal work was also part of the nuanced queer idiom that Acosta manifested through his art. He used these paintings to communicate the aspects of his life that had been afflicted by the trauma caused by living in a homophobic society. By creating a symbolism that best explained his particular experience as a queer Chicano on the border, Acosta manifested agency in making do with the oppressive anti-gay forces that shaped and would ultimately end his life. He expressed the many aspects of the emotional distress that plagued his later years with his surreal pieces. Despite the intersecting marginalities that he experienced as a queer person of color, Acosta drew upon the limited resources available to him to express the layered facets of his identity and speak at multiple levels through his art.

Acosta deployed various artistic styles, sometimes combining portraits and surreal scenes, but always imbuing his work with deep symbolic messages. *Fronteras*, the painting that an anonymous censor took off the wall and obscured from view, is such a

piece that contains codes relating differently at distinct levels. Acosta revealed this when he explained the painting, attributing to it a narrative that El Pasoans would understand and relate to. According to Acosta, this subject's crate is his shell that serves as "his secret identity that he can never get rid of."²⁷⁴ The nude man situated in a receptive, sexual position is forced into his barbed wire lined prison.²⁷⁵ This painting epitomizes Acosta's representation of sexuality through his use of symbols that could be read at multiple layers.

The removal of *Fronteras* from its display was an insult to Acosta as an artist but also a hateful and aggressive act in protest of non-normative sexuality represented within the piece. While Acosta dealt with the whole affair with good humor, such hostility against queer art was likely not necessarily an uncommon experience for Acosta who was forced to inhabit a world in which homophobia could translate into much more deadly terms than a painting being removed from an easel. The circumstances that brought Acosta's life to an end stand as a testament to this. His art had been the means through which he had the agency to communicate his queer identity in a way that empowered him because of its measured and interpretive possibilities. For queer people of color in the second half of the twentieth century, anti-gay brutality created a difficult and hostile world. It was out of this context that Acosta developed a queer artistic idiom that expressed his identity and sexuality. Doing so enabled him to shape his world by drawing upon his creative resources as a painter.

²⁷⁴ Copeland, "Naked Illegal Alien."

²⁷⁵ Acosta, *Fronteras*, date unknown.

Chapter Five

Acosta's Death and the Violence of Discourse

Less than a month before his death, Acosta found himself surrounded by his dear community of artists and friends standing in a circle with one another. The moon glowed overhead as they stood in silence, almost ceremonially gazing at one another and up at the placid, late summer desert sky. One of Acosta's close friends who survived him recalled the moment with great awe in retrospect that her dear Manuel's demise was so proximate.²⁷⁶ One remembered that in one of their last conversations he told her, "My painting is going to change. Ya voy a pintar los atros."²⁷⁷ Acosta had, indeed, recently developed an interest in weightlessness and space travel hoping to paint the impending discoveries in the era of space exploration.²⁷⁸ This dear confidant felt that Acosta knew that he was not long for the earth when he uttered those words to her.²⁷⁹

As discussed in the previous chapter, Acosta's art expressed a deep sense of foreboding that was part and parcel to a queer existence in the twentieth-century. For a gay person of color, existence in a white supremacist, homophobic world meant the constant awareness of the precariousness associated with one's identity. Nothing more indicates the very real threat of violence than the means by which Acosta died and the motive admitted by his murderer. Cesar Nájera Flores confessed to brutally killing Acosta, saying that it was retaliation for having been "sexually assaulted" by the artist.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ Mago Oróna Gandara interview by author, El Paso, TX, October 10, 2013.

²⁷⁷ Theresa Gallardo, interview by author, El Paso, TX, April 26, 2014.

²⁷⁸ Robbie Farley-Villalobos, "Before Dying, Acosta Had Been Making Changes in Art, Life" *El Paso Herald Post*, October 27, 1989.

²⁷⁹ Gallardo, interview by author, 2014.

²⁸⁰ "Mexican Citizen Charged in El Paso Artist's Death," *Kerrville Daily Times*, October 30, 1989.

What he described was a consenting relationship between him and Acosta that had supposedly existed over the course of the four years that they had known one another. Nájera Flores alleged that this consenting relationship was initiated by Acosta first having coerced him sexually and taking advantage of him while drunk at a very young age. For Nájera Flores, the horrific and inhuman manner in which he ended Acosta's life was justified by the artist's homosexuality.²⁸¹

This chapter explores Nájera Flores's use of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the "homosexual panic defense" in rationalizing his insidious murder of one of El Paso's most beloved figures.²⁸² It examines the significance of such an excuse and how the community responded to Nájera Flores's claims. In doing so it looks at the way that discourse shapes identity and sexuality, drawing upon Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. The narrative that was created as a result of Nájera Flores's murder of Acosta and his stated reasons for such a heinous crime depended on his "homosexual panic defense." Therefore, this chapter examines both Nájera Flores's defense as well as the community's reaction to it.

By looking at the ways in which identities are policed through violence and discourse, this chapter engages the "gay genocidal nexus" through which the cold-blooded murder of Acosta was made possible.²⁸³ It is important to read Acosta's death as an antigay narrative because of Nájera Flores's invocation of the "homosexual panic defense." This makes Nájera Flores's stated reason for killing Acosta an ongoing way that the killer enacted homophobic violence on him even after his death. The public

²⁸¹ Guadalupe Silva, "Man Admits Killing Acosta," *El Paso Times*, October 30, 1989.

²⁸² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 19.

²⁸³ *Ibid*, 40.

discussion of Acosta's sexuality was part of what Nájera Flores wanted in addition to killing him. Nájera Flores thrust Acosta's sexuality into the public discourse and many people in the El Paso community reacted with shame and outrage, firmly denying that such allegations could be true. Such a narrative provides an example of the severe hostility against homosexuality in a context in which it can be used as an excuse to end another person's life and absolve one's self of any wrongdoing. In addition to Nájera Flores ending Acosta's life, the killer also outed the artist and the homophobic response he elicited from the El Paso community played into Nájera Flores's motive. Thus examining Acosta's killing highlights the severity of anti-gay violence on the U.S.-Mexico border in the second half of the twentieth-century. It lays bare a particularly anti-gay context through the tragic example of Acosta's death.

Nájera Flores's murder of Acosta was illustrative of how homophobic violence polices identity both through physical intimidation as well as through discursive outcomes. By examining the narrative of his murder, the public response, and the consequences for Nájera Flores, the manner in which the "gay genocidal nexuses" operated in the second half of the twentieth century on the U.S.-Mexico border is revealed.²⁸⁴ The impact that Nájera Flores's "homosexual panic defense" had on the El Paso community reveals how antigay discourse unfolded in response to what he said.²⁸⁵ Examining this event shows how discourse and antigay violence emerge in tandem, particularly in Acosta's story and to the most terrifying effect. His murder is a tragic example of the dire reality enforced by hetero-normativity onto people like Acosta.

²⁸⁴ Sedgwick, *Closet*, 130.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 19.

