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Remapping *Latinidad*: A Performance Cartography of Latina/o Identity in Rural Nebraska

Karma R. Chávez

This essay argues that the cartography of latinidad generally locates US Latinas/os in either urban or border regions. In order to disrupt that spatial placing, this essay proposes “performance cartography,” a method that relies on storytelling, to disrupt the dominant configuration of latinidad. Through a series of family stories about being Latina/o in rural Nebraska, this essay shifts understandings of Latina/o performativity by emphasizing the importance space makes in producing different kinds of subjects. Although the author notes connections between urban, border, and rural conceptions of latinidad, this essay urges a more careful consideration of alternative spaces.

Keywords: Theory of the flesh; Storytelling; Assimilation; Disidentification; Space

“Hey Karm, I thought I should let you know that Mae will be in Phoenix tomorrow on Christmas,” my father began the phone conversation in his usual brief way. “Her daughter Diane has pneumonia. She’s in the hospital.”

“Mae has a daughter in Phoenix?” I asked from my living room couch. “I had no idea.” I’m in my late 20s, and though my queerness (and my feminism) might be off-putting to some of my extended family, I think of myself as family-oriented. It was weird to think I might have lived just down the street from someone in my family, and no one bothered to mention it—especially since I always thought of Mae as an aunt.

“Well, you know how big our family is,” my father yawned.

Over the next month, I learned just how big, as a string of family I had not seen since I visited my grandparents as a child in Scottsbluff, Nebraska flew into Phoenix. Over plates of cafeteria food, cheap take out, and before and after Catholic Mass,

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I listened to stories; stories of *mi familia*, of being Mexican immigrants and then Mexican Americans in rural Nebraska. As I listened and eventually shared, I tried to locate these stories within my academic studies of Latina/o and Chicana/o identity. I wanted to know if my family's experiences connect with others' experiences, and what, if any, role the stories of Mexican Americans in a place like rural Nebraska play in a broader construction of *latinidad*, or the creation and performance of Latina/o identities that potentially build pan-Latina/o solidarity.

"How did they end up in Nebraska of all places?" I asked my cousin Delores one night over warm tortillas and beans.

Delores, a woman in her 60s who prays before dinner and gulps bottled Bud Light, chuckled a bit. "Sugar beets. They came to tend the sugar beets. You come from farm workers."

The stench of sugar beets, like an earthy, humid compost pile, hovers in the air of Western Nebraska. Driving from the east on Highway 30, I remember crossing a threshold into the state's panhandle marked by that burnt-sweet odor from the giant factory outside of Scottsbluff. When we hit the city limits, we'd see large piles of the strange smelling fruit, turnip-like and off-white, waiting to be processed. My grandma worked in the sugar beet factory before she married my grandpa. According to my dad, it used to be that nearly everyone in Western Nebraska worked at the sugar beet factory at one time or another. Cherrie Moraga explains that her family's history in farm work elicited no pride for her Chicano family (28); contrarily, my family, some of whom eventually owned land, expressed farming sugar beets as a source of pride in our history as hard workers.

It makes sense that my maternal family, the German side, ended up in rural Nebraska considering the large numbers of German and other European descendants there. Mexicans living in rural Nebraska have never made much sense to me, and for good reason. Only ten percent of Latinas/os live in rural areas of the United States (Gouveia). Growing up, I experienced town after town of seemingly all White people. Nebraska never seemed like a good place for Brown people. We stayed always on the outside, always on the borders. For the most part, Brown bodies passed through in the summer, preferably never making a home. The Heartland never seemed to need or want Latinas/os to survive. Anzaldúa writes of the borderlands as a literal and figurative space where impure creatures are produced and reside. Although the borderlands can be a rich source of creativity, they can also be stifling.

Nebraska, "the good life," the state signs suggest. Once home to multiple indigenous nations, after nineteenth-century European expansion across these lands, a population of about ninety percent White people, and roughly seven percent "Hispanic" now constitute the state ("Nebraska Quickfacts"). Most of the non-White population lives in the urban areas of Lincoln and Omaha. For this reason, it seems obvious why few narratives of *latinidad* mention the Heartland (exceptions include: Barron-McKeagney; de la Luz Montes; A. González; Williams et al.; Willis).

As I listened to my family stories during the month of my cousin's illness, I realized that the cartography of Latina/o experience in the United States is one of border states, urban areas, and, to a lesser degree, the East and West Coasts (e.g., Anzaldúa;

Carrillo Rowe; M. González; Muñoz, “Feeling Brown”). When people speak of *latinidad*, they speak of pilgrimages to México (Calafell “Pro(Re-)Claiming Loss”), queer clubs in cities (Moreman; Rivera-Servera), migrant identity and migration (Sandoval-Sánchez), or representations in the media (e.g., Báez; del Rio; Garcia et al.). These spaces, these mappings of what it means to be Latina/o, resonate with my family’s stories of and in rural Nebraska. Similarities undoubtedly exist; yet, as Patricia Price bluntly puts it, “*latinidad* is complicated” (82). Many of the complications that my family presents for *latinidad* are not represented in the aforementioned studies.

