

**WESTERN ATTRACTION:
THEMING THE POSTCOLONIAL DARK RIDE**

MIGUELTZINTA SOLIS
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MIGUELTZINTA SOLIS

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Jackson Leween TwoBears
Supervisor

Associate Professor Ph.D.

Kim Mair
Thesis Examination Committee Member

Associate Professor Ph.D.

Annie Martin
Thesis Examination Committee Member

Associate Professor M.F.A.

Lori Blondeau
External Examiner

Assistant Professor M.F.A.

Suzanne Lenon
Internal External Examiner

Associate Professor Ph.D.

Anne Dymond
Chair, Thesis Examination Committee

Associate Professor Ph.D.

DEDICATION

For Mamá, who, when we frustrated her, would say in Spanish, “You owe me a trip to Disneyland.”

ABSTRACT

This project involves the conceptualization, design, construction, and staging of *-tzintlán*, the world's first postcolonial theme park. This support paper provides a broad understanding of the core concepts, theories, material considerations, and historical background for the project. The paper hybridizes academic writing forms with second-person narrative, itself an immersive experience that transforms the paper into a ride. In this way the paper reflects its own content, demonstrating how story, narrative and thought are embodied, affective, sensory, and somatic experiences. This approach allows for a critical examination of theming, immersive technologies, and multi-layered spaces, for the purpose of developing decolonial, Indigenous/Chicanx futurist strategies for worldbuilding and self-conceptualizing. The paper addresses *-tzintlán* as a space-maker for the exhibiting of site-specific works, a blend between artistic and curatorial practice. The paper guides the reader through questions of fidelity, time, and ephemeral, liminal, inverted, and subverted spaces as they pertain to the construction of *-tzintlán*. Attention is given to major influences on the thinking behind the park, including Disneyland and Aztlán, two multilayered territories which have shaped the artist's own worldviews, imaginaries, and cultural spheres. It also provides examples of other art-centered carnivals and theme parks which have influenced *-tzintlán*. Details on the process of designing and creating *-tzintlán* are given, along with information on each component within the park.

Keywords: theme parks, immersion, imaginaries, Indigenous futurities, queer performance, liminal spaces, theming, dark rides, Aztlán, Nepantla, Chicanx worldbuilding, embodied narrative

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“There are many obstacles and dangers in crossing into Nepantla.”

– Gloria Anzaldúa, *Luz En Lo Oscuro*

“I want to imagine a future beyond the arrow of time, where ideas and creativity circulate in a multidimensional experience of time.”

– Loretta Todd, “About the Future”

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Queue

Like in many creation stories, you do not begin fully in the dark.¹ You could say the first thing you are aware of is the humming light of stars on a moonless night. Do you hear this light before you see it? Do you feel it first on your skin? What do the stars smell like? Thick and eternal, is this existence or non-existence which bends around you? Is it both at once, something whose curvature distorts and invents your capacity to perceive as you attempt to take it all in at Once? You are in motion. Where are you going? In which direction? Is this still an academic paper?

The cosmos is interrupted by a giant sign, an archway of lights that twinkles amongst the stars. You are too far to read the words the lights spell out, but you can make out clearly at this distance a giant spinning butt. To be specific, you see the giant form of a painted fiberglass sculpture: a pyramid grafted onto the bottom half of a human (torso, butt, legs) spinning slowly, lit by two searchlights. The pyramid, a seven leveled temple, is edged in

¹ Scholar, artist, and filmmaker Loretta Todd tells a story of driving through the night while listening to Dr. Leroy Littlebear and Stephen Hawking having a conversation about time. Hawking asks what time is and Littlebear replies that time doesn't exist. Todd writes: “The night races by as I drive, marking, yes, time and space. But driving at night on this stretch of the highway I could be anytime and anywhere. All there is, is a dark road with few lights and no visible horizon. Thus begins my imagining of a ‘future’ for Aboriginal Art.” (Todd 2011, 126.)

ropelight that changes colours. The seventh level of the temple is in the shape of a top hat made entirely of lights, of individual bulbs that ripple in rainbow bursts like a jellyfish. You are drawn to this spectacle through the infinite soup of stars. You are pulled to it out of a need to parse what is up and what is down, what is waking and what is dream, what is you and what is not. You read the lightbulb sign: "Western Attraction." The style of the sign's font is one that is not in the list of fonts accepted by the School of Graduate Studies of The University of Lethbridge, but it is one that makes you think of circus banners that say "Big Top" and wooden signs that say "Saloon." Below the shimmering bulbs hangs a canvas banner that reads, "Theming the Postcolonial Dark Ride." This banner moves slightly in a bit of cosmic breeze. You feel pulled to it like a moth, a desire which propels you until you find yourself next to it. Now, the thing you saw from far away and desired, the promise which attracted you, is becoming somewhere you have arrived. You no longer see the butt from afar, you are under it, the feet of the torso right above you. You hear the creaking of its slow, mechanized rotation, and, in flashes of light, can see the buildup of grease and peeling of paint, and you wonder how far this butt has travelled. Taking it in, you are awash in the rays of the lit signs, unreadable from this close. You continue forward and pass the threshold of the archway.

You feel a hard surface under you, concrete, something you know not because of what you see but because of the way it answers your footfalls, matter pushing back against your traversal of space in the unique way you know concrete to do. Do you know it's concrete because you know concrete or because you know your own body? It is this that makes you realize you have a body, that makes your own embodiment tangible.

You continue forward and you see the concrete path that moves ahead of you, and, as you walk, the stars give way to a sunny day in a cheap replica of The University of Lethbridge

campus situated on a cheap replica of Blackfoot Territory. The path stretches ahead of you, winding lazily between a series of grassy knolls made of AstroTurf. The path leads you forward past trees that, as you get closer to them, you can tell are 3D printed, made of layers of some kind of plastic laid down in perfect succession. There is a bike rack with a handful of rusting bikes and a metal-looking but also plastic-looking sculpture of a human figure throwing a spear. There is no one else around.

You feel the press of a Chinook wind against your neck, warm and grassy, but you are distantly aware, too, of the whirl of fans that must be fabricating this wind. You feel the desire to know if this place you are in is real or not, while also wanting to suspend your disbelief, while also wanting to know how it is so realistic, while also wanting to laugh at what a poor replica it is. You take note of this unique coexistence of thoughts and desires, feeling it to be important, something to juggle, to keep in motion. This is a complex many-layered feeling, and it takes you a moment to re-calibrate so that all the truths, iterations and dualities may exist simultaneously.

Stretched over the front of the university entrance, where the shield with the sun should be, is a canvas banner with a painting on it. The painting shows a temple made of seven steps, the top one resembling a small top hat with vertical stripes. Below this is the bottom half of a brown skinned body, its legs crossed over each other elegantly at the ankles, bare rear suspended over a desert landscape, an echo of the butt before but rendered in two dimensions.

How do you approach the doors? Do you hesitate, unsure if they will open? Or do you step beyond them with confidence? The automatic door slides open, and you are in a wide foyer.

On one end of the foyer is a bronze sculpture of a pronghorn opposite of it, towards the back of the space, there is a small platform with a hologram rotating over it.

