Abstract: This essay places into dialogue two queer Chicana/o novels, John Rechy’s City of Night (1963) and Felicia Luna Lemus’s Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties (2003), in order to explore their common aesthetic sensibility. This sensibility is what I call rasquache camp, a stance that arises from the complex entanglement of rasquachismo’s utilitarian aspects of making do and the funky irreverence of camp, without resulting in a dialectical sublation between the two. This essay intervenes in the recent debates on the appropriateness of using rasquachismo as a tool for studying (queer) Chicana/o cultural productions. Informed by rasquache camp, I contend that these two novels develop and employ an ethics of representing marginalized queer and Chicana/o subjects who face insurmountable adversity by overturning the paradigms of morality and literary value, not from idealized, theoretical stances but by making use of imperfect, often cobbled-together solutions. As the future-oriented projects of these novels come to a close, both texts consciously fail to achieve their goals, but this failure allows the future to remain open to new and better aesthetic and ethical interventions by others.

Forty years separates the publication of John Rechy’s City of Night (1963) and Felicia Luna Lemus’s Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties (2003). This period saw important developments in the cultural history of Chicana/o and queer peoples, including the rise of the Chicano civil rights movement, the Stonewall riots, and the increasing visibility of literature, art, and criticism by and about queer Chicana/os, with the groundbreaking publication of acclaimed works by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. Bookending these four decades, the Rechy and Luna Lemus novels are also separated thematically: the first follows the anonymous narrator, a male hustler...
conscious of his Mexican ancestry, on his journey across the United States, while the second tells the story of Leticia, a Chicana lesbian, as she creates a life for herself in Los Angeles. Despite this distance, I contend that the two novels can speak to each other using a common language that arises from the queer Chicana/o sensibilities that structure their texts.¹

Through this dialogue, I explore the intersections of rasquachismo and camp that play out in these novels to form what I call “rasquache camp.” This aesthetic allows its subjects to make do with and transform limited resources despite hardship. I show how the narrators of both novels employ rasquache camp as they develop and enact a queer Chicana/o ethics of representation that attempts to build a better tomorrow without being closed to future interventions by other subjects.

Rasquache Camp: An Entangled Sensibility

Rasquachismo has been defined within a variety of contexts.² Though it is often associated with a social aesthetic of theater, installation art, and other forms of Chicana/o cultural production, it has also been applied to the desert survival tactics of migrants crossing the US-Mexico border. The latter interpretation appears in David Spener’s recent sociological study of the movidas rascuaches of those who attempt to migrate across the border. In this context, Spener defines rasquachismo as a primarily utilitarian practice through which migrants make use of scarce resources, “coming up with imaginative solutions to unforeseen problems encountered on the trail, and facing hardships with a resistant and resilient attitude of perseverance in the face of incredible adversity” (2010, 20). Spener’s notion of movidas rasquaches develops from a study of the foundational essays in cultural criticism on rasquachismo, in particular those by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Bains.

In “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility” (1990), Ybarra-Frausto offers a brief historical survey of rasquachismo. In the 1930s and 1940s, the peladitos and peladitas, or “penniless urban roustabouts,” who appeared in the Chicana carpa vaudeville sketches used rasquachismo “to draw sustenance from fundamental life processes and to use them for surmounting adversity,”

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always with a bit of humor (158–59). As a social aesthetic, rasquachismo relies on “a funky, irreverent stance that debunks convention and spoofs protocol” (155). In the 1960s and 1970s it was linked to grassroots socio-political movements in which “Chicano artists placed vernacular art forms and sources in the foreground and investigated the rasquache modality in ephemeral instinctive actions” (160). The Chicana/o movement was built from the ground up with extremely limited resources in order to bring visibility to this community and demand equality in the United States. In all of these cases, rasquachismo has the sense of “making do” as a means of finding creative solutions to overwhelming obstacles in a context of severe socioeconomic inequalities. Rasquachismo arises from “an underdog perspective” (156). It is employed by those who are “down, but not out” (fregado pero no jodido) and who strive, filled with hope and goodwill, to make ends meet today and reach a better tomorrow (156).

Mesa-Bains (1999) expands on the notion of rasquachismo from a Chicana feminist perspective she calls “domesticana.” She draws a comparative analysis between her own installation art and that of Patricia Rodríguez and Patssi Valdez. Before exploring the specifically feminist aspects of domesticana, she explains rasquachismo as follows:

In rasquachismo, the irreverent and spontaneous are employed to make the most from the least. In rasquachismo, one has a stance that is both defiant and inventive. Aesthetic expression comes from discards, fragments, even recycled everyday materials such as tires, broken plates, plastic containers, which are recombined with elaborate and bold display in yard shrines (capillas), domestic decor (altars), and even embellishment of the car. In its broadest sense it is a combination of resistant and resilient attitudes devised to allow the Chicano to survive and persevere with a sense of dignity. The capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado is at the heart of rasquachismo. (Mesa-Bains 1999, 157–58)

More than a purely pragmatic attempt to make do and get by in life, says Mesa-Bains, to be rasquache is to embody the “stance or attitudinal position” of “a shared barrio sensibility” and “world view” (158). It is to be unyielding and dignified despite (low) social standing, and also spontaneous and inventive in the face of hardship. Such imaginative solutions are carried out, Rosario Carrillo states, by combining and repositioning “symbols and images while simultaneously turning ruling paradigms upside down, as in welcoming what is not a sign of approved taste and decorum” (2009, 122). As a result, coffee cans and broken mirrors—what might
otherwise be deemed trash—and other found and recycled materials are transformed.

Although there are similarities between rasquachismo and kitsch in that both use the supposedly tacky and tasteless as decor, Mesa-Bains argues that the two sensibilities must be differentiated. She says, “Kitsch as a material expression is recuperated by artists who stand outside the lived reality of its genesis” (Mesa-Bains 1999, 158). Often, the cheap, mass-produced objects considered to be kitsch are reproductions of unique works of art that are then circulated and consumed by those who were not involved in the production of the original artwork or of the kitsch reproduction. By contrast, a rasquache sensibility arises among those who live the reality of the “down, but not out” and who make use of everyday materials. Instead of throwing away “trash,” they reuse and transform these materials to get by, but also to create and embellish. Whereas kitsch requires access to the goods put into circulation in the markets of late capitalism, rasquachismo implies that such access is limited or impossible. Therefore, to be rasquache is not only to make do despite obstacles but also to find beauty through a reconfiguration of the dominant cultural values that simultaneously regulate taste and decorum and uphold the exclusionary political, economic, and social systems that maintain these same obstacles and values.