On October 27th, 1989, Nájera Flores brutally ended Acosta's life. After a two day drinking bout, Nájera Flores entered Acosta's home by jumping over the wall in his backyard.²⁸⁶ Nájera Flores told Acosta that police officers were chasing him and the artist offered him some money which Nájera Flores refused. Acosta then invited him to sit down and join him for a beer while he watched television. Nájera Flores went to the restroom and on his way back picked up a hammer from a toolbox sitting in the hall. When he returned to the room where Acosta was watching television, Nájera Flores proceeded to bludgeon the artist in the back of the head with the hammer. When Nájera Flores saw that Acosta was still breathing, he stabbed him in the heart with a screwdriver to make sure he was dead.²⁸⁷ It would be an entire day before Acosta's body was found by his nephew and a close friend, Alfonso Gallardo, both of whom had to climb in through the windows to get inside the artist's home.²⁸⁸ They were deeply traumatized to find Acosta murdered. Acosta's van had gone missing and it was not long before police tracked down Nájera Flores as the person who had it, having used it to flee to his home in Ciudad Juárez. After a neighbor reported Nájera Flores for trying to run over her daughter in Acosta's charcoal gray 1987 Ford Aerostar the Sunday following the murder, Juárez police arrested him.²⁸⁹ Once apprehended, Nájera Flores admitted to having committed the crime, alleging sexual assault as his motive for vengeful murder.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ Silva, "Man Admits Killing Acosta."

²⁸⁷ Leticia Zamarripa, "Juarez Man Admits Killing Acosta: Suspect Accuses Artist of Sexual Assault, *El Paso Herald Post*, October 30, 1989.

²⁸⁸ Gallardo, interview by author, 2014.

²⁸⁹ Zamarripa, "Juarez Man Admits Killing Acosta."

²⁹⁰ "Mexican Citizen Charged in El Paso Artist's Death," *Kerrville Daily Times*, October 30, 1989.

The El Paso community reacted with great sadness at the loss of its beloved artist, host, creative leader, and culture maker. The outcry against the vicious murder was immense and accompanied with a firm denial of the verity of Nájera Flores's statements.²⁹¹ An immediate discourse emerged in response to the killer's nefarious excuse for Acosta's murder. Nájera Flores was thus successful in eliciting a homophobic response from Acosta's community. The remarkable and inspiring story of Acosta's life thus tragically ended in the most extreme act of systemic antigay violence.

Nájera Flores's reason for committing this atrocity exemplifies what Sedgwick posits the "homosexual panic defense."²⁹² She illuminates a schema of antigay violence that perpetrators justify as a response to gay advances on them. In her analysis, she shows how this defense rests on the assumption that homosexuality is so severely pathological as to justify retaliatory murder. Sedgwick points out how women as the targets of straight male advances could never use such an excuse as a defense for such a malevolent crime.²⁹³ The sociopathic absurdity of the "homosexual panic defense" is rendered clear when viewed in this light. Unfortunately, the pernicious effects of Nájera Flores's "homosexual panic defense" do not end with his murder of Acosta. His impact on the large community of people who had been very beloved by the artist was a part of the homophobic discourse that emerged out of Nájera Flores's defense.

While Nájera Flores described varying degrees of alleged exploitation by Acosta in what the killer called "sexual assault," he admitted to a consensual sexual interaction

²⁹¹ Silva, "Man Admits Killing Acosta."

²⁹² Sedgwick, *Closet*, 19.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

between he and the artist.²⁹⁴ When the two met, Nájera Flores was about sixteen years old. He claimed that Acosta coerced him into anal sex when Nájera Flores was inebriated.²⁹⁵ The two would go on to know and spend time with each other for roughly four years, with the artist hiring his eventual killer for odd jobs and modeling for paintings and drawings. Nájera Flores, a Mexican national, claimed that Acosta had also paid him for a sexual relationship and despite the fact that he was roughly forty years Acosta's junior and had a wife and young son living with him in Juarez. Nájera Flores described the nature of their relationship:

He hired me about once a month, sometimes once a week. Sometimes one or two months would pass before he gave me work . . . He would pay me \$20 or \$30 a day for posing or working in the yard . . . He would sit down. I was nude. And he would cover my body with plaster. And he would start to fondle me, and do that (perform oral sex),’ Nájera Flores said making an obscene gesture with his fist. Asked why he continued to visit Acosta despite his sexual advances, Nájera Flores shrugged his shoulders and lowered his head. ‘I kept going because I always planned to get back at him (Acosta) by robbing him. I thought I could do it without him catching me, but I never could do it.’²⁹⁶

Making his accusations against Acosta the focus of his narrative, Nájera Flores attempted to cast himself as the exploited victim of their interaction. The response of Acosta's community was to say that Nájera Flores's claims were untrue, implying that if they had been, he would have somehow been justified.

By using the “homosexual panic defense,” Nájera Flores thus acted violently against Acosta in multifarious ways. Most obviously, by ending the artist's life and using the “homosexual panic defense,” Nájera Flores participated in a systematized wave of anti-queer violence, one with genocidal implications. Since Nájera Flores was able to

²⁹⁴ Zamarripa, “Juarez Man Admits Killing Acosta.”

²⁹⁵ Silva, “Man Admits Killing Acosta.”

²⁹⁶ Zamarripa, “Juarez Man Admits Killing Acosta.”

create a discourse in which people felt forced to either acknowledge that Acosta may have been gay or vehemently deny the possibility, the killer drew upon the hetero-normative assumption of the pathology of homosexuality. This rationale hinged on the homophobic notion that admitting Acosta was gay meant condemning him to his tragic and especially macabre end. Because Acosta had been such a publicly adored figure, Nájera Flores only had the power to shame the artist as a way to exculpate himself. In addition to bringing about Acosta's untimely demise, Nájera Flores developed an antigay discourse through which the legal treatment of Acosta's murder as well as the public response would be dictated by homophobic terms.

Acosta's loved ones therefore felt caught in the middle of the widespread public outcry against his death and Nájera Flores's controversial motive for committing the crime. For them to deny Nájera Flores's claims, they also had to refuse the possibility that Acosta was gay, because to admit that he may have been was to risk deeming him a deviant predator. Therefore whenever the murder was discussed, the firm denial of the verity of Nájera Flores's story was an integral part of the narrative of Acosta's death. To honor Acosta was to deny his potential homosexuality. The focus on Acosta's sexuality in the aftermath of his brutal killing points to the "gay genocidal nexuses" addressed by Sedgwick.²⁹⁷ It shifted the emphasis away from the fact that he was murdered in the most cruel and savage way. By engaging Nájera Flores's statements about Acosta's sexuality, the community fell prey to his homophobic justification. They allowed for the severity of the murder to be conditionally based on whether or not Acosta was actually gay, rather than accept the horrific nature of Nájera Flores's crime, regardless of Acosta's sexuality.

²⁹⁷ Sedgwick, *Closet*, 40-41.

The El Paso community's response to Acosta's murder reflects the pervasiveness of homophobic violence on the U.S.-Mexico border, if not the United States in general, in the second half of the twentieth-century. Acosta's status as a well-known artist and cultural figure was enough to inspire outrage over his death; however, it also made his sexuality the focus of a representative discourse. The question of Acosta's sexuality hijacked the reality that the manner in which he was killed was vicious and inexcusable, regardless of whether or not he was gay. By vehemently denying that Acosta was gay, the El Paso community complied with Nájera Flores's "homosexual panic defense." In doing so they co-created an antigay discourse whereby gay identity might be considered a justifiable reason for brutal murder.²⁹⁸

Foucault's framework of discourse informs an understanding of the way that Acosta's loved ones responded to his murderer's claims. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault establishes the power of discourse to police identities and shape sexuality.²⁹⁹ As a young man coming from an impoverished neighborhood of South Juárez and non-U.S. citizen, Nájera Flores exercised the only bit of privilege he had over Acosta, drawing upon the hetero-normative power of pathologizing homosexuality.³⁰⁰ By creating a discourse in which Acosta's community was forced to participate, Nájera Flores enacted his homophobic violence upon Acosta's entire world, beyond just his private life. The antigay discourse that emerged ignored the inhumanity of Nájera Flores's murder and put Acosta on trial as potentially gay. It revealed a deeply homophobic sentiment even among people who were part of Acosta's beloved community as people both tacitly and

²⁹⁸ Ibid, 20.