1.2 Preshow

The hologram is of the same butt-temple emblem that you saw on the banner outside the building and at the entrance. As your eyes adjust from outdoor to indoor light, you sense that the hologram becomes brighter, more defined, and you realize the glass of the doors is tinting darker. The hologram shivers and blinks, and the butt-temple is replaced by a 5'5" human figure. You may or may not recognize the figure as Migueltzinta, dressed in a floral print blazer, blue jeans, and gold earrings. He smiles, seeming to notice you and lifts both arms in greeting.

Migueltzinta Hologram:

Hey! You made it! Thanks for being here. Like what I did with the place? I know, there's a lot of butts. I couldn't help myself. I just wanted to make sure everyone knew it was a little gay, this whole project. But ok, enough throat clearing; let's rock and roll. This thesis paper – well, "support paper," as it is called – has been written as a ride, and today you are not so much a reader, as a rider of this paper that is a ride. Think of this as an immersive narration, a guided journey through a constellation of idea-feelings. I am your narrator on this ride. You'll find me in the footnotes and the references. I will appear in many forms and places, by many names, as selves cartoonish, perverse, spiritual, and metatextual. I'll be joined by others, family, friends, and gods. You might even encounter yourself on this ride, which I suppose is the hope we often have at the beginning of a journey: to encounter ourselves.

You will find yourself in many places, sometimes in multiple places at once. You will move through so many topias: utopias, dystopias, heterotopias². You-topias and me-topias. We will go to Disneyland and Aztlán. You will move through states of *nepantla*, moving through worlds and worldviews. Maybe this whole experience will be easy for you or maybe it will come at great cost. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that just because they don't charge you at the entrance doesn't mean it's free.

Hologram Miguelzinta laughs villainously.

Miguelzinta Hologram:

This journey is about wanting to encounter myself in place, an act of diasporic self-location as an uninvited Chicana guest wandering around Blackfoot Territory. - *tzintlán's* innate ephemerality as a place is a direct influence of my own cultural patterns of movement and migration. This is a natural outgrowth of my work on *unbelonging* which was a core part of my MFA thesis work. It comes from a desire to better integrate and understand those parts of me that are elsewhere. For a time, I felt bad about this sense of a part of me always being elsewhere, but I think - I hope - that through designing, thinking, and feeling -*tzintlán*, I am beginning to integrate a sense that being *elsewhere* is not a failure. That finding embodiment in that elsewhere is about arriving in the liminal spaces that come to exist as alternatives to the spaces in which I cannot find myself. But, please, I am just a hologram. I am always elsewhere. What do I know about arriving? I will turn you over to someone more... corporeal?

² Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," 1967.

Hologram Miguelzinta points to a spot behind you. You turn around just in time to see a spotlight fade up on the bronze pronghorn in the foyer. Its eyes open with a robotic click and two glass eyeballs swivel in their sockets to look at you. The pronghorn's ears move mechanically, and it jerkily lifts a leg, its joints bending slowly.

Animatronic Pronghorn:

Boo!

The animatronic pronghorn laughs, and as it continues speaking you hear the hiss and squeak of the pneumatics that control it. You note that the audio track is out of sync with the animatronic's mouth movements.

Animatronic Pronghorn:

Like the introduction of an academic paper, many rides have what is called a "pre-show," a brief presentation that introduces the narrative, thematic, and structural elements of the ride. The pre-show serves multiple purposes, some very practical, such as buying some time for the previous group of riders to finish the ride, or to impart important safety information to the riders. But the pre-show also serves as a contract between rider and ride, a discussion of terms, an invitation into the suspension of disbelief asked of the rider by the ride.

Before we begin, I must ask some things of you, and I will tell you what I offer in exchange. I ask that you give yourself to this paper as you would to a roller coaster, that you hold in your mind the dual knowledge that you will be safe and that you could die. Well, perhaps not die, that is overdramatic, but I ask you to be open to being altered in some way. I'm not promising that you *will* be altered by this ride, but I invite you to enjoy the freefall of the unknown. I invite you to feel this ride deeply, to let it

encourage new pathways in your mind, to let it blur boundaries that may exist between your imagined and embodied realities.

As the pronghorn speaks, you see that it is changing. The spotlight fades away to reveal that the pronghorn has become translucent, made of dozens of tiny lights, a pronghorn made out of stars. Its eyes glow golden as it continues to speak.

Animatronic Pronghorn:

The purpose of this thesis ride is to move you through the ideas and feelings at the core of *-tzintlán*, the postcolonial theme park which I have designed. It must be a ride because this is the best way to exemplify not only the primary modes – immersion, narrative, storytelling – in use in this project, but also the mechanics of worldbuilding and *worldview* building that must happen as part of the establishing of the ephemeral place that is *-tzintlán*.

The pronghorn bends and springs into the air, and it looks very corny and jerky, the motion revealing a silver pneumatic post beneath the figure, that hisses upward then sighs as the figure begins to reset. You don't linger on the animatronic pronghorn, as you are being led forward by a projected version of the pronghorn that walks along the wall, deeper into the building, while it continues speaking.

Projection Pronghorn:

Listen to my voice. Follow me. Accept that this ride is necessary. That it isn't enough just to *conceptually* understand theories of embodiment and immersion. You must embody those notions and you must *be* immersed in experiences of alterity. This ride that is a paper will accomplish this. Please follow me to your queer vehicles.

The pronghorn stops talking but you follow the pronghorn projection as it hooves its way through the dark, leading you down a dimly lit corridor. On either side, you may recognize the glass cases that house distinguished faculty posters, awards, and trophies. But instead of these, the glass cases display hand painted portraits of various figures and characters, whose eyes seem to follow you as you move past them. A man in a patchwork top hat, a cat person in a bicycle helmet, an old woman wearing giant rings, a bearded white man in a baseball cap and sunglasses who is juggling. Faint sound seems to emanate from the portraits, a distant voice announcing the attractions at a carnival, soft circus music, faraway laughter and delighted screams, a crowd gasping in awe, applause.

Projection Pronghorn:

My investigations of immersion are not about realism and technological advancements in high fidelity manufactured experiences. Immersion here is more so a question of experiences that consume one, narrative-driven embodied experiences of story that have the capacity to unsettle, disorient, and compel. Questions of fidelity and authenticity of experience appear through queer, trans lenses; the prosthesis, the poor replica, the uncanny valley, drag, and camp all play important roles in my interpretations of immersive experience. Sure, Disneyland discourse comes up a lot here, but primarily through a kitschy tourist trap lens, an old drag bar you find behind a dirty, unmarked door in an otherwise gentrified neighborhood.

The projection of the pronghorn leads you into a darkened space, and, as it talks, the walls – which are screens – come alive to immerse you in a drag bar full of muscle gays, drag queens, futches, and bears, except they are all anthropomorphic pronghorns. You know it isn't real, but you would like it to be, and you wonder if this makes you a furry. You think you will be

grazed by pink feather boas, sticky looking-wigs, and leather-clad pronghorn knees that stick out as you follow your guide through the narrow, grungy bar.

Projection Pronghorn:

This body of thought is less interested in technology as a tool for high-functioning simulations, and more interested in the complexities of simulation and reality construction. Immersive technology in the context of this paper can be anything from a VR headset – which I don't find very interesting, for some reason – to strategies for relational co-storytelling such as happens in RPGs – an excellent example of how the act of storytelling is a root form of immersive experience.

You arrive at the back of the room where an imposing pronghorn drag queen is standing by a door. She smiles at your pronghorn guide through long lashes and opens the door with yassified hooves that are purple and twisting.