I first place the queer Chicana/o narrators of John Rechy’s City of Night and Felicia Luna Lemus’s Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties into dialogue at the crossroads where their rasquache sensibilities meet. Early in Rechy’s novel, the anonymous narrator recounts memories of his childhood in El Paso, Texas, when his family moved for economic reasons from a “clean house with white walls” to a decaying duplex built of bricks that were “disintegrating,” infested with cockroaches, putrid smells, and “Rot” (1963, 12–13). The walls were already covered in multiple layers of peeling gray wallpaper, which the family attempted to fix:

We would put up the sixth, or begin to—and then stop, leaving the house even more patched as that layer peeled too: an unfinished jigsaw puzzle which would fascinate me at night: its ragged patterns making angryfaces, angry animalshapes—but I could quickly alter them into less angry figures by ripping off the jagged edges. (12)

The layered wallpaper reflects a lack of time and resources to cleanly and perfectly decorate their home, but they do what they can. Meanwhile, the narrator finds the imperfections of this unfinished puzzle to be enticing; within this grimy environment, they call out to him and incite his creativity
to transform the angry faces and animal shapes into more pleasant figures. In doing so, Rechy’s narrator clearly embodies the rasquache attitude.

Leticia, the narrator of *Trace Elements*, similarly engages in “home-making efforts” with her partner K that might be described as rasquache, as they decorate the “gingerbread house” that is their first home together as a couple (Luna Lemus 2003, 149). They are two working-class women without privileged backgrounds who have limited resources for making this home into something they can enjoy. Leticia describes their new decor: “Silver construction site plastic tarp was hung as curtains on some windows for a touch of punk Martha Stewart—goes—dyke Home Depot. . . . Finishing touches, K put the photo of me from San Francisco up on the fridge in a frame made out of black duct tape” (163). They also used “a silver thumb-tack” and “a small binder clip” to hang the group photo-booth images from their trip on the wall (163). As a comforter for their bed they used “the blue unzipped sleeping bag” (223). The use of plastic tarp to make curtains, duct tape and office supplies to frame and hang photos, and a sleeping bag as a comforter combines the efforts to make do and to make beautiful. These elements represent an economical option for decorating their home. As all of the elements come together, they create a funky, irreverent vibe in the space by turning odd, often hideous bits of trash into decorations that both women love.

Both narrators enact rasquachismo, yet there is something else at play here as well. Even in the case of the makeshift curtains, picture frames, and comforter in Leticia’s house, it does not appear that their decisions are rooted solely in economic hardship. Leticia and K are not wealthy, but they both hold jobs, and the house they purchased is not remotely comparable to the decrepit home Rechy’s narrator moved into as a child. The narrative offers no reason to believe that the women could not have afforded “decent,” albeit cheap, curtains, picture frames, and comforter. The tension between the need to make do and the desire to make pretty is quite unresolvable. This something else at play in the novels manifests itself in the campy aspects of the narrators and secondary characters who populate the gay bars and cruising parks of *City of Night* and who form part of Leticia’s extended circle of friends and acquaintances in *Trace Elements*. While many of the characters in *Trace Elements* are Chicanas, the characters in *City of Night* come from a wide array of ethnic backgrounds. What can be interpreted as rasquachismo when performed by the Chicana characters might better be described as a form of camp for many of the secondary queer characters. Of course, this distinction or isolation of rasquachismo
from camp will not be so clear-cut in the case of the queer Chicana/o narrators of these novels; instead, their aesthetic sensibilities reflect what I call rasquache camp. Rasquache camp is not a dialectic sublation of a former antithetical binary, which would prove to be artificial and reductive, especially since rasquache and camp are by no means antithetical or oppositional concepts. Rather, it refers to a complex entanglement of the two sensibilities.

In “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Susan Sontag curiously describes camp as “a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style,” one that prefers artifice, sensuality, and frivolity and manifests a “love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not” (1961, 279). This use of the term style, however, should be clarified, because it seems to operate interchangeably with the words taste and sensibility at other moments in Sontag’s essay. In fact, she begins by defining camp as a sensibility, something that is “almost, but not quite, ineffable,” but at the same time she wants to attribute to camp a more stable quality that goes beyond “purely subjective preferences” without becoming “hardened into an idea” through intellectual systematization (276). This link between rasquachismo and camp—the desire to study them both as sensibilities, attitudes, or tastes, without being deflated into subjective desires or reified into a permanent aesthetic formalism—is already present in Ybarra-Frausto’s “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility.” He draws from Sontag’s “Notes on Camp” and explains rasquachismo as “neither an idea nor a style, but more of an attitude or taste” (Ybarra-Frausto 1990, 156). In a sense, Sontag names this camp sensibility as a style that debunks the permanence and purported objectivity of style just as it blends a sense of “being special, glamorous” through an enjoyment of that which is “old-fashioned, out-of-date, démodé”—that is, no longer glamorous or stylish (1961, 284–85). While both sensibilities can be brought together for their love of artifice and their funky irreverence, these attitudes or stances also share the desire to bring glamour, a sense of being special, and a form of dignity to those who employ them.

Furthermore, much as rasquachismo is readily associated with Chicana/o culture, Sontag asserts correctly that “there is no doubt a peculiar affinity and overlap” between camp taste and queer culture (290). In addition to the examples offered by Sontag and those in the Rechy and Luna Lemus novels, this overlap can be seen in the cases of Carmelita Tropicana, RuPaul, Manuel Puig, and John Waters. However, while rasquache camp is a sensibility most readily found at the crossroads of queer and Chicana/o cultures, it is not a practice exclusive to queer Chicana/os.
Finally, as Ramón García (2006, 214) rightly notes, the connection between rasquachismo and camp appears in certain structural elements of Ybarra-Frausto’s essay, mostly the categorization of *medio rasquache* (low) and *muy rasquache* (high), which clearly parallel Sontag’s differentiation between low and high camp. I prefer, however, to avoid creating a similar differentiation between low and high rasquache camp. At their point of articulation, this rasquache camp sensibility enables a form of serious play or playful seriousness by turning trash into glam in order to make things pretty while making do with limited resources, thus confusing the difference between low and high to the point where such a categorization is not only undesirable but impossible.

*Rasquache camp*, then, is the term I use to explore the specific moments when these two sensibilities come into contact in a way that complicates any attempt to separate them. They are intricately woven together; neither denies the visibility of the other as they become entangled, blurring but not eliminating the distinctions between them. Therefore, rasquache camp can be defined as an aesthetic appropriation of the undesirable and the undervalued that simultaneously stems from a pragmatic sense of making do with limited resources and from a dignifying transformation of the sensible world. This entangled sensibility is located at the crossroads of that love of artifice, frivolity, glamour, and things being what they are not that arises from the “down, but not out” perspective of queer Chicana/os.