²⁹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1* (New York, Vintage Books, 1978), 69.

³⁰⁰ Zamarripa, "Juarez Man Admits Killing Acosta."

sometimes overtly accepted Nájera Flores's violence on the condition that Acosta had been gay.³⁰¹

Nájera Flores thus acted violently against Acosta on many levels. By physically ending his life, he brought an end to a beautiful era, one centered around the artist's life and filled with music, laughter, food, art, puns, piñatas, dancing and celebration. He took away the one gift that Acosta appreciated the most. Nájera Flores robbed El Paso's favorite artist of additional years doing what he loved more than anything, painting and celebrating his community. But beyond Acosta's death, the reaction that Nájera Flores evoked tied his violence against Acosta to larger systemic processes of antigay discourse, representative in the community's response to Nájera Flores's rationale.

The discourse that Nájera Flores developed about Acosta depended upon the El Paso community's response to his stated reasons for the murder of the city's beloved artist. This points to Foucault's discussion of "alliance" as a pivotal force in the policing of Western sexuality. He says, "the deployment of alliance is built around a system of rules defining the permitted and the forbidden, the licit and the illicit."³⁰² The alliance that existed between Acosta and his community shaped the reactions to his death on behalf of the many people who knew him. This caused a silencing discourse to emerge in the wake of his murder. Acosta was beholden to the discursive rules that were created by the alliance that bound him in closeted covenant with his community.

It was tragic that Acosta's community followed suit in allowing his sexuality to be the focus of the conversation regarding his murder as Nájera Flores had intended. Many people expressed great shame that Acosta's memory was being tarnished by Nájera

³⁰¹ Silva, "Man Admits Killing Acosta."

³⁰² Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 106.

Flores's claims. Combined with the immense outpouring of grief, were firm denials of Acosta's killer's statements and conspiracy theories that foul play was afoot beyond the official version of the crime. This community response thus composed the discourse on Acosta's death. It situates his narrative within a broader history of systemic antigay discourse.

Acosta's loved ones and friends expressed shame at Nájera Flores's accusations against the artist. Even those who had felt very close to Acosta during his life admitted to being surprised and disturbed to know the truth about him. Yolanda Alvarado, whose iconic portrait by Acosta and one of the most prized in the El Paso Museum of Art's collection of his paintings, was one such person.³⁰³ It was well known that Alvarado had romantic designs on Acosta and hoped that if he ever wished to marry anyone that he would choose her.³⁰⁴ The two were dear friends and Alvarado took great pride in her portrait until the motive of his killer outed him. Immediately following the murder, Alvarado wished to rid herself of the portrait and expressed great shame at the potential that he had been gay. Alvarado was embarrassed that her close friend would hide such an integral aspect of himself in the face of her heterosexual advances. She also felt betrayed from never having known of his homosexuality to which she was morally opposed as a devout Catholic. Eventually, she regained her pride in the portrait and overcame the negativity associated with the feelings that were part of the deep trauma of losing him in such a gruesome way.³⁰⁵ Each person who had been close to Acosta was forced to confront the savagery with which he was slain in conjunction with the stated motive of

³⁰³ Manuel Acosta, *Yolanda*, 1956, El Paso Museum of Art.

³⁰⁴ Lupe Casillas-Lowenberg, interview by author, El Paso, Texas, December 22, 2015.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

his murderer. Such an event created a collective experience of deep trauma whereby Acosta's community was forced to cope with the many awful aspects surrounding his death's circumstances.

Those who had known Acosta and been part of the rich social world that he had worked to create sought to reconcile the competing discourses that emerged after his murder. Ricardo Sánchez, the poet who wrote *Canto y grito mi liberación* and was part of the Chicano cultural movement of El Paso discussed in Chapter 3, characterized the crime as "articide" in an editorial dedicated to Acosta. Sánchez said that in an increasingly hostile and depraved world, Acosta was a dying breed, a soul too good and thus not long for this earth.³⁰⁶ No social critic or editorialist covering Acosta's death wished to address Nájera Flores's claims in terms that contemplated his rationalization of the murder because doing so meant complying with the killer's identification of Acosta as gay. To engage such claims would be to risk admission of their verity.

Acosta's friends and family would go to any lengths to disconnect Nájera Flores's narrative from any potential truth to how Acosta died. Many people claim that foul play was a part of the way that Acosta was murdered and that the official version of his death is completely false.³⁰⁷ While some believe that Nájera Flores was not the real killer, others think that he had an ulterior motive for killing Acosta and that the story of their sexual relationship was entirely fabricated.³⁰⁸ The common thread running through many of Acosta's loved ones' beliefs about how he was killed is the denial of Nájera Flores's

³⁰⁶ Ricardo Sánchez, "Remember Manny by Changing our Attitudes," *El Paso Herald Post*, November 13, 1989.

³⁰⁷ Albert Jemente, interview by author, El Paso, TX, December 17, 2014.

³⁰⁸ Casillas-Lowenberg, interview by author, 2015.

claims of their sexual interaction. This is a central element to the popular memory regarding Acosta's murder among friends and family alike.

Such responses from the local media as well as Acosta's close friends and family composed the discourse that was initiated by Nájera Flores's stated motive. The immediate default to refute accusations of homosexuality point to the deeply antigay impulse at work in this discourse. A universe of explanations seeking to make sense of Acosta's death emerged in response to Nájera Flores, many of them disparate and competing, but all of them working against any acknowledgement of Acosta as gay. Such a strong current in this discourse points to people's fear that admission of Acosta as gay would be congruent with saying his murder was justified. This defined the discourse that reacted to the narrative put forth by Nájera Flores.

The motive Nájera Flores used to initiate the homophobic discourse that would come to define how people remembered Acosta's murder points to a deeply antigay twentieth-century. Despite the great strides in queer rights, including those discussed in Chapter 4 with an increasingly gay presence in American art, antigay violence was still a commonplace and systematized aspect of society. Acosta's story tragically illustrates that the pathologizing of homosexuality was so normalized that the artist's sexuality became the focus of the narrative of his death rather than the horrific manner in which Nájera Flores killed him. Only in a severely homophobic society would such a claim as that Acosta could have been gay imply that the malicious way in which Nájera Flores killed him be justified. It is a continuation of the violence that ended his life to condition his survival on his sexual orientation.

Looking at other historical examples of antigay violence on the U.S.-Mexico border lends insight into the story of Acosta's death. The gay Chicano novelist and poet, Arturo Islas, chronicles the homophobic slaying of his uncle, Carlos Islas in his seminal book *The Rain God*, which was based in part on events in his own family.³⁰⁹ In the fictionalized account of this murder, the killer is a young white soldier who was reacting to Félix Angel's (the character was based on the author's uncle Carlos) sexual advance. Just like with Nájera Flores, in the novel, as in real life, Islas's killer's "homosexual panic defense" translated into minimal consequences for the most brutal and inhumane crime. Carlos Islas's killer served no prison time at all for the murder resulting from his "homosexual panic defense."³¹⁰ Arturo Islas's fictionalized story of his uncle Carlos's murder presents a context in which antigay violence was a normalized aspect of twentieth-century society.