Unfortunately, *latinidad* can also function to homogenize different groups and their identities, especially when used by media to stereotypically lump “Latinas/os” together. Due to the risk of deploying *latinidad* in these problematic ways, Frances Aparicio advocates understanding *latinidad* as “a concept that allows us to explore moments of convergences and divergences in the formation of Latina/o (post)colonial subjectivities and in hybrid cultural expressions among various Latino national subgroups” (93). Taken in this way, *latinidad* is not a sweeping construction, but rather one that emphasizes particularities and how groups with different national origins share similar relationships to Whiteness and colonial histories. Aparicio’s conceptualization of *latinidad* provides a way to explore linkages between different “Latinas/os” without taking the terms for granted. At the same time, she assumes that *latinidad* refers to moments when Latinas/os are in relation to each other. Moreover, her analysis still emphasizes media representation as the main site for the construction of *latinidad*.

José Esteban Muñoz also seeks to challenge taken-for-granted ideas about *latinidad*, but he emphasizes performance as a rich source to map the complexities of Latina/o performativity and resistance. Specifically, Muñoz pushes us to think of the construction of belonging within “affective registers” where Latinas/os are expected to conform to “white affect” (“Feeling Brown” 68). Latinas/os cannot regularly achieve the norm attributed to White affect, which is why Muñoz decenters the White norm by emphasizing “feeling brown,” as a resistant affective register. Muñoz’s work is useful in that it demonstrates the importance of performance in constituting *latinidad*, and yet urbanity is very much the center of his analysis of *latinidad*. Price suggests that despite complexities, discussions of *latinidad* often issue an implicitly normative claim about where identities and performances should take place.

This cartography of *latinidad* therefore needs to be remapped, for families like mine are not the only Brown ones in the rural Heartland. Thus, I map here a different kind of space of the performances and identities that constitute the possibility for *latinidad*, one that, for a moment, centers the rural and nonborder. I offer Nebraska and my family’s experiences within it as a case study that may supply broader insight into Latina/o identities in other rural spaces. Such a temporary centering of a different kind of space functions to scatter the proper space of *latinidad*, and to evoke and enact the complexity of Latina/o identity and performativity. Moreover, as will be demonstrated later on, the disjuncture between urban and rural provides an

opportunity to understand strategies of disidentification with normative regimes that may not normally be available with the traditional spatial emphases of *latinidad*. The richness of this disjuncture provides another way of articulating and challenging *latinidad*.

Performance Cartography¹

To accomplish this task, I enact what I describe as “performance cartography,” whereby storytelling is the mechanism utilized to map space and the subjectivities and identities it produces. Maps have historically functioned as colonial tools and methods of reinscribing imbalanced power relations, but mapping through storytelling can cut through and against this functioning. Storytelling constructs the foundations for “theories of the flesh” (Moraga and Anzaldúa). Through the sharing of stories from lives that teach lessons or offer insight about the way the world works, narratives work to build theory literally from flesh and blood experience. This theory differs from the kind of theory produced in other kinds of spaces such as academia as it privileges people and voices usually not heard in those spaces. Drawing on the work of Black feminists, performance scholar D. Soyini Madison contends that theories of the flesh are found in the stories we tell from and about the “homeplace” (“That was My Occupation”). Theories of the flesh articulate who we are and where we come from as a significant source of knowledge (214). Performance cartography is premised upon performance scholarship that asserts the importance of narrative and story for constructing identity and bringing about new understanding (Langellier “Personal Narrative”, “Personal Narratives”; Madison “That was My Occupation”, “Performance”; Peterson and Langellier). Performance cartography shares with personal narrative an interest in bringing marginalized experience to the fore. It extends this work by telling marginalized narratives that emphasize space alternatively to voice. In other words, performance cartography emphasizes how space produces subjectivities and possibilities as opposed to emphasizing the specific subject that speaks a narrative. The focus on the spatial production of subjectivity illuminates the necessity of thinking of something like Latina/o performativity outside of conventional locales (i.e., urban and border spaces) since the assumption behind performance cartography is that space matters.

Cartography is literally the practice of making maps. Maps of course tell stories, but as Doreen Massey writes, “Loose ends and ongoing stories are real challenges to cartography” (*For Space* 107). Conventionally, maps imply that space is a surface with stability. Some cartographies do attempt to disrupt convention by opening up possibility and attempting to disturb seeming coherence (109). Such cartography can only emerge from an incoherent and unfixed perspective on space and spatiality, where as Raka Shome argues, space is a primary register of producing power (39). Space is better understood as interrelational, multiple, and always in the process of becoming (Massey “Imagining Globalisation”). In this way, relationships among people, groups, and discourses constitute a space, which means that multiple spaces may overlap. Such characteristics of space suggest that space can never be complete.