Much invaluable critical work has been carried out over the past few decades on the intersections of races, classes, genders, sexes, and sexualities. While not all early works, whether critical, creative, or activist, acknowledged the inseparability of these and other categories of identity formation, the field of Chicana/o studies has been at the vanguard in making these connections visible. The works of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, especially in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983), where they elaborated a Third World feminism, have been groundbreaking for Chicana/o and US Latina/o studies as well as for feminism and queer theory at large. Crossing and building from the bridges they constructed, more recent studies reaffirm the need to interrogate, as Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano points out, “the ways one experiences racial and cultural identity inseparable from gender and sexual constructions” (2006, 228). Anzaldúa’s essay “To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, escritora y chicana” further emphasizes that all these identities, and many more, continuously blend together within the same subject: “in actuality they are all constantly in a shifting dialogue/relationship—the ethnic is in conversation with the academic and so on. The lesbian is part...
of the writer, is part of a social class, is part of a gender, is part of whatever identities one has of oneself” (1998, 267).

In other words, a queer Chicana/o identity does not privilege the ethnic over the sexual or vice versa. Neither precedes nor overshadows the other, nor can these two markers ever be sufficient for addressing the complexity of any identity. Juana María Rodríguez refers to “queer latinidad,” in which “queer” is “not simply an umbrella term” but one that helps highlight “a challenge to constructions of heteronormativity” (2003, 24). Following José Quiroga’s analysis, these two categories, which also combine with many others, can be understood as inhabiting “the space of estar and not the pride in the complicities of the always essentialized ser” (2000, 198). That is, the intersection of queer and Chicana/o, Latina/o, or any other aspect of one’s identity can only be defined provisionally, not with the copula ser, which in Spanish emphasizes the permanence and stability of being, but rather with estar, a way to designate the fluctuating ways of becoming. Just as the components of a rasquache camp sensibility enter into a complex knot, the elements that compose one’s identity—which are still too often thought of as lists, intersecting but independent categories, or boxes to be checked—are always already an inseparable series of entangled connections that change over time and as one moves throughout different spaces.

Unlike camp in relation to queer culture, the use of rasquachismo to think about Chicana/o cultural production has provoked some debate. García’s polemic essay, “Against Rasquache: Chicano Camp and the Politics of Identity in Los Angeles” (2006), openly argues against considering or employing rasquachismo from an aesthetic perspective. The strength of García’s essay lies in signaling the complex tensions that surround attempts to reconcile rasquachismo and camp within the vast field of Chicana/o cultural production. However, García seems to overlook the distinction between rasquachismo and kitsch, which Mesa-Bains (1999) has clarified. He understands the use of rasquachismo in cultural texts solely as “stylizing marginal social space in order to construct a queer Chicano identity” (García 2006, 211). He takes issue with the idea of identifying as rasquache when, he claims, “nobody wants to be rasquache in a material way, because it is simply a lack of resources and funds and it implies bad taste” (214).

On the one hand, García is rightfully concerned about the possibility that a socially marginalized group is being exploited for purely stylistic purposes. However, the earliest critical essays on rasquachismo, such as Ybarra-Frausto’s (1990), all emphasize that it is a sensibility—not a style—that works at overcoming such obstacles and limitations with dignity; by
no means have these analyses overlooked the social inequalities that give rise to rasquachismo. This point is also defended by John L. Aguilar, for instance, who clearly differentiates between a “rasquache status” of many Chicana/os and a “rasquache stance” employed as one means of making do with or overcoming that status by taking pride in their culture (1989, 13). On the other hand, although it may be true that no one desires to be rasquache, which in García’s essay seems to operate as a synonym for poor or lower class, this does not mean that one who is rasquache cannot attempt to make the best of this situation. Furthermore, there are certain parallels to be found between using the word rasquache positively and the appropriation of the words queer and Chicana/o, which were also taken back from their original derogatory and offensive uses. I suggest that developing a positive, inspiring redefinition of rasquache should be applauded and not avoided. Just because rasquachismo, like camp and kitsch, has been associated with bad taste does not mean that it should be disregarded. The concepts of canonical taste and dominant values have been losing credibility and stability as camp and rasquachismo (more so than kitsch, with its direct connections to late capitalism) gain visibility, along with the marginal social groups that employ them.

As a solution, García proposes using the term camp in Chicana/o art and literature “in order to identify the uses of everyday culture or ‘popular culture’ as fields of struggle in Chicano aesthetics” (2006, 213). Overall, García’s argument that rasquachismo should be replaced with Chicana/o camp may be viable in cases where Chicana/o cultural materials are used solely for the purposes of irony or parody in order to disrupt normative identities and social spaces. Nevertheless, in the two novels studied here, and in many of the cultural works already analyzed through the lens of rasquachismo by other critics, I find it more productive to examine the instances of rasquachismo that arise when artists and fictional characters attempt to make do with their limited resources by manipulating trash and other unwanted materials and, through this stance, find inspiration to work toward a better future despite their socioeconomic position.

Holly Barnet-Sánchez has accurately observed that rasquachismo and domesticana “were not set forth as comprehensive structures applying to all Chicana/o art. Instead, they were offered as pathways for understanding conceptual and visual elements of certain art forms and their connection to the communities from which they came” (2005, 93). This point is necessary for understanding rasquache camp as well, since the concept is not meant to apply to all forms of queer and Chicana/o art, but only to certain works
that make creative and socially productive use of the intersections of these two sensibilities.

In the following example from *Trace Elements*, the irresolvable tension of rasquache camp becomes clear. When Leticia and K move into their house, it is “being painted a truly hideous off-white streaky cheap paint color” (Luna Lemus 2003, 153). This bland room, a true blank slate for them, could never please K, who is of Greek heritage but makes a living by painting Aztlan-themed murals and lowriders in bright colors, and who has come to form a genuine part of the Chicana/o community of Los Angeles. Nor could it please Leticia, who asserts her desires for the eccentric and the undesirable, all while making do with limited resources for turning this home into something they can enjoy. As a surprise for Leticia on moving day, K drives off and returns with a horrendous but alluring piece of furniture for their living room. The following is Leticia’s reaction:

Crouched in the bed of the truck there was a clear-plastic-tarp-covered green couch, big and square and squishy-cushioned. Let me clarify the color of that huge creature dredged up from a 1970s lagoon. The couch was bright green like a hollowed-out emerald with a flashlight-glaring electric squeal bright at its center. Even with all the bright color K’s style had introduced in my day-to-day, the couch was almost more than I could handle. (159)

Is the introduction of this couch—which Leticia says is “so ugly it was almost beautiful, but not quite” (159)—to be understood from a camp or from a rasquache sensibility? In other words, does K acquire this eccentric couch for its electric color or did she choose this junky couch out of economic necessity? Moreover, is it actually beautiful or is it Leticia’s description that makes it so intriguing?