Pronghorn Projection:

Well, this is as far as I go. You go, walk through this door.

1.3 On Ride: Strapping In

Passing through the door, you enter an open area themed to look like a living room or study. Simulated sunlight pours in from a large window to feed various houseplants at the peripheries of the room. A smallish, brown, animatronic dog sits at the window looking outside, its head cocking to one side occasionally. Art hangs on the walls and, among the plants, several bicycles peek out like wild animals hiding in foliage. You hear typing on a keyboard, and beneath it another sound: the sound of wheels on a rail, of gears and chains, wood, metal, and plastic clanging together. The path you have been on ends, and you set onto

a loading platform where a little car awaits you. On the other side of the car there is another animatronic of regular human-form Miguelzinta, sitting up lengthwise on a couch in sweatpants and a camo hoodie with some pieces of corn chip on it. His laptop is on his lap, and he types, his hands moving up and down over the keyboard in brutish jerks but never actually touching the laptop's keyboard. You hear Miguelzinta's voice coming from the general area of the animatronic. This same voice has sounded essentially the same across all the characters so far, with perhaps slight variations in tone and affectation. It is a voice difficult to describe by the writer who is also its speaker.

Typing Animatronic Miguelzinta:

You made it to the loading platform located in a replica of my living room, where I get most of my writing done. I know, the carpet is meh and I would never choose a white trim. But I just rent here. I should underscore that, methodologically, this is an autotheoretical and autoethnographic work.³ The invention of an ephemeral theme park seems like a logical next step for someone grappling with questions of belonging, hybridity, migration, transness, and diaspora. I am working from my perspective, and others might never feel the need to invent a theme park (sort of) named after themselves, postcolonial or otherwise. It's not for everyone.

Another animatronic dog, a larger grey one, lies beside the couch, its side rising and falling in a mimicry of breath. There is a loud clang as a lap bar inside the little car that awaits you unlocks and rises up.

Typing Animatronic Miguelzinta:

³ See Lauren Fournier's book, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), as well as a volume she co-edited with Alex Brostoff (*ASAP/Journal*) for details on autotheory as methodology in creative practice.

Most amusement rides require the rider to be restrained somehow, depending how dangerous the ride has been assessed to be. A rope over a hook, a locking cage, an elaborate body harness – there are endless systems of restraint involved in boarding a ride. Sometimes they are so elaborate they make you scared and sometimes so minimal it also makes you scared. They are often confusing, and you are either subjected to the expertise of the ride attendant or you are left to your own devices. To me, all these elements flag BDSM: the rider becomes the pervert who must surrender to an experience of suspended agency to which they have willingly and usually enthusiastically offered themselves to. Further, all this business of strapping oneself and binding oneself to an object which extends the body's capacity for action flags prosthesis. In this way, the ride vehicle is a queer vehicle, at once a mechanism of bondage as well as a prosthesis that facilitates entry into the embodied narrative that is the ride. Given that this ride will change in type and genre, you can expect the vehicle to change with it. Please watch your step as you get into the car. Once inside, pull the lap bar down over your knees and test it by pulling up. It will lock automatically.

Carefully, you step into the little car. You have the sense that it is made for someone smaller than you and, as you take your seat, you marvel that you fit inside. The inside of the vehicle is worn down as it seems many have ridden this ride before you. The metal floor of the vehicle has two polished imprints where the feet of others have gone. As you pull the lap bar down over your knees, you note the leather padding wrapped around it is patinaed beautifully, glowing with the wear of time. The lap bar clicks into place. You pull up on it and it holds. You are secured.

Looking to your right you see a sign at eye level. Crossed out with a red X is a graphic showing a person leaning with both arms stretched out of a graphic of the car you are in. Below that, crossed out with a red X, is a graphic of a person standing and stepping out of the graphic of the car you are in with motion lines behind it. Below that, crossed out with a red X, is a graphic of a person riding in the graphic of the car you are in, in the process of closing their mind to non-linear notions of time and place. Miguelzinta's voice continues speaking to you, but now from little speakers embedded in the vehicle. His voice floats up to you from around your feet, disembodied.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

It is hard to let go, to surrender. I, for one, feel very bound up in binaries. You might say to yourself, why is it so hard for this trans mestizXXX Chicax to be free of binary arrests? Well, when you get shaped by the contradiction of binaries, it is hard to see beyond them, to silence their constant chatter. I recognize this as an obstacle. To be preoccupied with the collision between worlds is to be unable to inhabit the sovereign state of betweenness that collision creates. You have to surrender. I have to surrender.

Easier said than done.

The car jerks, there is a loud clank, and you are moving forward. The car twists immediately to the left, then the right, and you have a sense of smallness, that you are a toy riding in a toy, that you are a cartoon version of reality governed by cartoon physics, cartoon momentum, and cartoon gravity. As you adjust to this, you hear Miguelzinta's voice again, and you listen as your little car follows its rail into darkness.

2. IMMERSIONS

2.1 Dark Ride

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

You are on a dark ride. A dark ride is characterized as an indoor ride made up of a series of rooms which feature distinct scenes and immersive experiences. Typically, the scenes are narratively or thematically linked, though many early dark rides such as the tunnel of love and haunted pretzel rides did not have linked scenes or themes. One of the oldest dark rides is the pretzel ride, called this because of its tight, twisting layout. Right now, you are on a pretzel ride.

The little car turns abruptly, pressing you into the side of the car which you are hoping has locked securely. The car turns again, and you lose sense of which way you have come.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

I chose to start you off with a pretzel ride because they are unsettling. Pretzel rides are often used for haunted house rides. You meander in the dark, pulled along by gravity and experience a series of *tricks*, various audio-visual effects that elicit fear and surprise.

A light turns on suddenly to illuminate a five headed monster whose animatronic necks flail clumsily about. You barely have enough time to read that each neck has a sign around it that says "deadline," before the light goes off and you are in the dark again.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

Pretzel rides are often themed but don't necessarily have a single story that unfolds over the course of the ride, at least not in the way that, say, is recognizable in many

Disneyland rides. A haunted house-type pretzel ride has a set of typical tricks and scenes you can expect: a dungeon scene, a swamp scene, a trick where you are almost hit by an oncoming vehicle, and one where a gust of air is blown on you.

Your vehicle turns just in time to miss a direct collision with a subcommittee.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

But while there might not be an overt, unifying narrative theme to most pretzel rides, I would argue that immersive experiences are inherently narrative. Immersed bodies seek out that narrative to sate a hunger for story, a desire which compels one forward, backwards, and sideways into the open arms of time.

Your car jerks sharply to the right and tilts upward, and, with a deafening ratcheting sound, a mechanism underneath the car engages a chain you can see moving in the inclined floor in front of you. The chain pulls you upward into a blacklight-lit tube that spins slowly around you, with twisting barbershop pole stripes of text on a white background with sporadic numbers and stars. You realize the stripes of text are one giant spiraling footnote.⁴ For a moment you aren't sure if it's *you* who is spinning, and you look down at your own hands gripping the lap bar, rendered an unusual colour by the blacklight effect. Nearing the end of the tunnel, you see a crudely made cardboard jaguar head that opens and closes as you draw towards it. You begin to hear Miguelzinta narrating again, though you can't make out his words over the clank of the chain which slowly pulls you into the velvety black void of the jaguar's mouth. There is another loud clank as the mechanism of the car disengages from the

⁴ The footnote reads, "A dark ride is a powerful conveyance for somatic narrative. As a haptic experience it triggers in us a sense of dying and being born, of dreaming, of being unconscious and waking up, of falling, of traveling to the underworld, of becoming very small, of being consumed by the dark and all the unknowns it contains."

chain and the little car tips forward slightly. You have the cartoon sensation again of movement, as the car zips along through the dark, taking sharp turns, rattling along on a gradual, downward track. The ride slows a bit, your movement having absorbed some of the momentum, and the car makes a sharp turn to the right.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

While I've been thinking about theme parks since I was a kid, my particular interest in the dark ride came about during the American election of 2016. Unlike many of my friends, I was not surprised at Trump's win, as I had been following the seeding, amplification, and dominance of the many narratives that would endear followers to Trump's campaign platform.