Identifying space in this manner affords the opportunity to explore the productive dimensions of space, specifically in seeing how it constitutes certain kinds of subjects and subjectivity.

Amelia María de la Luz Montes begins her essay: “Imagine a Latina lesbian narrative set in Nebraska” (30). Her point is that within conventional thinking about Latinas/os, conjoining Latina lesbians and Nebraska may seem paradoxical. She explains that although Anzaldúa made it clear that borderlands stretch past the Southwest, there is often a sense that only the borderland Latina narrative is the authentic one, even more so for Latina lesbians. The problematic of authenticity coupled with the potential for homogenization may function to suppress what it means to be Latina/o in alternative spaces.

The Space of Rural Nebraska: Imagine a Mexican Farmer

Rural Nebraska may not seem an obvious site of analysis to look at Latinas/os or to complicate *latinidad*. As Lourdes Gouveia writes, most stories of rural life in places such as Nebraska conjure images of White farmers, and Latinas/os often get portrayed as “illegals” or “transients” that are/were peripheral to rural life (6). Some Latino/a families have been in Nebraska for more than a century (Davis), and despite massive population fluctuations since the early 1900s, between 1990 and 2000 the number of Latinas/os increased 165 percent (Dalla et al.).

The space of Nebraska also produces certain possible practices and subject formations. Outside of Lincoln and Omaha, a vastness—of land, sky, and air—constitutes Nebraska. In parts of the state, especially out West, you can drive twenty miles or more without seeing another car or a house. Land not designed for pasture or ranch is tilled yearly into fields. In summertime, seas of green and gold emblazon Nebraska—the corn, milo, alfalfa, and soybeans are all green, and the wheat turns gold for a July harvest. Out West, the big farm product is sugar beets. This product exploded in production at the turn of the twentieth century for the propagation of sugar and related products. Only twenty-seven Mexicans supposedly lived in Nebraska prior to 1900, but the increase in sugar beet production brought hundreds of Mexican workers to Western Nebraska (Grajeda), including my great grandparents, Jacinta and Jacobo.

Rural spaces, characterized by small towns and family farms, construct a certain kind of folk. People drive at Sunday afternoon speeds seven days a week. Familiar faces pass each other in cars routinely stopped in the middle of roads to share a conversation from driver’s side windows. Everybody knows everybody. Yet, living a rural life is not all slow driving and friendly hellos. Rural areas in the United States have not seen nearly the economic growth of metropolitan areas (Galston and Baehler). Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that rural people in the Midwestern United States are suspicious of outsiders and resistant to change. These two facts about the rural Midwest collided during the 1980s when the Heartland experienced a farming debt crisis. People left rural areas much faster than they entered. Places

around Nebraska suffered, including a town named Lexington, forty-five minutes northwest of my hometown.

In the late 1980s, IBP (Iowa Beef Processors), the largest meatpacking plant in the world, said it would open a plant in Lexington. Mostly White locals voiced concern about the “type of people” such an industry would bring; officials assured them that most of the hires would be local (Gouveia and Stull). Based on history, this was a false promise as Latina/o and/or immigrant labor almost always fills meatpacking plants. My grandfather worked in a Swift packing plant for thirty years. Lexington, Nebraska, was no exception. The Latina/o population jumped from four percent to twenty-four percent within three years, changing the land and cultural scapes of central Nebraska. Some locals grumbled among themselves, and others unabashedly critiqued the new relationality that constituted the space. As Muñoz contends, we live in a country that mandates “feeling white,” so when new affective performances constitute a space, they shake the normative demands of the power structure (“Feeling Brown”). Many in my hometown started referring to Lexington as “Mexington,” and before long the town’s population had grown so much that Lexington High School left our athletic division. “White flight” became the norm as White families either left the area or sent their kids to schools nearby. Lexington lost thirty-eight percent of its White population under 18 (Dalla et al.; Gersema and Goodsell). For the few kids like me, the Lexington situation created a different sort of problem. These new immigrants and their relationships with White rural Nebraskans altered the relationship that families like mine had with those same White Nebraskans. Suddenly, our marked bodies, racially and spatially, connected to the new foreign other.

Normally, these connections were only temporary for us, like when the “beaners” came to town. “Beaners” were the migrant farm workers who annually came to Nebraska from Mexico and other Central American countries. In the middle of summer, my skin color too closely matched theirs. “Karma is a beaner, Karma is a beaner” asshole White boys chanted.

“I am not,” I hollered back. “My dad is mostly Spanish.”

We all knew I lied. Moraga recalls her relatives referring to lower income Mexicans as “wetbacks” and “braceros” in order to differentiate themselves from the meanings attached to being Chicana/o (28). I never heard my family use those terms, or the term “beaner.” Many of my White classmates did. Some White adults too. No matter who uttered the slurs, I hated when the “beaners” came to town to work in the fields while hot sun scorched their tired backs. Their Brown bodies reflected to me everything I did not want to see in myself. Their Brown bodies reflected my family’s history. Their Brown bodies, like a spotlight, highlighted our brownness to the Whites we had learned to relate to in ways that concealed our otherness from them. I learned to hide our food, our traditions, and my father. Those parts of me now seemed vulnerably naked in front of everyone’s eyes.