In a snarky tone, K asks Leticia’s grandmother, Nana, to clarify, since she is often the voice of perceived normalcy and morality in contrast to their own queer lives: “Isn’t it beautiful, Nana?” (159). K genuinely enjoys the campy qualities of this couch, and her question to Nana is also meant to strike a nerve given Nana’s somewhat conservative values. Nana responds only with a look that shows Leticia that “she just thought K’s taste was a little strange,” or perhaps, I might add, a little queer (159). While Nana does not necessarily find the couch beautiful, she accepts this affordable solution on a practical level and helps the women position the couch “so you can see out the windows” that overlook Elysian Park (161). Nana employs a pragmatic kind of rasquache sensibility, and she relies on this to find some common ground with her granddaughter. It is Leticia whose
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narration plays off the crossings between K’s camp and Nana’s rasquachismo. She does not sublate these two; rather, she allows the tension between them, as embodied in the interactions between K and Nana, to remain intact. Leticia’s rasquache camp sensibility mediates between them but never passes final judgment, allowing them to become entangled.

Elysian Park is named for the Elysian Fields of the ancient Greeks. Unbeknownst to Nana, it has also been a major gay Latino cruising ground within the urban landscape of Los Angeles. It is located alongside Dodger Stadium within Chavez Ravine, an area whose complex and troubled history features the violent uprooting and displacement of its Chicana/o community. In this sense the park serves as a connection between K’s Greek ancestry and Leticia’s Chicana/o cultural heritage. Elysian Park is also located roughly between Pershing Square, the central cruising grounds in Los Angeles for Rechy’s narrator in City of Night, and Griffith Park, which serves as the setting for Rechy’s second novel, Numbers (1967). With a bit of imagination, one might sit on the green couch in Leticia’s and K’s brightly colored but romantically stagnant gingerbread house and look out the window toward the recent past to find Rechy’s narrator in City of Night as he employs this same rasquache camp sensibility to navigate the dark streets, seedy bars, and cruising spots of Los Angeles at night.

One night, Rechy’s anonymous narrator is picked up by a married man who also remains nameless in the text. During their second evening together they go a bar called Carnival in Santa Monica. The space is immediately sexualized by the droning, savage sounds that echo throughout it. The narrator insists on the bar’s dreary monotony, like that of the gay male clone culture of his time, only to interrupt it suddenly:

From somewhere, lured by the jungle sexsounds—a dark Latin queen rushed frenziedly onto the small clearing of the dancefloor: beach-hat with lurid dyed feathers, red-polka-dotted loose-sleeved blouse tied at her stomach, white knee-length beachpants glowing purplish in the light, a gaudy gold butterfly pinned to her hip, several bracelets—beaded, multicolored, on her long brown arms. (Rechy 1963, 231)

The narrator becomes transfixed by this performance, detailing the drag queen’s writhing, sinewy body and the gaudy but grand costume she wears. Her attire seems inventively cobbled together from random materials, reminiscent of the battered, makeshift costumes of the pelados of the early-twentieth-century carpas. Her act entrances the entire audience as she actively reconfigures the monotonous space around her in a deliberate
and demanding manner, “camping openly with the masculine hustlers, . . . her woman-act so exaggerated, so distorted, so uncompromisingly brutal in its implied judgment” (232).

The Latin queen’s performance—oriented by her rasquache camp sensibility as experienced and inscribed by Rechy’s narrator—forces a new, ephemeral dynamic into the erotic economy of this space. In doing her job, she demands the audience recognize her for who she is, on her level, by dropping a coin into her feathered hat and accepting the implied judgment of her penetrating stare. Everyone in the bar complies except the closeted or confused man who accompanies the narrator. The man’s eyes meet the queen’s as they engage in an intense standoff: “He is the only one who will not acknowledge her on her own terms, the only one who is refusing—with that look—to accept her judgment and is therefore judging her” (232). Paralyzed while the man judges the queen, the narrator meticulously details the icy, unending glances that lock the two in a face-to-face staring match that only ends when the narrator intervenes by dropping a few coins into her hat. Before leaving, “she shook her beaded arms fatally before the man’s face—and disappeared in a flash of tawdry colors beyond the door” (234). The queen’s demand exceeds the request for money and becomes an ethical demand to recognize her for who she is, to participate in her performance on her terms, and to accept her unrefined, brutally frank appearance and its impact on the spaces around her.

Leticia narrates a similar experience when she and the other lesbian protagonists—some of whom are Chicana, some of whom are not—go to a rock show at Crystal’s, the sole lesbian bar in the novel’s fictional Los Angeles, which is always inhabited by the same people. They attempt to interact amid the “pointless screaming that led to nowhere,” but ultimately they “[surrender] to the band” (Luna Lemus 2003, 12). This performance similarly transforms the monotony of Crystal’s bar into a lesbian rock show that disidentifies with the outside, heteronormative world:

Up onstage, the lead growled into her microphone, but she was glorious loud enough all on her own without the added benefit of sound. Shirt and pants off, tall motorcycle boots still buckled up, her thigh-length men’s underwear displayed in the cigarette air, peeking out of the underwear’s front flap, her harnessed penis hung rather loose in its place. (12)

Watching this show, the protagonists all but disappear as the lead singer entrances them with her gender-bending performance. Leticia glorifies this act, praising the entangled interplay of masculinity and femininity that
the lead singer embodies, and it is through her narrative that the power of the performance develops full force. What Leticia envisages through her rasquache camp sensibility is a multiethnic lesbian counterpublic, a space that is aware of “its subordinate status” while “the discourse that constitutes it is not merely a different or alternative idiom but one that in other contexts would be regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness” (Warner 2002, 119).

Leticia explains that the bar, while not a Chicana space per se, was formerly Duke’s Diner and that Crystal minimally repurposed it to create this new public space:

Crystal didn’t do much to change the place when she bought it. She slapped up her delicious neon sign outside and took her position behind the high-gloss brown counter punctuated with bolted-down cracked vinyl and rusted chrome stools. Sprinkled in the center of the room’s sticky-stain concrete floor were six Formica tables circled by blue high-backed unstable tin chairs. Honey brown and burnt mustard country floral print wallpaper peeled away from cobweb corners. A small makeshift stage propped itself up against the wall far opposite the bar counter. All in all, the place was nearly enough to convince me that Duke must have been the god of interior decorating. Only divinity has such nerve. (Luna Lemus 2003,12)

Crystal’s is not a chic establishment. Its haphazard transformation from a diner to a lesbian bar filled with cracked, rusted furniture and dirty floors and walls implies the limited time and resources available to create such a space, as well as the desperate need for it by the women who frequent the bar. Moreover, the stage from which the singer so forcefully growls at the audience and breaks the bar’s monotony is nothing more than a makeshift structure that seems in Leticia’s description too flimsy and unstable to support such a performance. She builds such descriptions into her narrative, demonstrating how one can construct effective, albeit precarious, platforms for demanding public attention and acceptance for supposedly indecorous actions. It is her rasquache camp sensibility that allows her to see such possibilities both in private and in public. More than a way of decorating one’s home, rasquache camp is the attitudinal stance that guides such aesthetic choices and other exigent interventions and affectations. It is a way of living in the world that demands, like the dark, Latin queen and the growling lead at Crystal’s, as imagined by their narrators, to be met head on and recognized on their own terms.
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On her way home from school as a child, Leticia explains, she knew the immediate world around her: “Each detail all the way was memorized” (Luna Lemus 2003, 17). The question I ask, then, is how did the rasquache camp sensibilities of Leticia and Rechy's narrator affect the ways in which they render the details of their fictional worlds into language? And by extension, how does this sensibility position them to critique and attempt to reconfigure the lived realities of queer Chicana/os?