Nájera Flores was therefore successful in developing a homophobic discourse in response to his killing Acosta. By making Acosta's sexuality the focus of why he killed him, Nájera Flores was able to take part in a systematized violence against homosexuality. Acosta's community followed suit in responding the way that Nájera Flores had intended and by denying that the artist had been gay. Framing the narrative in the way that Nájera Flores did allowed him to execute his gay genocidal agenda in addition to casting shame upon Acosta. In essence, Nájera Flores's motive translated into real hetero-normative privilege when it came to deploying the legal system to ally itself with his homophobic agenda.

³⁰⁹ Frederick Luis Aldama, *Dancing With Ghosts: A Critical Biography of Arturo Islas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 83-85.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The most obvious way in which antigay discourse emerged in the wake of Acosta's death was through the outcome of Nájera Flores's trial. Since Nájera Flores was a Mexican national, the case was extradited to Juárez where he stood trial under "federal charges of murder and robbery in a foreign country."³¹¹ Despite the severity of facing federal charges, Nájera Flores reaped the benefit of standing trial in a country where more lax sentencing laws and good behavior policies at Cereso Prison conspired to commute his jail time to only five years.³¹² These actions indicate the real currency that could be associated with a homophobic motive for murder. Sedgwick's framework is applicable in reading the component of Acosta's death narrative in light of the consequences, or lack of them, for Nájera Flores. It is here that the full weight of his "homosexual panic defense" is realized.³¹³

Nájera Flores drew upon the assumed power of hetero-normative privilege to pathologize homosexuality through the discourse that he created that denied Acosta his humanity. He was out of prison within half a decade of having been convicted of Acosta's murder and would go on to commit other crimes as well.³¹⁴ The fact that the killer of such an important man, such an artistic pillar of his community, walked free after the vicious and horrific manner of his crime is a major atrocity and speaks to how antigay systemic violence plays out in stories like Acosta's. When brutal murderers like Nájera Flores face shorter prison sentences because of the currency of the "homosexual panic defense" it exemplifies how systemic violence undervalues queer people of color in

³¹¹ Ramon Bracamontes, "Police Close Acosta Case, Send Evidence to Juarez," *El Paso Times*, October 31, 1989.

³¹² Monica Merced, "Exhibit Celebrates El Paso Artist," *El Paso Times*, June 6, 1999.

³¹³ Sedgwick, *Closet*, 185-6.

³¹⁴ "Lo quería para curarse la malilla, lo detienen al momento que robaba cobre," *La Red Noticias*, July 8, 2007. <http://www.larednoticias.com/noticias.cfm?n=2707>.

a white supremacist hetero-patriarchal society. His confidence in his “homosexual panic defense” points to the terrifying reality faced by Acosta in an era supposedly considered landmark in increasing the rights of queer people. By the last decade of the twentieth-century, the legal consequences for an admitted murderer who calculated his killing of Acosta on the basis that he was gay was considered enough to garner some sympathy for even a vicious sociopath like Nájera Flores. The institutional acceptance of violence against people like Acosta, through the eventual lenient sentencing of his murderer, points to the devaluation of queer life on the U.S.-Mexico border during this time. Carlos Islas’s killer was not sentenced to any prison time at all, attesting to the shear power of the “homosexual panic defense” in reducing punitive measures for violent crimes.³¹⁵

Looking at the tragic story of Acosta’s death thus yields a potential to gain insight into the way that antigay discourse emerges in tandem with homophobic violence. The narrative that Nájera Flores was able to create sought to cast Acosta in a deviant light and to render his ability to be sexually categorized legible to the El Paso community. Sedgwick defines “queering” as an intellectual activity that resists categorization and problematizes the hetero/homo binary.³¹⁶ Queering the narrative of Acosta’s death therefore looks at what is violent not only about the murder itself but in the way that Nájera Flores sought to publically force Acosta into a sexual category and posthumously shame him. The multifold ways in which Nájera Flores deployed hetero-normative hate in both ending Acosta’s life and defaming his legacy are evidence of the real risks for queer people of color living in an antigay society.

³¹⁵ Aldama, *Dancing With Ghosts*

³¹⁶ Sedgwick, *Closet*, xvi.

Ultimately Acosta's murder caused an immense trauma for his loved ones and shocked his community. The experience of losing him left lasting psychological scars on many of his friends and family members and created deep rifts between the recipients of his estate. The nephew who found him murdered slashed one of Acosta's self portraits in a fit of distress and loss.³¹⁷ It is understandable why many grasped for stories and reasons that seemed to say more than the actual senseless brutality of Nájera Flores killing Acosta because he was gay. Still, the acceptance of Nájera Flores's justification signifies a complicity with his "homosexual panic defense" given that people are willing to accept it as a justifiable form of violence. Of the "homosexual panic defense" Sedgwick says:

Judicially, a 'homosexual panic' defense for a person (typically a man) accused of antigay violence implies that his responsibility for the crime was diminished by a pathological psychological condition, perhaps brought on by an unwanted sexual advance from the man whom he then attacked. In addition to the unwarranted assumptions that all gay men may be plausibly accused of making sexual advances to strangers and, worse, that violence often to the point of homicide is a legitimate response to any sexual advance whether welcome or not, the 'homosexual panic' defense rests on the falsely individualizing and pathologizing assumption that hatred of homosexuals is so private and so atypical a phenomenon in this culture as to be classifiable as an accountability reducing illness. The widespread acceptance of this defense seems to show, to the contrary, that hatred of homosexuals is even more public, more typical, hence harder to find any leverage against than hatred of other disadvantaged groups. 'Race panic'³¹⁸ or 'gender panic,' for instance is not accepted as a defense for violence against people of color or women; as for New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, remarks, 'If every heterosexual woman who had a sexual advance made at her by a male had the right to murder the man, the streets of this city would be littered with the bodies of heterosexual men.'³¹⁹

³¹⁷ Hal Marcus, interview by author, El Paso, TX, September 14, 2013.

³¹⁸ I think it is arguable in today's world that a certain type of 'race panic' persists allowing for widespread violence against African Americans. While white police and civilians alike would never overtly use their victims' race as a defense for murder, that race is an essential component is undeniable in the coded ways that these killers justify their crimes.

³¹⁹ Peter Freiberg, "Blaming the Victim: New Life of the 'Gay Panic' Defense," *The Advocate*, (May 24, 1988): 12, quoted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1990), 19.

Nájera Flores's homosexual panic defense allowed for him to take part in the systemic enforcement of hetero-normativity through violence and through antigay discourse.³²⁰

Still, the enduring legacy of Acosta rests not in the controversial circumstances surrounding his death but in what he created as an artist and Chicano leader in El Paso in the twentieth-century. Despite the widespread trauma experienced from his loss, the memories of his impact on the creative life of the U.S.-Mexico border are the lasting element of his story. Acosta was a singular figure who developed an artistic presence in El Paso that celebrated a love of Mexican culture and identity. His mission to represent the Chicano/as of El Paso was well realized through his prolific and successful career as a painter. Even though he struggled financially in his later years, he was able to consistently sustain himself and his family as an artist following his service in WWII and it was mainly because customers went without paying him for his work that he began to fall into economic ruin. His success, however, must be measured not in the material wealth that he accumulated but in his overarching impact on Chicano/a art along with culture and community in El Paso. The humanizing work that Acosta did rings louder than the dehumanizing, atrocious, and regrettable way in which his life came to an end.