A light turns on suddenly to light up a hand-painted, two-dimensional wooden cutout of Donald Trump accompanied by the blast of a horn so loud it hurts. The light goes off as you jerk sharply left and are once again in the dark.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

But my lack of surprise did not help me avoid the collective sense of fear, helplessness, and grief felt throughout that time. The months leading to and immediately after the election were marked by my following of election news in tandem with an obsession – an addiction, really – to watching on-ride videos of dark rides from around the world which amusement park enthusiasts had posted to YouTube. Some rides I'd ridden in person, but many I hadn't. I became an expert on theme parks I had never been to and may never visit.⁵ The more I watched dark rides, the more I felt that that moment in

⁵ I even created a playlist of Disneyland rides for a friend who lived several states away, in the hopes we could virtually "go to Disneyland" together.

time, a time marked by my living with my ex-partner, Luke, in Michigan, was itself a dark ride on personal, national, and global scales.

The car makes another sharp turn, and another light goes on, this time illuminating a scene: another living room in a large house with hardwood floors. On a couch, a Luke animatronic moves its head from side to side, face frozen in a grimace, in the arms of a frowning Miguelztinta animatronic.

Michigan Luke Audio:

What are we going to do?

Michigan Miguelztinta Audio:

We've always talked about living in a different country. Maybe this is our chance?

As the curving track of the ride begins to guide your little car away and out of the scene, you see the Miguelztinta animatronic turn its head to gaze out the window of the living room, past an illusion of falling snow, to look at a Trump sign in the neighbor's yard. You are craning your neck to notice this behind you before the light goes out, and you are again in the dark.

2.2 What We Are In

Disembodied Miguelztinta Voice:

Yes, the dark ride holds a unique power as a mode of storytelling. It allows for a narrative to be felt in the body, using sensory experiences to elicit somatic responses from the rider. Narrative and physiology work hand in hand to create immersion.

Another kind of dark ride is the ghost train, a short series of cars that pulls you through a series of rooms with spooky themes. People refer to “trains of thought” – so what about a *ghost train of thought*? The narratives we seek out in a dark ride are both meta-narratives such as, crudely, the struggle between good and evil, and practical micro-narratives such as, simply, we were outside, we went inside, and now we are outside again. In moments of disorientation, unsettlement, and belief-suspension, the mind-body grasps freely for things to make sense. In a sense, a dark ride makes the rider quite vulnerable to whatever narrative the ride is trying to impart. Even the simplest series of similarly unrelated frights staged for a thrill might unwittingly be teaching you what to love and what to fear.

The ride slows suddenly, and a light goes on in front of you. You start because a human figure is there, illuminated from above. What you see looks very familiar, but it also frightens you in the way the inexplicable can be terrifying. You are both catapulted from and pulled deeper into the immersion: are you seeing a ghost, powdery and light like a sheet of tracing paper? The light shifts and you realize, laughing, that it is a mirror, and you are looking at your own reflection. You look strange in the harsh light. The car locks into a sideways elevator, and you float up an incline, its wall lined with mirror, such that you continue staring at this odd, shifting reflection of yourself.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

Immersion is what we are in. I know that sounds obvious. But obvious things are easily taken for granted. Immersion is a hugely subjective experience, an ever-shifting co-construction between our inner lives and external influences. Our moment-to-moment sense of the present is shaped by our understandings of time and the stories or

narratives we use to organize time. Immersion is a sensory experience. To be immersed is to be in sensory exchange with surroundings.

The light shifts again, and your ghost morphs, now seeming to take on the layered features of a different person. Are you turning into someone else?

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

I have been asked multiple times now if *I* am an immersive experience, and if this ride itself is an experience of being immersed in me. I would say we are all immersive experiences. We are all immersed in our own subjectivities and worldviews, each of which could be made into a dark ride that anyone could try out. To flip the question around a little, I would ask, *Why have I felt the need to create an experience of being immersed in myself?*

The car stops its sideways climb, there is a clunk, and you begin to move forward toward a mirror in which you are no longer yourself. The front of the vehicle smashes into a hard surface which splits in the middle – a set of wood doors that the little car parts as it speeds through them. The car slows and you find yourself in a large, dimly lit space made to look like a forest. Ugly tree trunks made of thick plaster-coated cardboard tubes rise above you, and looking for their tops you can see where the tubes hit the ceiling. Plastic pine fronds drape from the tubes, dusty and cobwebby. You pass a sign that says “Concow, CA: population ~~1,300~~ 400.” You hear gunshots and there are suddenly holes in the sign, which you move past before you can work out how that trick worked.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

My subjective experience has been one which has demanded a constant self-accounting. Questions like “Where are you from?”, “Where were you born?”, and “What

do you do?” all have complicated answers for me. To select the option of “male” on a form is to omit the 25 years of my life I was a butch lesbian, the embattled years I didn’t want to come out as trans, and the ways in which, even while passing as a man, my gender is something porous, transient, and undefined. It’s not that mine is a unique experience, rather that linear, binary, and categorized accounts of experience omit and collapse our storied selves.

Your car winds through the forest and past a little scene built with forced perspective to make it seem as if you are gazing down a gravel driveway onto a clearing where a two-story geodesic dome house stands. While you can tell it is a maquette, the effect does work, and even though you can tell the house is not actually far away, it feels far away.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

-tzintlán has self-identified as an autotheoretical theme park, but I would clarify that, while it has attractions which are about *my* unique experience, the park aspires to be a *site* for anyone’s autotheorizing to unfold. As a park containing multiple autotheories, *-tzintlán* has potential to be a site for an experience of collective immersions. I grew up immersed in Chicana Indigenous worldview, inherently hybrid and ever-shifting, and in this moment, I am coming to accept that this worldview does not sit comfortably. I find it exasperating and confusing in its apparent multiplicity. It is full of conflicting narratives, marked with cultural debates, constantly contested, rejecting of all borders and territorial limitations, even as it insists on being recognized as being close to land and nation. Newly diasporic in the grand scheme of Indigeneities, it is an identity that takes sooooo long to explain. It’s the kind of thing you need to make a ride about just to even begin to explain how the Chicana subject is constructed.

The forest thins and gives way onto a city, the trees replaced with the girthy supports of overpasses, and everything is grey.