Individually or tangled together, rasquachismo and camp are more than a purely formal aesthetic. Ybarra-Frausto explains that “rasquachismo feigns complicity with dominant discourses while skillfully decentering and transforming them” (1990, 160). For Sontag, “camp is a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness” (1961, 290).

Rasquache camp, then, can guide those who work toward transforming the dominant discourses and moral indignation of their social realms by creatively intervening in them from the outskirts through a disidentifying gesture. As José Esteban Muñoz explains in Disidentifications, queer artists often choose to disidentify with the world that surrounds them, instead of wholly rejecting it, by using “its parts to build an alternative reality” (1999, 196). Furthermore, Muñoz later elaborates in Cruising Utopia on the ways in which a queer aesthetic “map[s] future social relations”: “it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future” (2009, 1). Building on Muñoz’s ideas, these narrators’ rasquache camp can be defined as the act of looking at what little surrounds them, selecting certain easily accessible components, and using these elements not only to get by but also to transform their reality with flair and bravado toward a potentially better, dignified tomorrow.

However, this is not a facile undertaking. Employing rasquache camp is a demanding if not impossible task. It is this demand that prompts what I read within Rechy’s and Luna Lemus’s novels as a queer Chicana/o ethics of representation that aims to challenge an imperfect present and to project a different future from a precarious, almost utopian thought that perseveres despite being aware of its inevitable failure. This ethics of representation must be differentiated from the terms morals and morality, which can be defined as prescriptive or normative systems that outline acceptable behavior, determine good and bad taste, and order the socioeconomic realms within which a rasquache camp sensibility arises and to which it responds. An ethics, in contrast, requires what Simon Critchley describes in Infinitely
Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance as a “commitment or fidelity to an unfulfillable demand” (2007, 11). The present demand is one that can never be satisfied or achieved; it has no predetermined aim, no teleology. For Leticia and for Rechy’s narrator, the aesthetic choices they make with their rasquache camp sensibilities while narrating their stories are infinitely demanding. These characters commit to representing and transforming their queer Chicana/o worlds despite the insurmountable odds against them. They know that their stories will never perfectly present or replace those worlds and the subjects who inhabit them, nor will they close themselves to future interventions or reify their own limits. Rather, the narratives wind their way through the shadows of these spaces, shining a light on the subjects who inhabit them without controlling or speaking for them.

Both Leticia’s and Rechy’s narrator reject a linear, straightforward structure for their stories. Leticia, early in the novel, focuses on the “winding stories” that she learned from her great-grandmother, Mamá Estrella (Luna Lemus 2003, 26). These stories follow no direct or prescribed path; instead, they jump around, take detours, and eventually incorporate the different stories found along the way into the tangled web of the main story. In fact, each chapter of Trace Elements engages in this winding storytelling practice by opening up multiple threads and loosely weaving them together, as if leaving room for them to shift and expand on their own. Leticia explains that she prefers to think of the structure of her stories and her life on a metaphorical level, as crossing intersections diagonally, as not following the straight, preformed paths. “What I did know,” she says, “was that my life depended on me crossing the street diagonally, sometimes in a winding circular pattern for that matter” (169). The path taken by the narrator, informed by rasquache camp, could not be the shortest or most common, well-known route. On the contrary, she commits herself to narratives that diverge from planned itineraries to wind around in circles along the path of her own invention. Her agency is dependent on this narrative practice, and she draws her power to represent and transform that world from the winding movement of her writing, which orients itself toward the future but knows no direct path, nor seeks out a particular end.

The narrator in City of Night certainly winds his way through overlapping cities and stories as well. However, he more directly emphasizes the agency he gains by writing from an exterior perspective that allows him to observe, relate, make do with, and make pretty the marginal characters of his fictional world. He explains, “I would sit by that window looking
at the people that passed. I felt miraculously separated from the world outside: separated by the pane, the screen, through which, nevertheless—uninvolved—I could see that world” (Rechy 1963, 17–18). The narrator is almost always watching other lives through windows, books, and movies; he inhabits the borders of these written worlds, a space that seems the most advantageous for deploying rasquache camp. While in Los Angeles, he rents a room in a hotel on Hope Street, “on the fringes of that world but still outside of it (in order to always have a place where I could be completely alone when I must be)” (99). He projects his representations of this world from Hope Street—from a hope stemming from the shadows of night, from a directed orientation toward a better future, and from a specific border location. He gradually winds himself further into this world but never reaches a mythical center or essence. Instead of finding a strategic vantage point from which he could control his world with a totalizing, hegemonic vision—the top of a tall building in the center of the city, for example—he chooses to stay on the dark fringes. “I added to the shadows,” he claims (28). His exterior perspective spatializes the untraversable gap separating him from the immense, sublime cities of night. Despite the anxiety provoked by these overwhelming spaces and the unknowable subjects who inhabit them, he commits to respecting the impossibility of traversing the distance between him and his world that is demanded by this ethics of representation.

Outside the bounds of the narrative, nevertheless, Rechy and his publisher, Grove Press, sought to overcome these distances by publishing the novel and inserting it into the public space of 1960s literary markets. This was a time when both queer and Chicana/o cultural productions were beginning to gain visibility despite the tremendous barriers against both, not to mention the perceived antagonisms between them. This novel is certainly responsible for beginning to bridge that gap, work that was continued by later Chicana/o feminist and queer writers, theorists, and activists like Anzaldúa, Moraga, Arturo Islas, and many others.