Acosta's lasting influence as a Chicano leader and culture-maker on the border in the twentieth-century is realized through the immense body of work that he left behind as well as the loving relationship that he cultivated with his community. He contributed to the artistic life of the U.S.-Mexico border for several decades and represented his people in a way that affirmed their humanity and belonging. If people live on after their death in the people whose lives they have touched and the beauty that they contributed to their

³²⁰ Sedgwick, *Closet*, 186-8.

world, then Acosta's afterlife is as rich as his life was. The remarkable thing about Acosta was the way in which he harnessed his natural ability to be social and creative, into a philanthropic way in which he served his community. He actively shaped his beloved city through his work as a painter and through ways in which he supported local causes—donating to the San Juan Orphanage in Juárez, raising money for local democratic candidates, teaching El Paso public school students about art and culture.³²¹ His name is synonymous not with the scandal his killer tried to attach to him but with the artistic world that he developed on the border over his long life working and enjoying his community in a way that only he could.

Living as a Chicano artist in the mid twentieth century, Acosta defied what limited options were offered to Mexicans in America in terms of professional occupations. His artistic career alone can be seen as a major achievement in Chicano/a history and a contribution to his people. By serving as an example to other young Chicano/as that it was possible to make a living as an artist, he helped nurture a generation of Mexican American creativity. He demonstrated the agency to live life on his terms outside of the normative bounds of what white supremacist, homophobic society dictated. Using his unique talents of conviviality, creativity, and performativity, Acosta had a life that left him fulfilled, happy, actualized, and relevant to his community despite the ways in which this world ultimately failed him.

Acosta's death left a lasting impact on his family, friends, and the art community as well. The traumatic and painful way in which his life was brought to an abrupt end scarred those who loved and were close to Acosta. It was an incredible loss that his life

³²¹ Casillas-Lowenberg, interview by author, 2015.

ended so early. If he had had additional years of painting, he could have been able to recoup his financial troubles and retire. He had been working on a large body of work that was meant to fund his retirement.³²² Acosta could have had decades more on this earth and his life was cut short by a hateful madman who employed the “homosexual panic defense” to justify his nefarious crime.

The loss that Acosta’s family experienced cannot be overstated. His death left a lasting trauma that they will carry with them as they continue to keep alive his memory and maintain his art. While his parents had already died within the last decade of his life, he left behind all four of his siblings along with their children who were very close to him as well. In the immediate aftermath of his death, tensions flared between his executor and the other recipients of his estate that resulted in their failure to divide Acosta’s remaining body of art.³²³ Within two decades of the artist’s death, his brother committed suicide.³²⁴ Remaining divisions among Acosta’s nephews and nieces descend from disagreements and differences that had existed between his siblings. His death furthered a deep rift among his family and his art sat in a lawyer’s vault for a decade after his passing as his heirs could not reach agreement as to how it was to be dispersed.³²⁵

Acosta’s friends were also devastated by his murder. Given his deeply social proclivities, Acosta was the heart of a dense network of people in twentieth-century El Paso. Profound sadness was known to all of the many whom Acosta had called dear friend. Different people dealt with the loss in different ways. Some of those who had not

³²² Jemente, interview by author, 2014.

³²³ Maribel Villalva, “Property of Late Artist Acosta Auctioned off to Pay Debts,” *El Paso Times*, July 15, 1999.

³²⁴ Jose Antonio Acosta, interview by author, El Paso, TX, September 25, 2014.

³²⁵ Villalva, “Property of Late Artist.”

known that Acosta was gay, like Yolanda Alvarado, felt a deep shame regarding Nájera Flores's motive for killing him and had trouble reconciling such a realization about him with the painful way in which he died.³²⁶ Others memorialized him, emphasizing his contributions as an artist and the pillar of his borderlands community that he was.³²⁷ Many tried to keep alive Acosta's beloved celebrations and sought to carry them on in the wake of his death.³²⁸ For example, friends hosted a *posada* at Christmastime following his death.³²⁹ However, Acosta's friends soon realized that Acosta worked hard to organize his parties as the time and that it was difficult to replicate in these efforts. His celebrations had served as performative gatherings where Mexican culture was central to the rich borderlands social milieu that he crafted as a host. No one could mimic the use of the party as an artistic medium as Acosta had done. His signature creative contributions were unmatched by any other artist and were tragically cut short on October 27th, 1989.

Over the course of half a century, Acosta painted the people of the U.S.-Mexico border, represented his community, and crafted a creative social world rooted in his experience as a Chicano. Because of his unique perspective, his vision of Chicano/as is fundamental to the American art canon. When Acosta died, the art community lost one of its longest standing singular voices whose picture of Mexicans in the U.S. served to humanize them. The universal and deeply sincere love that Acosta had for all people came through in his beautiful paintings. He saw a soul in each of his portraits' subjects and was dedicated to revealing that soul through his work. Every single person he painted

³²⁶ Casillas-Lowenberg, interview by author, 2015.

³²⁷ Silva, "Man Admits Killing Acosta."

³²⁸ Ricardo Sánchez, "'Pinto Poet' Bide Adieu to Magical Sojourner," *El Paso Herald Post*, October 31, 1989.

³²⁹ "Posada and Art Auction" flyer, December 23, 1989, Hal Marcus Papers, El Paso, TX.

regardless of race, sex, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, or nationality is depicted as a complete person born of the same spirit as every other. His great talent, available to him through this humanistic impulse at work in his paintings, was a loss to the world of art. He could have kept building his already prolific body of work for much longer had his life not been brought to such a tragic and abrupt end.

Acosta's death left a lasting scar from which the many people he left behind have never fully recovered. The brutal hate crime that brought his life to a premature end was part and parcel to the widespread homophobic violence faced by people at the end of the twentieth-century. That Acosta did not publically identify as gay stands as a testament to the ongoing terror queer people experienced. The ongoing need to maintain a closeted performance of straightness weighed heavily on the potential target of antigay violence in this context. Nájera Flores's "homosexual panic defense" and his legal outcome after having admitted to killing Acosta prove how the "gay genocidal nexus" works in a world where systemic antigay oppression is still widely accepted.³³⁰ Hetero-normative discourse translates into real legal privilege under such a system whereby antigay violence is so largely tolerated and normalized.

Ultimately, Acosta's story proves the vulnerability of even the most vibrant and adored people in the face of such normalized violence. Acosta was someone who, while independent and sometimes solitary, loved company and left his social world open to anyone. He did not discriminate and, in fact, found great joy in the beauty and humanity that he was able to both see and reflect through his portraits. His killer was one such a person who Acosta had mistakenly trusted and allowed into his life. He and Nájera Flores

³³⁰ Sedgwick, *Closet*, 130.

had known each other for four years and Acosta had every reason to continue seeing the good in everyone up until the last moments of his life proved otherwise. Acosta was large and strong, had fought in a World War, and likely could have fended off his attacker. His gentle, loving, and deeply humanizing philosophy was embodied even in his last moments of life as he passively refrained from behaving violently against someone who he knew and cared for.