With all the Mexicans in Lexington, I experienced the same thing. People looked at my family with suspicion. Calling on a Spanish (and colonial) ancestry, no matter how fictional or marginal, worked to disconnect the racial relationship I had with Mexican migrants. Affirming that only Whites belong here and that Brown-others are

indeed foreign to this rural space, such moves facilitate Brown erasure while upholding White racism as an appropriate response to Mexican presence. Not surprisingly, my classmates used racist anecdotes to otherize Mexicans and bolster claims that Mexicans did not belong in Nebraska. This multilayered tension over race and culture constitutes a new kind of space.

Lexington marked the first manifestation of mass Latina/o migration to Nebraska and racist negotiation in my lifetime, but this was an historical tension as well. More than 49,000 farms and almost 46 million acres of farmland exist in Nebraska (“2002 Nebraska Census”). The incredible amount of farms coupled with incredible amounts of White people leads to an incredible amount of White farmers. To check crops and livestock, these farmers take long, slow drives late at night and early in the morning to the soft hum of AM radio or perhaps just the sounds of cicadas and birds. The lifestyle creates people who are used to being by themselves and in control of their world. It seemingly takes a lot to get those good ole boys riled up.

In the middle of the twentieth century, my great uncle Manuel became the first Mexican in Western Nebraska to own his own farm.² Among a few other crops and livestock, Manuel farmed sugar beets. Prior to being a landowner, he worked long hours for a White farmer who wanted to retire. My uncle, eager and able, hoped that he could buy the farm. The White farmer eventually decided to sell his farm to my uncle. As people caught wind of the pending sale, the White farmers in town a few miles away grew furious, and angrily confronted their White friend. “It’s my farm, I can sell it to who I want,” he told them indignantly. He wanted to sell it to Manuel, and he did. Both the White farmer who sold his farm and the White farmers who protested enacted the privilege to be in control of their own worlds.

The fear that these White farmers felt is not unlike the fear I felt with the “beaners” arrival each summer in my hometown or the shifting space of Lexington after IBP. In both instances, new relationships and new possibilities constitute the space. Though nearly 40 years separated the time between the arrival of IBP in Lexington and my uncle’s purchase of the farm out West, in many ways the relationality between Whites and Latinas/os remains similar. Mexican farm owners are rare, and Mexican meatpackers continue to be the norm. Of all the principle farm operators in the state of Nebraska, more than 49,000 are White and 287 are Latina/o (“2002 Nebraska Census”). Latinas/os make up more than eighty percent of the low-wage workers in meatpacking plants in Lexington (Gouveia and Stull).

Performing Latina/o in Rural Nebraska: Imagine a (Mexican) American Dream

When I met my cousins Phyllis and Marcella at the hospital in Phoenix, they eagerly told me what it was like for our family to come from Mexico to Nebraska. Phyllis, a jolly woman who has since taken up residence in Maui, travels easily between Spanish and English, often forgetting that my assimilation in childhood and my laziness in adulthood have left me with only one mastered language. For Phyllis, it seems both retelling our family’s migration story and speaking in Spanish are an immense source of pride. As a woman, as one responsible for maintaining culture and passing down

history (Trinh), Phyllis beams when she speaks. I must again appear puzzled as I try to make sense of part of a story she has just conveyed in Spanish. Noticing my confusion, she shakes her head.

“Oh Uncle Art,” she sighs referring to my grandfather.

She does not need to say anymore, as we both know the disheartened tone of her voice critiques his insistence on becoming “American,” becoming White, and how those decisions continue to impact his grandchildren. My grandfather’s pride, very different from Phyllis’, reflects his own sense making of family and cultural history. My grandfather’s father and grandfather both emerge in Grandpa’s stories as great heroes who did what it took to overcome all odds and achieve success including lavish consumption, refusing handouts, and publicly adopting a White style of dress and conduct. The pride in achieving some semblance of the American Dream via the norms of Whiteness seems essential to the performativity of Latina/o identity in the space of Nebraska; it had to be.

Rural Latina/o Community: An Oxymoron

A primary characteristic of urban Latina/o identity is the existence of communities or enclaves, which create the possibility for at least some semblance of cultural connection and camaraderie (Price). This sense of community can come at a cost considering some people may not want to be in the kind of community that is available to them. Especially where diverse groups of Latinas/os reside, people may get lumped together who have no desire to be thus grouped. Contrarily, in rural areas, the sheer distance between farms, coupled with the small amounts of Latinas/os in the first place, makes the possibility for community virtually nonexistent. For Latinas/os generally, *la familia* is central to community (Gangotena). In rural areas this is especially so. As evidenced by my Uncle Manuel’s experiences, a primary relationality that constitutes rural Nebraska is between White and Brown people. Because of the power imbalance inherent in these relationships, the resulting space can compel a heightened sense of pride among Latinas/os, much like the kind of pride my grandfather adopts. It is both a source of strength and a mechanism for coping with perpetual minority status in an overwhelmingly White space.