Rasquache camp is also inscribed in the language used to represent the characters that inhabit these spaces. From this winding storytelling practice situated in the shadows and margins, both narrators commit to transforming prescribed roles, clichés, and stereotypes—that is, the trash and discarded elements of “good” literature—by confronting them head on. Their rasquachismo guides this disidentification, so that the narrators adopt and make do with superficial, pejorative ideas in order to make them aesthetically pleasing and socially useful.
Stuck in the clone culture of his time, Rechy’s narrator explains the prescribed roles that each hustler must duplicate and perform repeatedly in order to be successful: “youngmanoutofajob butlooking; dontgiveadamyounngman drifting; perrenialhustler easytomakeout; youngmanlostinthebigcity pleasehelpmesir” (1963, 32). What stands out is the hypermasculinity required of the hustler: he cannot be identified with queens and queers, and his sexuality must remain tacit. As Carlos Ulises Decena explains, making an analogy to Spanish grammar, the tacit subject is one that “is not spoken but that can be ascertained” since it is “neither secret nor silent” (2011, 19). Rechy’s narrator quickly learns that none of the johns, the “shadows” as he calls them, is looking for a smart, book-loving hustler like himself (1963, 33). His potential clients’ desires are strictly limited to easily recognizable roles, so he adopts these roles as necessary in order to make a living. In performing the hustler, Rechy’s narrator also adopts “the pose learned quickly from the others along the street: the stance, the jivetalk—a mixture of jazz, joint, junk sounds—the almost-disdainful, disinterested, but, at the same time, inviting look” (32). Going one step beyond simulating the hustler, he incorporates this jivetalking pose into his narrative through disidentification. His jivetalk guides the rhythm and rhyme of his phrases, which wind around the rules of punctuation, spacing, and capitalization, the rules of proper literary language.

Nevertheless, his Chicano ancestry does seem to fade away during this performance, a point that has sparked some debate about the relevance of this novel to Chicana/o cultural production, despite clear efforts throughout the novel to remind readers that the narrator is of Mexican descent. However unfortunately, he does what he must to make do with the less than ideal situation in which he finds himself. In fact, rasquache camp never deals with ideal situations and theoretical solutions. He plays the parts well, and he also commits to respecting his personal limits. When approached by a cop who tries to pick him up, he says, “My Pride won out: To be with a cop—even for scoring—humiliated me, and that stopped” (33). Rechy’s narrator maintains his dignity to the best of his ability, despite the deracialized, prescribed roles he finds himself forced to perform.

Meanwhile, almost repeating the john’s clichéd desires in City of Night, Leticia finds certain aspects of K’s stereotypical butch appearance to be enticing: “Whoosh, K made me dizzy pleased with her tough boy cliche” (Luna Lemus 2003, 69). Instead of rejecting clichés a priori, Leticia finds an attractive, desirable force in them. She turns ideas that would normally be regarded as unseemly into the focus of her desire, thus revaluing them.
Yet Leticia manages to push this one step further by transforming such preformed molds and rewriting the tired stories told repeatedly about Mexican and Chicana women. On the one hand, she appears to build on the jivetalk in *City of Night* with her almost clunky, but rhythmic chains of descriptors. She refers to Edith as a “smarty-pants Mission District glamour homegrrrl” (3). Nolan, another friend, becomes “a young foxy dyke with plenty of style and obvious brains” (52). On the other hand, she confronts the colonialist discourse of “Weeping Woman” (La Llorona) and Malinche, whom she first refers to as “bad, bad, bad girls” (19). But their badness is precisely why she praises them. For Leticia, they represent not the fear and betrayal that is repeatedly inscribed on their bodies, but rather a “fierce rebel lasting power” to be remembered after their death, a rebelliousness that she endeavors to embody one day. Leticia’s narrative winds itself into the shadows to uncover and emphasize a hidden characteristic of these misogynistic archetypes, thereby enacting what Emma Pérez calls a “decolonial imaginary,” which “recognizes what is left out” or hidden by the residual effects of the colonial imaginary (1999, 55). In a move that clearly situates her within a genealogy of queer Chicana/o fiction and theory tying back to the rupture provoked by the publication of *City of Night*, Leticia demonstrates the continuing decolonial queer, feminist impetus of this ethics of representation and rasquache camp.

Finally, the quirky, eccentric language of the narrators strives to establish a profound, yet consciously ephemeral and contingent connection with reality. Leticia, recalling a university course she took, focuses on the language of the teaching assistant, who begins to lecture about “commercial sex workers” in Mexico (Luna Lemus 2003, 28). Leticia explains her reaction: “I raised my hand to correct her. At best I figured her family had taught her to be polite with her words. But really, she didn’t seem to know the world she had so many facts memorized about. The words she spoke, they had no meaning where I came from” (28). Leticia articulates a particular relationship between language and reality in which cleaned up, supposedly respectful euphemisms and memorized facts create an untraversable gap between signs and the reality that they claim to represent, a gap that far exceeds that between signifier and signified. “Nasty whore,” Leticia tells us, was the way those women were described in her town in Mexico, and that is how they should have been described in the class (28). By speaking up, she enacts this ethics of representation in her own narrative and never shies away from calling a nasty whore a “nasty whore.” This practice is not an idealized solution for filling in the gap between language and the real, nor
does it indicate an ignorance of that gap. Rather, both narrators commit to making less than ideal, but concrete aesthetic choices that value the frank, unruly language surrounding them; they do so to represent the real and to make visible what would otherwise be pushed into the deepest shadows of the night by moralizing forces. They know that no perfect future, no utopia will result from their transformations, but they strive toward a better world nonetheless by making do with the limited resources at their disposal.

**Rasquache Camp, or Trying to Fail Better**

Parallel to the dark Latin queen who, from an unseen outside, rushed frenziedly into the gay club in Santa Monica and actively transformed it through her demanding performance, Rechy’s narrator can choose when to rush into the center of the cities of night and when to remain on the outskirts, disidentifying with them. On the fringes, the layers of his loneliness and isolation intensify, but he manipulates these into a fleeting sense of superiority and uniqueness while rationalizing his position as one he could renounce at any moment. This is, he explains, “because I was convinced I was not trapped by that world, as I was certain they were” (1963, 169). Such certainty and stability, nevertheless, prove to be precarious. For instance, Rechy’s narrator quickly concedes that “there were those other times when I felt even more hopelessly a part of it for having searched it out” (169). Nothing pure or certain can arise from his paradoxical hopelessness on Hope Street, from his commitment to this ethics of representation. The longer he chooses to inhabit and write these “nightcities” (19), the more he feels incapable of stepping out of them as they take on immense proportions that threaten his control.

Ybarra-Frausto has shown that instability and uncertainty are a defining aspect of rasquachismo: “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 and gone tomorrow” (1991, 133). Sontag explains that for something to become camp, it has to have already failed in some regard: “Thus, things are campy not when they become old—but when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of being frustrated by, the failure of the attempt” (1961, 285). Similarly, the ethics of representation guided by rasquache camp is necessarily transient and fragile in order to avoid the prescriptive norms and moralizing forces of the socioeconomic realities these narrators seek to overturn from their down-but-not-out positions. Opposed to closed,
perfect worlds, Rechy’s narrator and Leticia purposefully inscribe inevitable failures into their stories that allow these fictional spaces to collapse. Thus, they open their interventions to future projects that could exceed the limitations of their own acts. Muñoz explains the necessity of failure in all future-oriented projects: “Utopia can never be prescriptive and is always destined to fail. Despite this seeming negativity, a generative politics can be potentially distilled from the aesthetics of queer failure. Within failure we can locate a kernel of potentiality” (2009, 173). Failure does not have to be an end, even if Rechy’s narrator has little strength to try again after the destruction at the end of his story. In the ruins of the cities of night, it is Leticia who encounters the trace elements of a future rasquache camp when her own failed attempts become the basis for others who might try to fail better.