That someone so broadly known as a source of kindness and fun, so established in the El Paso community, and so deeply appreciated by his people could be killed in such a horrific way and the murderer be out within five years of the crime, speaks to the power of antigay violence in the second half of the twentieth-century. The extradition of the case to Mexico worked in Nájera Flores's favor being that if he had been tried in El Paso where Acosta was more widely known and adored, the sentence would have likely been more severe, although it is not certain. Heterosexuality thus carries with it such currency that even when having admitted to engaging in consensual sex with Acosta, Nájera Flores claimed that he was a victim of these events because the artist had initiated them. As a married man and father of a young child, he sought to cast himself as the normative victim of Acosta's predatory deviancy to explain his brutal killing. The active-passive binary was also at work in Nájera Flores defense as he saw Acosta as the initiator of these encounters and thus the active, and therefore guilty party

It was tragic that the discursive weight deployed through Nájera Flores's motive had such a profoundly shaming impact on Acosta's community. The shame that Nájera Flores was able to cultivate through the narrative that he used to justify his heartless murder reflects a deeply antigay impulse at work on the U.S.-Mexico border in the

twentieth-century. By postulating his own victimhood, Nájera Flores sought to vilify Acosta because of his sexuality and describe a consensual relationship between them as grounds for murder. For a closeted gay man, being outed through an act of violence would have been an ever present, terrifying potentiality. All who knew Acosta would say vehemently that he was a law-abiding humanist who would never harm or take advantage of anyone. While Nájera Flores expressed some shame and remorse for having committed an extremely violent act against such a beloved community figure, his accusations of Acosta's homosexuality were meant to criminalize the artist and justify the brutal manner in which he was slain.

The loss of Acosta's life was a major blow to the El Paso community. His art and celebrations were fundamental to the creative life of the border city. For the better part of a century he had portrayed the people of the borderlands and built a career for himself by doing what he loved. In a world where Chicano/as had fewer opportunities to succeed as artists than their white counterparts, Acosta stands as a testament to Mexican American achievement. He organized a rich social world from which he drew a deep inspiration. The mutually fulfilling relationship that he built with his community was part of his creative mastery as a culture-maker in the twentieth-century borderlands. As an artistic leader, Acosta's legacy lives on in the vast body of art that he left behind but, more importantly, in the memories of his parties, in the nicknames that he gave his friends, in the wordplay that he enjoyed so much, in the performative displays of dance and theatrics that took place at his celebrations, in the many contributions that he made to his community, and in a deep humanistic love and soulfulness that he captured in each one of his subjects.

Acosta's story serves as a tragic reminder of the very real threat that antigay violence posed for people living on the margins of society. As a compassionate, generous, and influential community figure his legacy lives on in the hearts and minds of the many people whose lives he touched. Acosta's spirit will never be killed, even though that is what Nájera Flores had intended. He had hoped to ruin Acosta's memory in addition to robbing him of his life but he failed in doing so. Because no single hateful act could outweigh the lifetime of magnanimous kindness and lively creative force that will forever live on in association with Acosta's memory. No small and selfish mind can undo the beauty that he contributed to this world.

Conclusion

Acosta's life and death offers an example of a gay Chicano's life on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and reveals the confines in which he had to live. The power that Nájera Flores's "homosexual panic defense" had attests to the ubiquity and normalization of antigay violence in the twentieth-century. It points to the pervasive fear felt by those prone to the terror caused by homophobia. That Nájera Flores was free within half a decade of murdering Acosta evidences the currency afforded by the "homosexual panic defense."³³¹ The brutal end to Acosta's life combined with the antigay discourse that emerged in response to Nájera Flores demonstrates the hegemonic influence of hetero-

³³¹ Monica Merced, "Exhibit Celebrates El Paso Artist," *El Paso Times*, June 6, 1999.

normativity. This narrative exemplifies the relationship between antigay violence and discourse at work in the lives of those most marginalized by homophobia.

Despite the intersecting oppressions experienced by Acosta, he thrived as a successful artist on his own terms. He was able to carve out a life for himself doing what he loved. Forging his own career during a time when few Chicano/as achieved the kind of artistic renown known by Acosta, he provides an example of the many fields in which Mexican-origin people have struggled for recognition in U.S. society. He was a role model for the young Chicano/a artists of El Paso who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Acosta's work as a painter stands out amongst his generation, as few non-white artists were able to make their living through their art. What is clear through an examination of Acosta's exceptional story is that Chicano/a artists had a more difficult time sustaining themselves commercially through their art in the twentieth-century. Despite that difficulty, he established a career for himself that allowed him to develop artistically and draw on his full range of creative talents while living a life that sustained him comfortably in his borderlands city.

Still, it proved the most challenging for Acosta to maintain the economic viability of his career in the 1980s as he increasingly lost income because he had failed to collect payment for his work and his debt mounted. When he died he owed thousands of dollars in back taxes that were paid through the disbursement and sale of many of the paintings that he left behind.³³² Acosta never reached the kind of commercial success that Hurd or his cohort in the "San Patricio Five" did, indicating that it was indeed more difficult for a Mexican American artist to generate the kind of wealth as white artists could. In many

³³² Maribel Villalva, "Property of Late Artist Acosta Auctioned off to Pay Debts," *El Paso Times*, July 15, 1999.

ways he was tokenized by the Southwest art colony that was a part of through his mentorship under Hurd.³³³ Looking at Acosta's life and career serves as a reminder of how difficult it was for Chicano/as to make a living creating art during the twentieth-century.

After Acosta's death in 1989, commercial success in artistic careers would continue to remain elusive for Chicano/as and other people of color. In October of 2014, the broad based humanities organization, BFAMFAPhD, published an article describing how difficult it is to make a living as an artist for Latinos and African Americans. The study cites U.S. Census Bureau data that indicated only one in four people earning their income from careers as artists was a person of color.³³⁴ Six decades after Acosta began his career as a painter, the odds of a non-white individual being able to earn a livable wage through their art are bleak. This shows that just in the same way as people of color struggle to attain success in many professional careers, lack of opportunity and income disparity make it very unlikely that a Chicano/a can make a living as a painter in the U.S. today. Acosta's career was thus uniquely important because of what it meant for a Chicano to succeed in the field of art.

It is imperative to consider the implications of the lack of Chicano/as in the art world. Representation is power and art helps to develop narratives about people. If four in every five artists are white, then that means the voice most vastly heard throughout the

³³³ Curry and Fran Holden to Peter Hurd, September 6, 1969, Peter and Henriette Wyeth Hurd Papers, Box 4, Reel 5128, American Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Microfilm.

³³⁴ Susan Jahoda, Blair Murphy, Vicky Virgin, and Caroline Woolard, "Artists Report Back: A National Study on the Lives of Art Graduates and Working Artists," *Creative Economy Report*. Otis College of Art and Design, 2013, <http://www.otis.edu/otis-report-creative-economy>

American creative world is white. Chicano/as had to fight to enter an artistic discourse in the twentieth-century. Acosta helped open the path for Chicano/a art to be part of the American artistic discourse more generally. He took part in the representation of his people and painted them into a vision of the twentieth-century U.S. His career was significant to the broader movement to include Chicano/as in the American historical narrative. Acosta's artistic career thus contributed to the uplift of his people more generally.