Disembodied Migueltzinta Voice:

California as a place which has mapped me for what I am, is a place that requires and indulges in constant self-accounting, less a place as much as a methodology, a happening that is still happening. Sure, all places are made up of stratifications of time, parallel worlds, and hauntings. But California adds to its many layers its own self-mythologies, its stories it tells itself and others *about* itself.⁶ It tells these stories repeatedly, remaking itself through them. This is *different* from the narrative of American self-invention, because it does not pretend to begin from a blank slate, a pretense coded here as heterosexual white middle class male optimism, the prospector who only needs to “want something bad enough.” These self-mythologies are haunted, driven, and deformed by active colonial ensnarement, battles over territory, intense political upheavals, and mobilizations. California, the remix.

You are surrounded by cardboard cutouts of every famous place in California, but they look like they were cut into pieces then sewn back together in a strange way, a collage of the idea of a place. The volume rises slowly on background music you realize has been playing since you entered that forest. Listening to it, you realize it is every song ever written about California played at once. The narrator shouts over the music.

Disembodied Migueltzinta Voice:

⁶ Disneyland has a California-themed theme park, which I can't comment on because I have never been there – why would I? I have been there my whole life.

So, am I an immersive experience? I don't know. California is pretty freaking self-involved and self-aggrandizing, its narcissism something I very much see reflected in myself. I would say I am a California, and I have made this ride to self-account. Why the need to self-account? To feel real by making a simulation of myself. To feel reflected in the world. To explain my weird childhood. To explain where I'm from and what I am. To take you for a wild ride.

2.3 (In)Fidelities

You are now on a ride called a robotic arm ride. Unlike the little car on the rattling track, this ride is smooth and high-tech feeling. You are strapped into a padded seat at the end of a mechanical apparatus that can extend and withdraw. It feels as though you are at the end of a giant, articulated crane or one of those robots that assemble cars. There is no floor to your seat, and your legs dangle below you as you cruise along. It is not quite flying, but you could call it gliding. You relax into a sense of floating, as you move over a strange landscape made entirely out of collaged postcards of California. The robot arm rotates, moving you up and down gently, controlling your perspective of the scenes. You see the angles it forces you to see. A redwood forest out of postcards of redwood forests, a Golden Gate Bridge made of postcards of the Golden Gate Bridge, an alpine stonescape out of postcards that say, "Welcome to Yosemite," a rocky coast made entirely out of jagged postcards where postcards of the ocean shred themselves into papery foam with wave-like rhythm.

Disembodied Migueltzinta Voice:

In this section I want to address the ways in which reality, fidelity, and immersion come into play in the processes of theming and imaging Indigeneity, and how these in

turn shape expectations for Indigeneity. I would like to point out from the outset that *fidelity* here addresses multiple things. I am interested in fidelity in the sense of a technological capacity to replicate, distinctions between *high-fidelity* (hi-fi) and *low-fidelity* (lo-fi), as well as fidelity in terms of faithfulness to expectations of authenticity. This is all relevant to questions asked within the postcolonial theme park precisely because of contradictions existing between what is real and what is not. The theme park is a site of falsity and inauthenticity, even while it has a history of passing itself off as a provider of realness, a producer of *real memories based on real experiences*, as well as being a real site of real cultural production. Ironically, it does this by immersing you through extensive and unapologetic use of the fake.

You float backwards, the robot arm giving you one last look at the postcard California, and you feel yourself pass into a darkened area. You are turned and, facing forward, are met with an empty, purple horizon, as if a sun has just set there. Projections of tumbleweeds – they are also made of postcards – roll in the distance. You hear strains of harmonica, discordant, and twisted. You might recognize it as the opening notes for Ennio Morricone's *Man with a Harmonica* from Sergio Leone's 1968 spaghetti western, *Once Upon a Time in The West*. The song continues as the robotic arm twists you around and stops moving through space. You are now facing a strange dome-shaped device, a concave projection surface, which the robotic arm pushes you into until you sit fully inside the projection. Video is playing in the parabola, an endless, soundless montage of clips from 60s and 70s movies showing white actors in redface.

Disembodied Migueltzinta Voice:

There is a place in Bavaria called Pullman City, home of the white German “Indianers” who are a perfect example of how obsessions with fidelity can turn into a kind of mania. Drew Hayden Taylor, on assignment to investigate the origins of German fascination with all things Native, speaks with a Dr. Hartmut Lutz, who has coined an English term “that might catch some of the ironic ambiguity,”⁷ *Indianthusiasm*, which “really means an exaggerated, mainly a-historical, romantic infatuation with Aboriginal people.” To this, Taylor quips in the voiceover, “Indianthusiasm seems like a good word. They sure seem enthusiastic, for lack of a better word.” We see Taylor at a bar, and, as he lifts his beer to the camera, the focus shifts to show a hand-lettered old west themed sign that reads, “NO ALCOHOL FOR INDIANS.”

A chance encounter leads Taylor to see the “Authentic Area” (Authetikbereich), an area whose distinction from the rest of Pullman City seems to be that everything there believes itself to be authentic, even while all the white Germans living there, permanently, and temporarily, walk around in cultural mish-mashes of what they feel to be authentic North American Indigenous dress. The people in redface that Taylor encounters all express passion for their own imaginaries of Indigenous life, culture, and history. Karl May, the German novelist responsible for creating the character Winnetou in the late 1800s, which, according to the director of the Karl May Museum, is “Germany’s superman,” never even visited North America.⁸

Viewing it inside the parabola, the redface montage seems endless and all consuming.

Disembodied Migueltzinta Voice:

⁷ Taylor, *Searching for Winnetou*, 2018.

⁸ Ibid.

This is important to an understanding of the lineages of theming as they overlap with notions of immersion, and how they have constructed the systems of racist imaging and obsessive pursuit of authenticity that continue today. In other words, the “Indianers” believe themselves to be without question hi-fi Native Americans, even as Curve Lake Ojibwe Drew Hayden Taylor looks on with stunned incredulity at the repeated displays of shameless inaccuracy, projection, appropriation, and co-optation. Here we begin to understand the power of the themed narrative: Taylor goes on to find out that what the German imaginary is *specifically* obsessed with – German imaginaries including that of Adolf Hitler, who used the Indian stereotype to propagate ideas of the ideal warrior to his Nazi followers – is the idea of Indigenous peoples and nations as having adjacency to nature and being either free or in pursuit of freedom.

For a moment, the projection seems to flicker, but perhaps you imagined it.

Disembodied Migueltzinta Voice:

The pursuit of realism and the real in art and literature, and as we now see, themed environments, comes across to me as a primarily colonial, heteronormative imperative. We can even think of the colonized worldview as being one that clings desperately to its own uninterrupted high-fidelity, as any break in it could mean a questioning of the realness, authenticity, and technological supremacy it has fought so hard to maintain.

The image that surrounds you shudders and melts away mimicking the effect of film burning and disintegrating. The robotic arm begins to pull away but comes to a sudden stop. The music also stops. You sit in quiet for a second. Even the disembodied Migueltzinta voice seems to have stopped. There is the sound of an intercom coming on, somewhere around you, a gritty sound like someone picking up a phone and breathing into it.

Intercom Miguelztinta:

Hello rider! It seems we're having a little technical difficulty. Please sit tight and await further instructions.

You sit tight. Without any projection on it, the inside of the parabola is a creamy, inverted dome, the facets of the armature it sits on visible. You stare into this concaveness for what seems like a long time, occasionally swinging your legs pensively, letting your eyes go out of focus. You hallucinate little bubbles and tracers in the blankness. Suddenly, you feel yourself dropping and hear a hissing sound. Your controlled fall ends with a jarring but not painful thump and you feel your feet touch the ground. You are face to face with Miguelztinta, who, surprisingly, seems to be a real person, not a projection or a hologram or an animatronic. He is dressed in a dark blue coverall with a name tag over his right breast pocket, which says "Miguelztinta" in embroidered cursive.