I bite into my salad as Phyllis starts telling a story about my great grandfather Jacobo, apparently, a difficult man to live with. When the US government repatriated Mexicans to Mexico, Jacobo and Jacinta went “willingly” so that they could keep their passports and return later. Many Mexicans were not so lucky (Flores). When Mexicans could return, my great grandparents went to work on White farms in Nebraska again. I am sure the work was more difficult for Jacinta—she had to work in the fields and keep the home. Most women did. Her birthday was the only day of the year that Grandpa Jacobo treated her how she should have always been treated. Each year my great grandpa threw her a grand celebration. One year, her birthday fell at a time when their White employer left for vacation. Jacobo bought and cut up many chickens for a fried chicken feast in honor of Grandma. Upon return, the farmer discovered that some of his own chickens had been stolen. He also noticed the mess

of feathers and bones behind Jacobo and Jacinta's shack. He confronted Jacobo, a proud man who not only would never steal, but adamantly refused handouts for his family. Jacobo spoke little English but heard the accusation. With a raspy "g" and a silent "h," "go to hell!" he told the farmer and packed his family up in the middle of harvest season. The farmer, who later learned a neighbor stole his chickens, begged for my grandparents' return. They did not return.

Calafell notes that in a space with few Chicanas/os, those present may be more likely to connect than they otherwise would ("Disrupting the Dichotomy"). In explaining her relationship with her friend Mario in North Carolina, Calafell suggests that they may not have been friends in the Southwestern United States because the meaning attached to her White skin within a Chicana/o context may have prevented their coalescing. However, in North Carolina, such meanings are less significant. Calafell speaks to the spatial production of community building, and community resisting. In the story of my great-grandparents, although some relationships with Brown people outside of the family likely existed, the primary community included kin. The long hours of farm work, and the geographical distance between farms minimize other kinds of relationality. However, Jacobo and Jacinta lived within close proximity to their White boss. A power imbalance constitutes this relationality. Jacobo and Jacinta not only worked for the farmer, but they spoke little English and had only recently returned from repatriation. In this sense, Latinas/os in rural spaces often lack Latina/o community, and thus lack the resources to resist discrimination or to reshape Brown-White relationships. Though more Latinas/os live in rural Nebraska today, especially in specific areas, for families such as mine who have inhabited this space for generations, the past constitutes the present.

Assimilation: Learning to Speak American

Surviving rural life teaches valuable lessons, and those lessons travel through the generations and across the prairie like meadowlarks caught in the wind. Assimilation is a part of nearly all experiences with Latina/o identity in the United States. In ethnic urban enclaves, border regions, or in mobile cultures like migrant farm workers, the method of assimilation and the necessity to do it are decidedly different from rural regions in places like Nebraska. Assimilation is arguably always a facet of the experience of non-White others in the United States, but the type of community available to non-Whites in rural areas perhaps provokes a more rigid kind. In Anzaldúa's discussion of the *mestiza* identity, she actively works against assimilation—either to White or to heteropatriarchal culture. Calafell explains that in a space such as the traditional Chicano/a homeland of Aztlán in the US Southwest, Latinas/os do not have to think about their identity "since it is given and supported in the everyday" (Calafell "Disrupting the Dichotomy" 182). With great numbers of Latinas/os, the community and cultural connection is built into people's experience. Thus, when Calafell leaves such a space, she is not compelled to assimilate to the new culture, but rather find ways to recuperate what is no longer consistently present. Calafell's response to her new space devoid of familiar Chicana/o relationality

presents one option; another response is assimilation. Some assimilate because that is the only option; others assimilate to gain caché. In rural spaces, constituted by very little Brown–Brown relationality, assimilation can easily characterize Latina/o performativity.

“It’s too bad Grandpa Jacobo’s resolve in that story didn’t translate to my grandpa,” I tell my cousins. “But I get it in the Midwest, you know. Did you ever hear Grandma’s Ruby Goodrow story?”

They shake their heads and I begin. As a child, my grandma Ruth had to walk through dirt roads and cornfields to get to the little country school about four miles away. Grandma liked school, and she always touted herself as a tomboy. She stood five feet tall, weighed ninety pounds, and had rich brown skin. Though her combination of Mexican and indigenous facial features seem unmistakable to me, she always insisted, “I am not a Mexican. My daddy was a Spaniard.”

One day in elementary school at recess, Ruby Goodrow, a blonde-haired and blue-eyed German girl with five older brothers, called Grandma a Mexican. Grandma punched her in the face. The brothers threatened my grandma for the rest of the day. As the story goes, at the end of the day, my grandma ran out of school before them, ducked into cornfields, and beat all five brothers to the safety of her yard.

“I was a fighter, I had to be,” she always told me between smoky breaths.

“We all have to be fighters, you’re a fighter too.”