Despite the obstacles confronting artists of color in the twentieth-century, Acosta created his own artistic niche in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. By representing his world through the unique lens as a member of the Mexican American Generation, but one who in many ways was not bound by the generational limits of Mexican-origin people in the U.S. in the twentieth-century, he developed a humanizing vision of his people and sought to portray a united border identity, one not marked by distinction between Chicano/as, Mexicans, or Mexican Americans. This reflected his experience growing up in El Paso as the son of two immigrants, but also as an immigrant himself, whose connection to Mexico remained prevalent throughout his youth. Just as he felt a common cause with the Chicano/as on the U.S. side of the border, Acosta saw a shared experience with the people of Mexico as well. He rendered this cultural cohesion that was the product of his life as a Mexican immigrant, a Mexican American, and a Chicano/a all at once. In many ways he transcended generations and brought all three together in his artistic work. Acosta defined a career that served his aims as a Mexican-origin person of the borderlands.

It is remarkable that Acosta was able to achieve the degree of artistic success that he was, given the limited opportunities for artists of color in the twentieth-century. He stands out as the first widely known Chicano artist in El Paso. During a time when white artists defined the creative discourse in the American West, Acosta paved a way for himself to simultaneously exist within this world yet in some degree of opposition to it, all at once. He defined his own aesthetic that put Mexican identity at the center of his visual narrative. His influence was felt throughout the Chicano/a artistic world of the subsequent generation and was recognized by the leaders of that movement.³³⁵

The orientation of Acosta's art was therefore his community, commercial success taking on secondary importance to his social and political goals. Acosta loved his people and his city and made both central to his artistic enterprise. His studio thus became the site of interesting guests posing for his paintings and an exhibit venue in which showings provided him the opportunity to host parties as a way to celebrate Mexican culture and to bring people together. Acosta always donated proceeds to local charities and often supported his local democratic party.³³⁶ His work was focused on the ways in which he could contribute to his community over any concern for individualized success.

Acosta's story is thus just as much one about the U.S.-Mexico border that he called home as it is about his life itself. The social, political, and economic forces that defined reality for El Paso's Mexican proletariat in the twentieth-century shaped Acosta and thus his life yields a clear picture of the borderlands city during his existence. El Paso's cultural and artistic milieu of this period is illuminated by his biography. He was a

³³⁵ Ricardo Sanchez, "'Pinto Poet' Bids Adieu to a Magical Sojourner," *El Paso Herald Post*, October 31, 1989.

³³⁶ Paul Salopek, "Acosta Found Art is Own Backyard and Built Reputation Nationwide," *El Paso Times*, October 26, 1989.

part of a larger community of artists and activists that were celebrating Mexican culture and working to empower Chicano/as. As I gathered stories from those who knew him, I realized that his tale was as much about the broader Chicano/a Renaissance situated in El Paso. This world came to life when Rosa Guerrero recalled performing a spirited *folklorico* dance and Acosta yelling “¡Cuidado, te vas a descocer!” (“Watch out! You are going to unravel!”) recognizing her passion and force as a dancer.³³⁷ It felt as though he was present in the room when dear friend, Teresa Gallardo, remembered the nicknames that Acosta gave to members of his inner circle.³³⁸ He was linked to the broader Chicano/a world elicited in stories such as those recounted by Carmen Felix of her own radical activism defending *Segundo barrio* residents and her experience of having her portrait painted by Acosta.³³⁹ As a member of a large family with a rich history rooted in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, Acosta lives on in the endless memories treasured by his nephews and nieces who wistfully describe a world in which their family occupied the heart of the Chamizal neighborhood and celebrated living less than a mile from the international boundary that marked the two worlds they had inhabited.³⁴⁰

Recalling Acosta’s life thus sheds light on a broader Chicano/a world that was taking shape on the border in the twentieth-century. His story provides a window into a particular contextual reality, one in which Chicano/a activism, leadership, and culture making played fundamental roles in the struggle for Mexican American equality. The ways in which El Paso’s artists, poets, musicians, dancers, journalists, and organizers

³³⁷ Rosa Guerrero, interview by author, El Paso, TX, October 28, 2015.

³³⁸ Theresa Gallardo, interview by author, El Paso, TX, April 26, 2014.

³³⁹ Carmen Felix, interview by author, El Paso, TX, May 24, 2015.

³⁴⁰ Irma Chavira and Ramon Acosta, interview by author, El Paso, TX, March 10, 2015.

cultivated a love of Mexican identity contributed to a shift toward a Chicano/a consciousness. Their efforts to counter white supremacy culminated in the political activism of the 1970s in El Paso that typifies the Chicano/a movement there. Acosta was able to use his career as an artist to live a life in which he affected his community in a positive way. As a Mexican-origin person living in a community that was historically Mexican, Acosta derived inspiration and strength from his identity and his opportunity to express himself as a Chicano through his art.

Still, Acosta was not able to communicate every aspect of his identity with equal candor. Just as salient as his ethnic and racial experience was that of his sexuality. He relayed his queer identity through a coded idiom in his art. This provided him the means to express who he was to his community without saying it outright in a homophobic world that threatened the lives of queer people. Acosta remained otherwise closeted in the public realm and understandably so when considering the circumstances surrounding his death and the discourse that ensued when his friends and family responded to Nájera Flores's "homosexual panic defense."

Acosta's life demonstrates the intersectionality of Chicano/a and queer identity. He had agency to define a life that empowered him, gave him meaning, and allowed him to express the many relevant aspects of who he was. The artistic role that he played in his community afforded him a fulfilling yet humble existence that was ultimately cut short at the hands of an antigay murderer. His killer knew that the shame elicited by his motive would create lasting trauma for Acosta's loved ones. The homophobic discourse that emerged in the aftermath of Acosta's death exemplifies hetero-normative violence at work in the lives of queer people of color. His death reminds us of the full extent of the

dire brutality that could spell the end of someone's life, even a dear figure beloved by many.

The limits of Acosta's agency were thus defined by his encounters with hetero-normative oppression throughout his life. He lived a closeted life in which only his closest friends knew the truth about his sexuality. His art also provided him the means to share the truth about himself in a homophobic world. The emotional burden that this caused him combined with the financial hardship that he underwent in the last decade of his life, pulling him into a deep depression. His paintings of this era take on a surreal style and render his pained relationship with identity and sexuality. Being able to portray this experience through his art offered Acosta a therapeutic means through which he could communicate his innermost struggles and conflicts honestly and safely all at once.

In contrast to the coded way in which Acosta expressed his sexuality, his identity as a Mexican-origin person was foremost in his artwork. Growing up as a member of El Paso's Mexican proletariat shaped the class and racial concerns at the heart of Acosta's work. He celebrated working class people and Chicano/as as central to a portrayal of American life. His experience growing up in El Paso was fundamental to the artistic message that he developed over the course of his career. The ability that Acosta had to celebrate his Mexican identity publicly stood in sharp distinction to his coded expression of his sexuality.

Acosta's art was the main vehicle through which he exercised his agency as a gay Chicano in the twentieth-century borderlands. The double marginalization that he experienced contoured the limits of this agency. Acosta's story provides a salient example of the ways in which hegemonic systems shape the lives of queer people of

color. Still, he resisted all of the forces in his world that sought to relegate him to a life not right for him. Despite the oppression he faced, he was still able to create an existence for himself that was meaningful and beneficial to his beloved community. He used his talent and love of bringing people together to develop a festive life in which the celebration of Mexican culture stood at the forefront. Art provided Acosta the means to create a relevant life for himself amidst his cherished border city.