Rechy’s narrator already foreshadows the destruction of his fictional world while in the early stages of making it. He describes these night cities as “a world of whispers” with “a chorus waiting eagerly in the wings to enter and announce a new Downfall” (Rechy 1963, 185). This chorus appears when the different cities of his narrative first begin to fuse, but already there is a whispering, a quiet speaking from just off stage, which softly, yet with eager determination, announces the inevitable destruction of his world. During Mardi Gras in New Orleans—“a physically moribund city” (287)—the cities of night begin to meld in the account of the narrator:

Times Square, Pershing Square, Market Street, the concrete beach in Chicago . . . movie balconies, bars, dark hunting parks: fusing for me into one City. . . . Yes, If I take the subway, I’ll be on 42nd Street. Or in Bryant Park, or on the steps of the library, waiting for Mr King. . . . Or in the park in Chicago, also waiting. . . . Or if I hitchhike on this street, I’ll be on Hollywood Boulevard, which will be lighted like a huge electric snake—and there, I’ll meet— . . .

And ghostfaces, ghostwords, ghostrooms haunt me: Cities joined together by that emotional emptiness, blending with dark-city into a vastly stretching plain, into the city of night of the soul. (371–72)

Expressing the narrator’s emotional emptiness and anxiety at trying to represent this world, his writing fuses all of these cities of night into one sprawling, urban plain. But the cities are not the only things that fuse together. He starts to recall the characters from earlier stories in the narrative, and they mix with memories of the Texas sky and of other characters whose stories were not written into the novel with any detail (376). All of his cities, their inhabitants, and their possessions come colliding at once,
yet the fractured narrative with its constant ellipses staves off this fusion, weakening the structure with his despair, fear, and loneliness.

While Rechy’s narrator comes to love and hate that sprawling city of night, Leticia narrates her world as a shrunken space. She explains, “it’s like I was running in circles, all tangled up in a leash nobody was forcing me to wear” (Luna Lemus 2003, 52). Her world shrinks while the cities of night expand, but both have fused into inescapable and overwhelming or claustrophobic spaces. During an emotional scene in which K and Edith announce that they are ending their respective relationships with Leticia and Nolan in order to move in together, Leticia fails in her commitment to transform stereotypes and clichés. She can only conceive of this moment in her life as a soap opera: “A fucking telenovela in my dining room, I was speechless” (218). For once, not even Leticia knows what to say. The clichés she employs here only function as a stopgap in her narrative, as an attempt to plug up the silences that arise from her failed relationship. This use of clichés is not an instance of rasquache camp, but rather a self-conscious moment of personal crisis in which she fails in her impossible commitment to the unfulfillable demand to represent her world.

As a last attempt, both narrators fall back on their rasquache camp sensibilities to try to take charge of their worlds in the face of their now evident failures. Rechy’s narrator anticipates the total destruction of New Orleans in the middle of the Mardi Gras parade: “I imagined the razing fire sweeping this rotten city” (1963, 371). Yet this fire never materializes, for it would have made his escape from the pressures mounting around him too easy. Leticia, in contrast, tries to take charge of her loneliness after K moves out of the house. She creates a sub-reality within the narrative—written as if she were telling what was actually happening to her—that later proves to be her imagination. When there is a knock at the door, she thinks that it must be K coming to ask for forgiveness. But it is, in fact, just the delivery man, who has a package of things that K has returned to Leticia, proof of the very end, of the failure of their relationship (Luna Lemus 2003, 227–230).

What most grabs Leticia’s attention is that K has returned the group photo-booth images, the ones they had hung above the green couch in their gingerbread house with a silver thumbtack and a binder clip. The photos at the time had served as a reminder of a fun day with her friends and had been incorporated into the precarious rasquache camp decor of their home, but now these photos serve only as proof of the failure that in retrospect seems to have been present in them from the start. In the last photo, Leticia and
Nol were missing because Nol had been upset and had left the booth, and Leticia went to find her. Only K and Edith were in the photo that now has been torn off from the rest; K has kept it as a photo with her new girlfriend before returning the rest to Leticia (229). Just at the moment in which these novels approach a grand revelation or the construction of something whole and unified, just as these narrators almost traverse that infinite distance separating them from their worlds, from those who inhabit these worlds, and from the repurposed materials that come to populate those spaces, they fail. Their narratives shatter. Leticia’s prose—what she calls her “winding talky-talky ways” (86)—collapses into parataxis at her defeat: “Acid tears down my cheeks. Defeated. Completely defeated” (230). Even the jivetalk of Rechy’s narrator gives way to the plain, staccato language used to write the ultimate destruction of the fused urban landscape at the end of *City of Night*, language that could easily be transplanted into *Trace Elements* to write the end of Leticia’s relationship with K:

Then smash!
*Smash! Smash! Smash!*

The world collapsed. (Rechy 1963, 377)

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa writes, “Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The *Coatlícu* state can be a way station or it can be a way of life” (1987, 68). To embrace this state, which is of course painful, prompts “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (101). Something very similar can be said of the queer Chicana/o ethics of representation guided by rasquache camp. The inevitable failures of committing to the unfulfillable demands of rasquache camp can remain meaningless or they can clear out a space for more funky irreverence to be cobbled together from future restrictions and from objects or people discarded as waste. The destruction in both novels occurs at what will be their final point of contact within this essay, a temporary crossroads beyond which each novel returns to its separate path. This failure, nevertheless, is not the end in itself. The future-oriented aesthetic practices of both narrators have failed, in one sense, in that they did not locate a better, actually existing, and stable socioeconomic realm for queer Chicana/os, a demand that they knew to be unattainable from the start. Following defeat, Rechy’s narrator appears to give up completely and retreat into nihilism:
And what has been found?  
Nothing.  
A circle which winds around, without beginning, without end. (Rechy 1963, 379)

The end to his narrative is one of defeat and a rejection of hope, one in which the “potential revival” of spring is crushed by “the fierce wind [that] comes screaming, whirling the needle-pointed dust, stifling all hope” as his narrative circles back to where it began (379). However, I read Leticia’s narrative as one that pries open the closed, circular structure and existential crisis that arises at the end of Rechy’s novel, which if left alone would condemn the narrator to repeat the same mistakes in perpetuity. At this point, I prefer to allow Leticia to explore these ruins, or the trace elements, of the cities of night in Rechy’s novel. She locates a powerful potentiality in the smallest things: “the little things . . . that had the potential to build up and tear down my wobbling structure” (Luna Lemus 2003, 234). The direction of this phrase can also be reversed. After tearing down a structure, among the ruins, the simplest, most common things—in this case a cliché that she creatively manipulates to her benefit—have the potential to spark a reconstruction: “Fine, if it’s the small things that count, a small gesture just might have the power to bake life into peach pie” (235).