Grandma never finishes the story. I could not tell my cousins the details about what happened in the subsequent days at school, or if parents or school officials got involved in the dispute. I do know that some years later, Grandma says school administrators told her she could not graduate high school unless she purchased her class ring, something she could never afford to do. I do not know if these stories are related. My grandma considers punching Ruby Goodrow in the face the hallmark of her fighting spirit. That she punched Goodrow in defense of a fictitious identity and out of a desire to be acknowledged as White never entered the story. Grandma told that story and others like it so many times she believed she was a Spaniard, more White than Brown. Calling upon European ancestry, which undoubtedly made up some small part of her heritage, seemed the easiest defense; I am sure it must have seemed the easiest defense for me in the face of similar taunts some fifty years later. For both my grandma and for me, the performance of European heritage slipped; yet, we both enacted it and framed it as our method of fighting and of being. As Muñoz suggests, non-Whites are expected to approximate the norms of White belonging, even though they will never be able to (“Feeling Brown”).

“Your grandparents were a good match then,” one of my cousins jokes.

“Yeah, minus all the fighting!” I laugh. We all know the story about my grandpa’s return from World War II. My grandpa Art returned from Mexico to Nebraska around age fifteen and spoke no English. He learned quickly, and by the time he turned seventeen, the United States neared the end of World War II. He begged his mother Jacinta to sign papers so that he could join the Navy and fight for his country. She refused, so my grandpa signed up for the Army draft (they did not check the age of enlistees), and within weeks, he left to fight for his country. He ended up in the

military police in Germany in 1945. When he returned to Nebraska, his friend Raymond introduced him to my grandma, a woman with no interest in getting married. She eventually gave in after much protest. They married. Though both bilingual and at least privately connected to their heritage, “we’re American and we’ll speak American,” my grandpa insisted.

She was the fighting kind, but she did not fight this demand. A young couple starting their life in rural Nebraska in the 1950s needed to pool all of their resources in order to survive. Assimilation to Whiteness or, as Hector Amaya argues, acculturation to European American values, can be an invaluable resource for those capable of performing it. With generations, the connection to language, culture, and values fade and people believe in the assimilated performance as natural. Though these families, my family, still eat rice, beans, and tortillas several times a week, and make *tamales* and *menudo* at Christmas, these practices are reframed as unique family practices, disconnected from a broader Latina/o experience. Although certain phrases in Spanish become a part of familial vernacular, and stories like the one about the weeping *La Llorona* get repeatedly told, little connection to the broader cultural significance of such practices remains. No reason exists to connect practices to a cultural past (or present) in rural Nebraska because the space constitutes subjects who have learned to do what it takes to get along, to belong.

Disidentification: Changing Spaces

Growing up, I really did not like being Mexican in Nebraska, and I do not blame my grandparents for the moves they made toward “Americanness”/Whiteness. I hate how people consistently speak slowly to my father in auto parts’ stores and government offices because they think he cannot understand English. I hate that people have often questioned my siblings and my relationship to our mother because she is White with blue eyes and should not have birthed us.

On the other hand, I liked having different family traditions from everyone else. I liked having an accent over the “a” in my last name. I liked hearing ghost stories from old México. And I liked being able to run freely on gravel roads throughout my entire childhood. Truth be told, I did not realize I knew little about my family history or what it meant to be Mexican in Nebraska because the absence of such knowledge felt normal. Outside of Nebraska, sitting in waiting rooms and hospital cafeterias with my family in Phoenix, I start to realize the spatial characteristics of Nebraska. In Phoenix we are all rural exiles, together telling stories in the urban safety of anonymity, Spanish speakers, and many Brown bodies. Currently hailing from places like Denver, San Diego, Phoenix, and Maui, we have grown accustomed to Brown–Brown relationality, and ethnic enclaves that mostly refuse assimilation to Whiteness. The urban is not a utopic refuge, but it provides a different perspective on what it means to be Latina/o in rural spaces. Moreover, through our mobility within and away from our home state of Nebraska, we are able to read our past and our family’s present with different eyes.

The term disidentification describes “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 4). Muñoz later elaborates: “disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence” (161). The way my family tells stories, rarely, if ever, marks experience in Nebraska as traumatic or violent. Perhaps toeing a careful line between masculine pride and White assimilation protected my family from physical violence. Perhaps those stories are a part of what my grandfather refers to as “the bypass period,” or the series of stories that he refuses to tell about our family’s past. White Nebraskans are not the only ones who are a quiet and reserved bunch. Rural Nebraska undoubtedly invites similar responses to hardship no matter one’s racial identity. The strategies my family deployed to deal with being Brown in rural Nebraska do not easily reflect disidentification. As Muñoz argues, disidentification is not always an appropriate or sufficient strategy for all subjects (162).