Ride Operator Miguelztinta:

Sorry about this. This is rare. Seems I'm going to have to escort you from here, at least till the next section of the ride. Luckily, we do have a system for when this happens.

Now, I'm just going to...

Ride Operator Miguelztinta pulls a little hex key from his pocket and reaches across you to manually unlock the restraints that have held you in place. He pulls up the bar as you disentangle from the belts, and he holds out a hand for you to steady yourself as you stand up. You look around. The work lights are turned on now, and you can see you are in a large warehouse-like space. Ride Operator Miguelztinta gestures for you to follow him and, stepping away from the robot arm ride, you can get a good look at the impressive apparatus

that was moving you through space. It looks like a strange dinosaur, crumpled at the feet of the parabola's armature.

Ride Operator Miguelzinta:

They aren't all *that*, you know. Those robot arm rides? Sure, they're cool. But I like the old school rides best. Give me some lo-fi shit. Dependable. Like this. Ta-da!

The coverall-clad Miguelzinta has brought you to an office chair sitting in the middle of the warehouse. He puts both hands on the backrest.

Ride Operator Miguelzinta:

Go ahead! Have a seat!

You stare at him for a second. He smiles back. You wonder if you are being kidnapped. You sit in the chair. He begins pushing you forward at a comfortable speed, the chair's little wheels clickity-clacking over the occasional seam in the polished concrete floor below you. You grip the chair's seat under you with both hands, resting your feet on the wheel housings.

Ride Operator Miguelzinta:

Recently, I was deeply moved by the sense of immersion that came from looking at two giant weavings showing at the Phoenix Heard Museum's ongoing group exhibit, *Substance of Stars*. The largest of the weavings, which I remember being perhaps ten feet tall and fifteen feet wide, showed Diné beings doing their thing. I would not pretend to know the meaning encoded in the design, but the immensity of the weaving itself got across an idea of time and multidimensional space so realistically that it was hard not to have a profound response. I really felt like I could fall upwards into the weaving, and the whole experience of just *being* there felt so real and profoundly

immersive, even while the figures themselves were, you could say, abstractions depicted on a two-dimensional surface.

Your chair is pushed out of the warehouse room and onward through the guts of the ride's backstage, through a series of industrial hallways and storage areas. You pass a darkened room filled with – you shudder – a crowd of lifeless Miguelzinta animatronics frozen in various poses, dressed in various costumes. You pass a series of doors with many warning labels that say things like “danger: tangents” and “caution: early drafts”.

Ride Operator Miguelzinta:

That experience of the weaving came as an interesting contrast to another experience in the same exhibition, a wide and tall rectangular room with curved corners that displayed a 360-degree video projection. Four projectors and multiple speakers immersed the viewers in footage of Haudenosaunee, Yup'ik, Diné and O'odham territories, the territories from which the exhibition participants originate. The video was certainly beautiful and provided an interesting gesture of invitation into the specificity of the lands informing the various contributors' worldviews. But, for me personally, it was not nearly as striking as the immersive experience of standing in front of the giant weaving. This was also interesting because it made me think of a weaving as a screen capable of providing a sense of immersion, and, conversely, of the projector as a tool for weaving composite images. Weaving is certainly a kind of technology, but one does not usually think of it as a technology poised to provide immersive experience. Other than for the weaver, anyway, who, while weaving, is immersed in the temporality of the weaving process. Of course, if you wanted to argue that, because of this, time is inherently a dimension of weaving, you might say that

weaving lends itself naturally to having an immersive quality and operates in *four* dimensions.

You are pushed toward a set of swinging doors under a sign that reads “To Theming” in a no-nonsense industrial script. You think you’re going to be smashed into these doors like your little car smashed into the doors earlier, but at the last minute the ride operator spins you backwards and walks you both backwards through the doors, using his butt to open them. He continues talking casually, and you wonder if this was meant to be part of the ride the whole time. When he turns you around you find yourself in an immensely long tunnel at the end of which you can just make out what seems to be a red, glowing “Exit” sign.

Ride Operator Miguelzinta:

There’s something to be said for the power of abstraction in Indigenous practices of image and object-making across Turtle Island and other continents, whose capacity to encode ancient knowledges into complex yet simple designs and efficient, time-tested materials, has endured multiple eras of attempted extermination and erasure. What, then, is fidelity? Is it about a direct replication of what the human eye sees, a painstaking endeavor taken on by everyone from European landscape painters to contemporary digital photographers trying to recreate qualities of light with the aid of filters? Or is fidelity, to image, to experience, about something else? It is ironic that a Bierstadt painting might be considered a more sophisticated approach to imaging reality than, say, the other large-scale Diné weaving in *Substance of Stars* that shows Tsé’bit’a’i (Shiprock) rendered in simple lines and red, brown, white, and grey colour blocks. The weaving’s complexity in visual design, encoded spiritual and cultural meanings, weaving technique, and material composition, far out-sophisticate (out-fi)

the landscape painting that seeks little more than to replicate scenery inside a frame. The projection room mentioned before also offered footage of a starscape, the effect completed by blinking lights amongst the blacked-out rafters of the ceiling, but even this, to me, was both less immersive and less real than the large-scale Diné weavings. Ride operator Miguelztinta's forward push has slowed, and he is seemingly distracted by his own monologue. But you don't say anything or attempt to interrupt him, though you do continue staring at the exit sign which still seems very far away.

Ride Operator Miguelztinta:

I think the last time I'd had that unique feeling of being immersed in a big object like that was in 2010, when I last stood next to *La Piedra del Sol*, the iconic Aztec calendar stone in Mexico City. It was funny because I hadn't seen it in person since I was a kid. Besides being massive, the kind of object that swallows you up in its presence, there was something about standing before the "original" stone which I had seen replicated in tattoos, t-shirts, jewelry, sewn into regalia, and airbrushed onto lowriders. Like, if a spawn point existed for the ChicanaX imaginary, was this it?

2.4 Postcolonial Temporal Immersions

You are finally close enough to the exit sign to see that it doesn't say "exit," but says "Theming." You prepare to pass the threshold, but the operator stops and turns you around in your chair, and sits down on the ground in front of you, continuing to talk.

Ride Operator Miguelztinta:

Real quick, I want to bring up panoramas. Robert Barker, credited with the invention of the panorama, attempted to patent these early immersive proto-cinematic experiences

in the late 1700s as “Nature at a Glance.”⁹ The panorama would become increasingly popular as an immersive attraction into the 1800s, and go hand in hand with the advent of the universal expositions and world’s fairs whose purpose was to put on display both technological advances and the “wonders” of the colonies. The panorama, in some ways the earliest iteration of the dark ride, would invite in the viewer to be surrounded with a 360-degree painting depicting a historical event or a colonial expedition in an “exotic” land. Key to the panorama’s immersive effect were the real objects and two-dimensional cutouts placed at strategic distances between the viewer and the painting to lull the eye into a false sense of horizon. The universal expositions that featured these panoramas also featured human zoos, freak shows, *tableau vivants*, sexualized dance demonstrations of racialized bodies, and staged battles. But the force of the panorama’s immersive power held special sway over the voracious colonial imagination:

It was the illusionistic technologies of the panoramas, dioramas, and their variants, however, that transported the spectator to colonial situations with unrivaled sensory intensity. The circular canvases of the panoramas proper were numerous at the 1900 exposition, especially in the colonial precinct.