A future-oriented rasquache camp attitude or stance, like Leticia’s, is necessary because it envisions a way to remake that which is undesirable and imperfect today and to pick oneself up after utter failure. It critiques the present while projecting into the future the potential for a better world. More important, it maintains and demands the right to be infinitely reconfigured. This queer Chicana/o ethics of representation does not aspire to impose the particular demands of one individual on an entire society as if they were universally valid, but rather projects more precise and local reconfigurations that never become so rigid as to be unchangeable. Despite the inevitable destruction and collapse of these fictional spaces, there is a strong sense that only a small gesture, perhaps one inflected with a rasquache camp sensibility, is all that others might need in order to remake these failed interventions in and for the future.

I would like to open up the boundaries that define rasquache camp to be as porous and malleable as possible without losing the concept’s specificity. It will never become a universal aesthetic underlying all queer Chicana/o cultural production, but it can serve as one among many social aesthetics or sensibilities at play in this rich cultural field. Rasquache camp and the queer Chicana/o ethics of representation that this sensibility guides
might be located or employed in a variety of situations, both in and out of literature and the arts, by those who may or may not readily identify as queer Chicana/os.

K, in *Trace Elements*, is a complex albeit imperfect example of how this might come to be. She embodies, at times, a racial ambiguity, prompting Leticia’s grandmother to ask if she is Puerto Rican (156). While she is from North Philadelphia and many of her neighbors there were Puerto Rican, her family is “from Greece originally” (156). Nonetheless, K appears to have almost seamlessly assimilated—if it can be called that—into the Chicana/o culture of Los Angeles. She commits herself to working as an artist who paints lowriders and murals in the area. In fact, she did the same in Philadelphia with her Puerto Rican friends until she was in a life-threatening accident, when on her way to check out a wall for a potential mural, that left her scarred (126–28). As a result, K fails to create this mural, but she begins a new life in Los Angeles; although the time she spends with Leticia is brief, she engages in aspects of Leticia’s rasquache camp, which should not be ignored because of K’s ethnicity. Of course, this too comes to an end after their breakup, when she begins dating Edith, a wealthy Chicana. On the one hand, K’s fleeting commitment must be differentiated from the lifestyle of Edith’s Chicano parents, who reject their barrio upbringing and talk poorly of the “damned lazy beaners,” as Edith’s father says, who live in the Mission District (110). On the other hand, K is not the trust fund hipster that Amy is. Amy, an acquaintance of Leticia and K, works as a stripper and at one point lives in a 1948 “mint condition” trailer in a trailer park, just for kicks, appropriating an other’s culture only for her own pleasure (53). K does genuinely participate alongside, if not directly in, Leticia’s rasquache camp, at least for a short time. At the very least, this suggests that rasquache camp and the ethics of representation it guides are not, *a priori*, closed off to anyone.

In the end, Rechy’s narrator and Leticia enact their rasquache camp sensibilities by winding their way through the shadows and committing to an ethics of representation. They attempt to construct a new sensorium from the entangled tensions, unforeseen limitations, destabilizing anxieties, and razing fires that ultimately force them to fail. These narratives never truly end, leaving them open to future interventions and reconfigurations by any texts, subjects, materials, and sensibilities, whether queer, Chicana/o, rasquache camp, or something radically other.
Notes

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1. There has been much debate on the extent to which Rechy’s novel should be read as part of the Chicana/o narrative tradition. Early scholarship and reviews from the 1960s often focused on the novel’s role in giving visibility to homosexual characters and openly depicting sex and sexuality. Because of this content, it was excluded from the early Chicana/o nationalist rhetoric of El Movimiento. See Peter Buitenhuis (1963) and Stanton Hoffman (1964) for immediate reactions to the novel. In contrast, Karen Christian (1992) attempts to reclaim Rechy as a Chicano writer, with or without the marker “queer,” by situating him as an exemplar of ethnic subjectivity. The narrator often claims that his story “must begin in El Paso,” a city to which he returns on a few occasions, in part to see his mother, described as “a beautiful Mexican woman” (Rechy 1963, 14). This novel certainly does not hide or erase that part of the narrator’s identity, even if, as Ricardo L. Ortiz affirms, Rechy’s early novels do not elaborate “on the intersection of the ethnic and sexual dimensions” of their protagonists’ identities (1993, 113). John Rechy seems to respond to these questions by more consciously expanding on his Mexican ancestry in his memoir, *About My Life and the Kept Woman* (2008). Overall, I prefer the balanced and dynamic approach taken by Frederick Luis Aldama: “John Rechy’s novels are queer and Chicano, and much more, in their texturing of the complex contours of race and sexuality as engaged with world literary themes and genres” (2005, 72, my emphasis). In the same work Aldama provides a summary of the reception and criticism of Rechy’s fiction (47–53).

2. There are various spellings of this sensibility in circulation. As a noun, *rasquachismo* is alternately spelled as *rascuachismo*; the adjective, *rasquache*, also appears as *rascuache* and *rasquachi*. I follow the spellings used by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in his essay, “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility” (1990), which are the ones used most frequently within cultural studies.

3. Jennifer A. González (2008) provides a detailed analysis of Amalia Mesa-Bains’s artwork and her domesticana sensibility. In studying the Chicana feminist attributes of the artist’s altars, González explains, “The home altar, in other words, is a cumulative form of expression that draws objects from different cultural, historical, racial, and religious traditions into a single, unique, and generally private display. For women, this symbolic, domestic, ritual activity provides the means to imagine a set of social relations to family, community, and even the divine, beyond the strict confines of the male-dominated church. Mesa-Bains’s decision to choose the altar as the format for her early installations suggests an awareness of these gender-specific connotations that might have successfully worked against the more heroic, masculine bias inherent in Chicano art of the time” (127).

4. Sontag does not use the term “queer culture,” but rather refers to the overlap between camp and “homosexuality” (1961, 290). While “homosexuality” would have been the term of choice in the 1960s, it has, of course, fallen out of favor since then, particularly because of its use within clinical psychology to designate
an abnormality or pathology to be cured. I am updating, in a sense, Sontag’s essay by replacing the terms for the purposes of my argument.

5. While García is correct in showing some points of contact between rasquachismo and camp in Ybarra-Frausto’s work, I will return to a discussion of García’s polemic essay below.


7. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto offers a detailed study of the pelados, the sexual innuendos that underlay their buen hablar, and their “indulgent, while also aggressive” attitudes (1984, 51).

Works Cited