When one radically changes space by leaving a physical place, new knowledge gets produced about the previous space. As I listened to my fellow familial exiles, I realized that we can read our pasts differently because we are no longer constituted by that space in the same way. Having the mobility to experience the difference that space makes for the possibility of different kinds of subjects and relationality, affords the opportunity to reread the responses that our family made in relation to and as produced by their environments. Moreover, as Muñoz hypothesizes, those with more class privilege often have more access to disidentificatory practices (*Disidentifications* 164). My present privilege coupled with the liminal space between currently living in an urban environment in the US Southwest, and formerly residing in a rural Midwestern space, alters my own Latina subjectivity, supplying me with an opportunity to engage in disidentificatory strategies of my personal and familial past *and* present. For example, the silences that characterize my grandfather’s conceptualization of his identity in Nebraska become a rich source for pedagogy and performance for me in Arizona and now, New Mexico.

After learning so much of what had been a silent history from my cousins, I decided to see if I could get my grandfather to talk about his migration experience, and the hospitality he has experienced in the United States, especially in Nebraska. I thought I prepared efficiently, armed with several details that I hoped might encourage his openness. We met at his house early Saturday morning for Irish coffee—weak coffee, hazelnut creamer, and cheap brandy. Grandpa lives in a tiny pale yellow house one block south of the railroad tracks in Minden, Nebraska. We—my partner Sara, my dad, and I—park in the back alley, and walk through the thick, green grass to Grandpa’s covered back porch. My dad engages in this ritual every weekend. Sara and I feel happy to join them. Grandpa has a patio table set for four, equipped with fresh donuts, and all the supplies for Irish coffee. If Grandpa pours, it’s fifty percent coffee and fifty percent brandy, particularly for guests. Alcohol invites communication, or so I have experienced. I invite my grandfather with some questions about his family in Mexico and what it was like to come to Nebraska. He

sips his coffee and slips into his role as entertainer. To hear my grandpa tell the story, there's never been a serious problem in his life. His family left for Mexico by choice when he was young, he came back to the United States and joined the military. He married my grandma, worked hard in a meatpacking plant for thirty years, had six kids and owned a great house—the (Mexican) American Dream. What else is there to tell?

The sun beats down hot on our bodies. I lean in and ask him how he and Grandma met. He jokes about things being agreeable when they met and then remarks that it is natural for people to be agreeable at first.

“We decided to make a go of it, and we did. Of course there were bumps, but that's all part of the bypass period,” Grandpa laughs.

My father, who has grown accustomed to critical theory as a regular part of conversation with me, looks at me out of the corner of his eye and smiles. He shakes his head just a bit and sucks in his teeth through his grin as if to say, “don't push him, it's just not worth it.” I should not be surprised. Latina feminist Patricia Zavella's search to understand her family history and cultural heritage also ran her into family reticence and gaps in the lore (43). Like me, she explains that though her grandmother would tell tidbits about overcoming obstacles, she would reveal little else about their heritage.

I laugh to myself. My grandpa fills my coffee cup with brandy. “Okay Grandpa, ok. That's enough. It's only eight in the morning and I can't be drunk all day. Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

He wipes his hand in front of his face as if to clean the writing on a chalkboard. He smiles, “that's all she wrote.”

“Thanks, Grandpa.”

“Sure, sure, it's good to know where you come from.”

I looked to my dad on my left, my partner on my right, and my grandpa across the table. This is where I come from, where I continue to become. Dad has heard these stories a hundred times, told in the same carefully crafted way. These stories are not unlike the ones he has begun to tell over and over, in the same carefully crafted way. Sara and I have never heard these stories before. We share a glance that I feel as both intimate and arrogant because we acknowledge to each other that we read underneath the surface, around the corners, and through the crevices of my grandfather's narrative. I take comfort in the fact that she and I share the same read, even as I feel a little badly for reading this way. I can't help it though; academic spaces produce new possibilities for my own Latina performativity. The four of us joke around awhile longer, hurling clever insults at each other as we are known to do. We leave shortly, exiting through the back porch. Grandpa stands there and waves.

“That's all she wrote,” I chuckle to myself. In retelling Grandpa's story on these pages, in my classrooms, and with friends, I am able to articulate the different ways that we make sense of how spaces produce certain possibilities for experience. My grandfather's refusal to name racism or discrimination within the contours of his experiences emerges out of a space where there was little community to express resistance. His refusal to take what could be perceived as a victim stance in

acknowledging cultural hardship emerges from a historical relationship that the men in his family have learned to have with their experiences because of the space. The way he has come to relate to and perform his identity, as a result of the space where he grew up, worked, and raised his family, resembles the way many other Latinas/os in similar spaces also perform and relate to their identities. I can feel my grandfather's influence in the way I now think of my identities, as the space that constituted my grandfather is not unlike the space that constituted me. Articulating and rereading his stories, my stories, and our family stories can function as a strategy both to challenge dominant discourses and to remap the meaning of spaces that seem fixed or immobile.