(Benjamin 2014, 115)

Lisa Reihana’s work, *In Pursuit of Venus* (2015), acknowledges the ways in which the European fixation on experiencing immersive replications and reproductions of the colonized territories impacted the imaging of Indigeneity. Reihana’s work, a digital video panorama, functions as a redressing of the original scenic wallpaper from the early 1800s that Reihana found in her research. The wallpaper depicted the voyages of

⁹ Benjamin, “Colonial Panoramania,” 115.

Captain Cook, and Reihana felt a need to address these imagings with an equally immersive and contemporary response. Reihana's wallpaper is digitally animated, combining illustration with live action actors staging interactions between Maori and Pacific Islander Indigenous communities and the colonial men they were contending with.

Ride Operator Miguelzinta pauses and looks at you. You stare at each other, and you resolve to say something, but he says:

Ride Operator Miguelzinta:

Face it! Sometimes you need the office chair. *-tzintlán's* own technologies which it employs to deliver immersive experience are charged with a necessary commitment to low fidelities and *infidelities*, infidelity to image, to history, and to reality. We can consider the colonial relationship to audio-visual technology as being obsessed with high-fidelity replications of reality which we are subjected to consensually and non-consensually, and in turn shape and reinforce colonial reality. This continual striving for high-fidelity replication is hugely unsustainable, as it must immediately make irrelevant prior technologies for reality-construction at the same time it must overwrite prior renderings of reality itself. The Disney Corporation's many parks, which have always situated themselves as being at the forefront of technological advances, have little patience for outmoded immersion and ride technologies, and are constantly investing in multimillion-dollar research and renovation efforts. And so, there is something wonderfully and importantly adulterous - perhaps polyamorous - in the queer delight of enjoying low-fidelity and antiquated themed immersive elements, a critical perverting of capitalist technology's monogamy with the

temporalities of infinite progress. Lo-fi (in)fidelities are critical to the success of *tzintlán's* resistance to the entrapments of the real/not real binary, and to heteroliner and chrononormative¹⁰ ideas of time. They resist the legacy of colonial obsessions with authenticity that inevitably end in cultural genocide.

Ride Operator Miguelzinta stands and moves you to the open doorway into "Theming."

Ride Operator Miguelzinta:

In the following section, we will examine theming and its roots, seeing how it interrelates with ideas of creating narrative out of immersive experiences, and building imaginaries, turning the imagined into places one can actually visit. Want me to spin you?

Not waiting for your response, you are spun. Your chair spins and spins. You think you will be sick. You attempt to throw yourself out of the chair, but something holds you in place, jerking you back to your seat.

¹⁰ See Elizabeth Freeman's "Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories" (2010) for an explanation of chrononormativity.

3. THEMING

3.1 Cruise Jungle

You look to find yourself outside, on a small tour boat with an awning. At the front of the boat, standing behind a ship's wheel – a small one – is Miguelzinta, this time in khaki clothes and a canvas captain's hat. The boat chugs gently down a river (though you note that the chugging sounds are recorded) and feel a rumble below deck you suspect is the grind of wheels on a track somewhere underwater.

Captain Solís:

Ahoy there! Good thing you got that life jacket on! You were about to go overboard there. Welcome to Cruise Jungle, an adventure into the wilds. We're just entering the park now. I hope you weren't trying to find the *Jungle Cruise* ride. We get that mistake a lot. People come aboard expecting a jungle theme, you know, animal animatronics: elephants playing in the water, hippos rearing their heads from the river, tigers pouncing out of ethnically ambiguous temples just vague enough for plausible deniability. No, you won't get any of that here. Here, we leave our oranges on the trees, if you know what I mean. Oh, you don't? Well see, when Disney's *Jungle Cruise* ride first went up, they couldn't afford to buy a bunch of adult trees. So, they used trees already on site, and also transplanted what they could get from all the highway construction sites around Los Angeles in the 50s. This meant a lot of the trees they used were orange trees. But Disney felt seeing oranges would break the immersive qualities of the exotic tropical theme, so employees were tasked with picking all the oranges off the trees before they opened to the public. Ironic, isn't it? That the theming of wilderness requires such control and maintenance.

A series of barks and howls comes from the right bank, and a pack of people in leather pup masks, wagging their tail butt plugs, runs into the water and begins doggy paddling toward the boat.

Captain Solís:

Not again! They're so horny. I told them to wait for the guests to come to *them*. The younger generations... I got this.

Captain Solís reaches into a leather pouch at his side and pulls out a handful of popper bottles.

Captain Solís:

Are you good boys? Here, have some treats!

He throws the popper bottles into the water, and the pups pant excitedly as they swim to bob and dive for the small brown bottles.

Captain Solís:

Well, that took care of that! Nope, no rhinos or giraffes here. Though you can definitely expect to see bears, otters, wolves, horsies, and, as you just saw, pups. If you really want to go on safari, you can always dock at Furry Flats. They have everything there. But that's kind of a whole thing you need to make time for. It's not my thing, but I'm glad it exists. Ah! Take these and look there!

Capitan Solís hands you a pair of binoculars and points to what look like pieces of trash on the banks of the river, lush with real vegetation. Through the binoculars you find what Captain Solís was pointing to: a handful of pages from a gay porn magazine strewn about and molding.

Capitan Solís:

Yes, when we first set about designing Cruise Jungle, we knew we would need to include forest porn. There's just something so beautiful about walking in nature and

finding gay pornography. That's how I saw my first gay porn! I just feel sorry for kids these days who get their first gay porn experience online. Frottage just doesn't image the same without a little water damage, in my opinion. But I digress!

The earliest amusement park boat rides were called old mill rides. Classically, these rides did not have any particular narrative that extended the length of the ride. The old mill ride – also known as the “tunnel of love” – was semi-intentionally a place of limited sight, where you could do all kinds of stuff in the dark, from brief sexual and/or romantic acts, to acts of vandalism. While the rides didn't have overarching themes, there were vignettes that riders would experience fleetingly. The vignettes were therefore designed to be instantly recognizable: scenes from fairy tales, a jungle scene, a significant historical moment, or the scene of a famous battle. The ride's designers made assumptions here about the narratives the rider would translate into a narrative experience. Later, on this ride, I'll go into details of theming and the axiological assumptions it often makes and the colonial imaginaries that feed much of theming...

Capitan Solís trails off distracted by a sound he seems to hear somewhere on the bank. You hear it too, a sexual grunting and moaning.

Capitan Solís:

Now, your ticket is punched for the thru-ride, not the Voyeur Voyage, nor Raw Rapids, nor to transfer onto our larger ship, a perfect replica of the USS MSM. So, unless you would like me to shore up to the “Dick Dock,” I would suggest staying on the boat.

There's a lot of hungry daddies in this cruising jungle. In fact, if it's all the same to you, I think I might get off myself – of the boat, I mean, and go... sex-scape into adventure!

You know, just to make sure they don't get too wild out there. You'll be fine! To tell you

the truth, this steering wheel isn't actually attached to anything. The boat is on a track, and you'll get where you need to without me. The narration is pre-recorded, too, so just sit back and relax!