By working as an artist, Acosta was able to perform the closet through the non-normative lifestyle that it afforded him. His artistic career also allowed for him to express his sexual identity while maintaining the safety of the closet. Working as a painter afforded him an alternative lifestyle to the hetero-normative nine-to-five ideal of the Greatest Generation. His career as an artist was often the explanation given in response to any question as to why Acosta did not pursue marriage and children. Devotion to his craft was assumed to take precedence among his priorities.³⁴¹ By developing his own alternative sexual schema through his art, he could communicate his sexuality to the world. The inherently interpretive aspect of art worked to Acosta's benefit by letting his work speak at multiple levels. Ultimately, living as an artist gave Acosta the means through which to have a life that fulfilled, rewarded, and protected him all at once.

The social milieu and creative world that Acosta built in his borderlands city provided him the means to claim a space for himself as a gay Chicano in the twentieth-century. He devised a means to remain closeted while divulging his sexuality among his most trusted friends. His art provided him the coded means to express that which otherwise remained hidden to the public. He was able to perform the closet because of his

³⁴¹ Manuel Gregorio Acosta, *Manuel Gregorio Acosta: a retrospective = una retrospectiva* (El Paso: El Paso Museum of Art, 2009), 17.

life as an artist exemplifying the way that Kosofsky Sedgwick describes, “‘closetedness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularly by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.”³⁴² At the same time as he performed the closet in this way, he was able to openly celebrate his Mexican identity. His art was oriented around the concerns of Mexican-origin people who had served as El Paso’s underclass at the bottom of the border city’s racialized economic hierarchy. The different forms of oppression that Acosta underwent as part of his unique experience informed who he was as an artist.

The lines of race and sexuality therefore intersected in Acosta’s life both in terms of the struggles he faced and the agency he had to resist them. As a queer Mexican-origin artist living on the border in the twentieth-century, he had the power to create a life for himself while at the same time facing the hetero-normative violence that would ultimately kill him. Having to live a closeted life, Acosta used his art to express his sexual identity through a coded idiom. His career provided him the means to have a non-normative lifestyle and to build a community around the celebration of Mexican culture. While he was subject to the homophobic violence that kept him closeted and eventually ended his life, Acosta established himself as El Paso’s first Mexican American painter and contributed to the cultural changes that were fundamental to the Chicano/a generation. His life offers a salient window into the ways in which Mexican Americans contributed to the Chicano Renaissance in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in multifarious ways.

³⁴² Kosofsky Sedgwick, 69.

Acosta's life story contributes to Chicano/a historiography and exemplifies how biography can yield greater historical understanding. His intersectional experience and the unique way in which he dealt with his circumstances reveal a complex man who used his creative talent to deal with his situation in a resourceful way. He established a place for himself amidst the community that was the focus of his art. Painting Chicano/as into American art, Acosta used his artistic voice as a platform to work for the good of his city. He was committed to the uplift of his people and the inclusion of them in a larger vision of the United States.

El Paso provided the formative context for Acosta's life and work. His experience as the child of working immigrants who struggled to carve out a life for themselves informed the major impetus of his art. The vision of the borderlands that he created augmented the art of the American West. He intervened on an artistic discourse that had depicted Mexicans in flat stereotypes. By contributing his voice to this artistic canon he augmented it with a much needed and underrepresented Chicano/a perspective. He laid the groundwork as a Mexican American artist to develop the cultural changes that would be fundamental to the Chicano/a Renaissance of the twentieth-century. As a queer Chicano, he lent a singular artistic voice to American art, communicating his sexuality through queer codes that he included in his work. Art provided him the means to render himself legible at different levels through his paintings. His life was tragically cut short at the hands of a brutal killer who deployed the "homosexual panic defense" to justify his murder. Acosta's remarkable life and death reveal a salient narrative about the intersection of race and sexuality in the experience of El Paso's foremost Chicano artist.

Ultimately, Acosta's story provides a window into a broader story about Chicano/as in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in the twentieth-century. His life exemplifies the Mexican American Generation but at the same time he stands out among his contemporaries. He transcends the generational limits one typically attributes as characteristically dividing the Chicano/a and Mexican American generations. His artistic career and his creative approach to building community defined the unique role that he played in the history of his people. El Paso provided him the contextual experience to emerge as the city's earliest Mexican-origin painter. Exploring Acosta's life thus reveals a more general cultural milieu of which he was a part. He provides an example of the forces that marginalized queer people of color in the U.S. and how he was able to resist those forces. The life that he built for himself as a Chicano artist on the border engaged with and struggled against the homophobic, racist, and classist systems that shaped his circumstances. By developing his own significant way to exercise his agency in spite of the challenges that he faced, Acosta's remarkable life calls on historians to consider the myriad ways that people fight their oppression.

Acosta's claim to fame was that he painted what was "in his own backyard."³⁴³ He was known for finding beauty in the border landscape and its people. His knack for capturing the essence of this unique community set him apart from other Southwest artist of the mid twentieth-century. He prided himself on his ability to celebrate Mexican identity as fundamental to an American historical narrative. The love that he had for his people was at the heart of his artistic motivations and the driving force behind his career.

³⁴³ Salopek, "Artist."

The goal that Acosta had to paint his people on the border was fully realized in his life that was cut too short. He recalled that when he would ask his grandmother to sit for portraits “she was shy and felt she wasn’t important enough. I told her that everything that is here and now is important. Right here is just as important as anything going on in Paris or London.”³⁴⁴ His love of painting El Paso and the Mexican-origin people of the borderlands fueled his career. For Acosta, success did not hinge on widespread fame or vast wealth; rather, he sought to define his work on its own terms as something centered on the uplift of his community. His love of his friends and family along with Mexican history, culture, and identity formed the basis of his aims as an artist.

Acosta left behind a city that loved him dearly. The unfathomably brutal end to his life speaks to the extremism of antigay violence. That he had to live in a deeply homophobic world that forced him into the closet, points to the ubiquity of heteronormative abuse at work in the twentieth-century. His art provided him the means to communicate the multiple aspects of his identity and to convey his experience as a gay Chicano in the borderlands. He lives on in the art that reflected his identity and provide a window into a unique cultural space at a particular historical moment. By building community through his art in El Paso, Acosta greatly enriched border culture and contributed to the uplift of his people.

³⁴⁴ Hal Marcus, “Manuel Acosta,” *Southwestern Art Forum* (March/April 1976) <http://www.utep.edu/acosta/manuel1976.html>.

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Vita

Susannah Estelle Aquilina earned her Bachelor of Arts Degree in Early Childhood Education in 2005 from Naropa University and her Master of Arts Degree in History from the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) in 2011. During the interim between these degrees she worked as a community organizer at La Mujer Obrera in El Paso, TX. Her research is focused on twentieth-century social justice movements. In 2011, she published an article in the journal, *Intercultural Studies*, titled “Common Ground: Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah on the U.S.-Mexico Border,” that examined the cross-cultural collaboration between Iranian and Chicano youth activists in the 1960s and 1970s. She received the Cotton Scholarship in 2011, the Frances G. Harper History Dissertation Research Award in 2014, and the Dodson Research Grant in 2015. A grant from the Center for the Advancement and Study of Early Texas Art (CASETA) in 2015 also provided resources for research. Aquilina has taught U.S. History at UTEP and currently teaches Advanced Placement U.S. History at the high school level.

Contact Information: seaquilina@yahoo.com

This thesis/dissertation was typed by Susannah Estelle Aquilina