I write these words in the hopes of conveying a story that offers a unique perspective on how a particular kind of Latina/o in a particular kind of place comes to be. In the ability to write and use my familial stories as a rich source of data to analyze experience, I work through and against my own history and subjectivity. Muñoz suggests that performance that centers Brown affect can create a kind of utopic space that engenders the possibility to imagine other realities ("Feeling Brown"). In contrast, the stories I relay here do not point toward utopic possibility as much as demonstrate a different kind of Brown affect. Although my grandfather's stories arguably still conform to the national affect constituted by Whiteness, retelling his tales from a different space textures his experience as a Mexican American, as a Latino. Moreover, it complicates the broader depiction of *latinidad* by pushing at the limits of the possibilities of solidarity or unity. There should not be a more "authentic" Latina/o tale or kind of performativity. Stories of "assimilation" do not necessarily end there, as the malleability of space can continually constitute assimilated subjects into hybrid subjects who can and do disidentify with the past and present.

Conclusions: What Else can be Imagined?

Rural Nebraska constitutes a certain kind of Latina/o performativity that challenges traditional conceptualizations of *latinidad*. In the conclusion to her book, Calafell questions the possibility of *latinidad* (*Latina/o Communication Studies*). She writes, "Finding spaces that honor unity without erasing difference is difficult when you have communities as heterogeneous as those that fall under the umbrella term Latina/o" (128). Although not totally separate from the urban, coastal, or border space, this discussion furthers Calafell's question as it ruptures some taken-for-granted assumptions about *latinidad*. I argued that such a rupture represents a needed perspective in discussions of *latinidad* in order to prevent the silencing or essentializing of various Latina/o identities and performativities. In this essay, I proposed the concept of "performance cartography," whereby storytelling enables a new mapping of space and subjectivity. I then discussed the importance of space, contextualized rural Nebraska in relation to Latinas/os, and considered the relationship between Nebraska and the construction of Latina/o performativity.

Massey argues for “imagining space as always in process” (*For Space* 11). She goes on: “In this open interactional space there are always connections yet to be made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction (or not, for all potential connections have to be established), relations which may or may not be accomplished” (11). Here Massey comments upon the necessity of keeping space open to keep the future open. Mobility and disidentification enable the possibility for ensuring that spaces remain vibrant.

When my relatives met in Phoenix, we used the time (and space) as an opportunity to disidentify with Nebraska as a community, a community of family and yet one of strangers. We reveled in the moments of being able to tell “what really happened” in our family history because of a shared awareness that those “real stories” often get silenced or altered when told in Nebraska. In telling “real stories,” we resist, and yet, we remain in relation to Nebraska. We can never be removed from Nebraska, for Nebraska enables the disidentificatory practices. So, even if I can see around the story my grandpa tells, and even if I can see the gaps in the so-called “bypass period,” I am still always already performing at least part of that Latina performativity even when outside of Nebraska. When back in that space, I can easily fall into the performance of Latina performativity that the space compels. I tone down my “politics,” I respect my father’s silent request not to challenge my grandfather, and I feel compelled to think of my family rituals in connection primarily to family and not culture. Though I may rebel or rupture that space, the performance is easy and familiar.

At the same time, because space is always a process, where new relationships and juxtapositions are possible, the disidentificatory practices enabled by one space can in fact become part of another. In that possibility, space remains open, and identities and performativities also remain amenable. Like Calafell, I question the possibility of *latinidad* (*Latina/o Communication Studies*). In moving through the spatial analysis here, I grow increasingly confident in the possibility of mapping the different productive spaces as a means of pushing on the apparent borders of *latinidad* and challenging its implicitly normative claims (de la Luz Montes). In creating maps, crossovers and parallels among Latina/o history and experience emerge. Additionally, mapping illuminates those regions of dissonance not found in other spaces or that manifest differently across space and time.

The enactment of performance cartography provides another tool to wrestle with the complexities of *latinidad* by offering an alternative way to conceptualize both the unities and the divergences within Latina/o identities and performativities produced within different spatial (and temporal) registers. Like other kinds of maps, performance cartography creates even as it seems only to record. Because of its transparency as an act of creation, however, performance cartography highlights space as a process and as a site of enacting and producing change. I haven’t talked much to the cousins I met in Phoenix. I think that is okay. Out of necessity, we created a special space. That space was constituted by our relationships as multiple and incomplete. That space constituted us as storytellers, family, and Latinas/os of some form or another. That space constituted the possibility for other spaces, other stories, and other connections.

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Notes

- [1] Historical cartographers David Woodward and G. Malcolm Lewis have identified “performance cartography” as one of the three main kinds of cartography cultures use across the world. They argue that in some cultures, performances such as rituals, songs, poetry, and dance function as maps when their expressed purpose is to describe some sort of spatial knowledge. My use of the term is related to Woodward and Lewis, but as a communication scholar instead of a cartographer, my version of performance cartography is far less literal.
- [2] I haven’t been able to confirm that he was in fact the first Mexican to own land in Western Nebraska; this is the story my cousins, his daughters, tell. It is clear based on the time period that he was absolutely one of the first.

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