Captain Solís strips off his shirt and dives headfirst into the river. He swims dramatically to shore and climbs onto the bank where he disappears into the bush. You sit in silence, and looking around, wondering if the narration will come on or not, you realize one of the popper bottles has fallen on the ground. You pick it up, uncap it, and take a sniff. At first you don't feel anything. And then it hits you. You feel loose and light, and for a brief moment every inch of your skin feels twice as sensitive, soft as your inner lip. You hear Miguelzinta's voice narrating once again, a little scratchy as if playing over a phonograph.

3.2 Theming as Colonial Strategy

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

Theming has always been caught up in the colonial imaginary, so much so that *postcolonial theme park* is, in many ways, an oxymoron. A postcolonial theme park sets itself up to be a contested territory. How does one theme postcoloniality? Colonization itself must be understood as a force of theming. Before the "age of discovery" had themed itself as such, the colonial imaginary was already reaching for fuel, even as politicians, clergy, and contractors were sitting at tables justifying the conquest of non-Christians, their lands, and resources. Each territory that would be colonized by Europeans was already being themed even before the first ship landed. We might even think of the first colonial agents as being the first "Imagineers"¹¹ who, through the

¹¹ The title Disney bestows upon its attraction designers and engineers.

travelogue, began imaging non-European life and lands to profit from the entertainment of Europeans made hungry by promises of a “New World.” Many colonial efforts struggled and failed – sometimes multiple times – to defeat the individual Indigenous nations they sought to conquer. Strategic projects had to be developed, often by European clergy members and military personnel, to make possible the political, economic, and cultural destabilization of these powerful Indigenous nations and societies. It is here that the calculated scrutiny of the Native Other begins to take shape in the form of, for example, the careful notes kept by Franciscans attempting to better understand Nahua societies and practices in order to convert them. Pete Sigal writes:

The Franciscans watched the Nahuas and the Maya very closely, working to intermix with the Indigenous populations, learning their languages and customs. The Franciscans found it extremely important to gaze closely upon Indigenous practices. While they were not unique in this regard, the Franciscans, more than the other religious orders and secular authorities, prioritized direct and close contact with the natives, including the intimate movements of bodies and flesh. This is why, in all their correspondence with the Spanish crown, the Franciscans insisted that they were the ones who worked most closely with the Indians: they needed to work closely with them in order to engage in an act of witnessing, a voyeurism that would provide them access to the Indigenous soul. (Sigal 2020, 140-141)

Those accounts provided to the crown would need to justify the sending of resources to so-called New Spain, and Sigal notes that those accounts exaggerated the “savagery” of Indigenous peoples, in order to justify further investment into the colonial project.¹² In essence, they were deliberately feeding a colonial imaginary that insisted upon a notion of the Other which theming still clings to, narrativizing the Indigenous body, and the land that is part of that body, as an entity to not only fear but also correct.

¹² Sigal, “Franciscan Voyeurism in Sixteenth-Century New Spain,” 143.

Besides its malicious intent, one must wonder at the bareness of an imagination that so perversely craves these imagings of the Other.

As you listen, you let your hand drape over the edge of the boat, into the water. The water is murky and warm, but the popper high – which is lasting a remarkably long time – makes it feel pleasant. You fantasize that you become water that dribbles through the cracks in the boat and joins the river’s flow.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

This “theming” strategy would be remarkably similar to the one employed by the United States Government in the 1940s when Walt Disney himself would be sent with a team of Imagineers as cultural ambassadors on a “goodwill tour” to a handful of Latin American and South American countries, in an effort to gain their favour and support in the war. The Imagineers would spend their travel time charming the pants off of foreign officials but also observing, drawing, and sketching what they saw in order to create a thinly veiled propaganda film which celebrated the supposed comradery between Cuba, Mexico, and the United States.¹³

Sudden movement breaks the reverie. You jerk our hand out of water just in time, as a school of used condoms makes its way toward where your fingers had been grazing the surface. Defeated, the condoms swim away, driven by the propeller-like movements of their tied-off ends.

3.3 Re-Themings

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

¹³ Thomas, *Walt & El Grupo*, 2009.

Disneyland comes up a lot in this work for a few reasons. Firstly, Disneyland is very recognizable as a theme park which has from its initial conception functioned from a desire to replicate, recreate, compliment, and shape the idea of America as a cultural monolith and nation. Secondly, Disneyland figures strongly in my own imaginary having grown up in a Chicax context in both California and Mexico. There exists an urban myth that if you are a Mexican national trying to get a visa to visit the US, all you need to do is say you are wanting to visit Disneyland. My mother has stories about dreaming of going to Disneyland – she grew up a few hours inland from Los Angeles – and feeling guilty because in those dreams she was there alone, without her family. A running joke from perspectives outside of the United States looking in, is that America itself *is* Disneyland, a space that enjoys its happiest-place-on-earth-ness at the expense of and with ambivalence toward the realities of the rest of the world. The map becomes the territory, or, in this case, the nation becomes the park. As Jean Baudrillard puts it:

[...] Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, which is Disneyland (just as prisons are there to conceal the fact that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, which is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.

(Baudrillard 1981, 12-13)

If coloniality is theming, and all colonial states are fake, then are we all characters within it, forbidden from taking our costumes off?

Delving into Walt Disney Studios and Disneyland's histories reveals layer upon layer of calculated cultural/corporate construction, from Disney's pre-opening reports – televised segments that hyped the park's opening, giving teasers of what guests could

expect – to the plans for utopic cities of the future that would eventually become Epcot in Florida.¹⁴

I have also looked to Disneyland and its attending enterprises to think about the trajectory of the politics and economics of themed entertainment. In the 90s, when the Disney cruises began, you can see a sudden shift in Disney’s advertising which began targeting the white middle class nuclear family in a particular 90s, Bill Clinton era kind of way.¹⁵ But now things are shifting again, and the Disney parks – at least the American ones – are updating insensitive attraction elements, such as the scene of a woman being auctioned by pirates on *Pirates of the Caribbean*. *Splash Mountain*, which has already seen some edits to distance itself from the racist “southern pride” film it’s based on, *Song of the South*, has been closed in order to be rethemed after *The Princess and the Frog*, featuring Tiana, Disney’s first Black princess. While such moves toward inclusivity and redress are important and not without positive impact, like in criticism of the Truth and Reconciliation project in Canada, there is always the question of territory: is Disneyland, as a producer of place, prepared to surrender ideological and economic power as it relates to that same place-making?

3.4 Diminutive Counteracts

Disembodied Migueltzinta Voice:

¹⁴ Iwerks, *The Imagineering Story*, 2019.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Theming, in all its colonial desirousness, has over the decades been consumed by the queer gaze, a site of campy revelling with huge potential for a drag aesthetics of *place*. In the era of hipster irony, drag aesthetics, and a new hunger for kitsch, there is something compelling about lo-fi artifacts of fake-ness. For better or for worse, the kitschiness of outdated theming attracts the gays like flies to roadkill, and we feast upon it with gusto, incredulity, and a sense of delighted awe. This is a kind of superpower which, in my own experience, has transformed what would otherwise be a demeaning experience into one of wonder and delight, a necessary deployment of *cute* to disarm things which are harmfully racist, homophobic, and so on. Theming born of the colonial imaginary is rife with movements toward the cute-ification of the Other, and goes hand in hand with vilification and exotification as aestheticizing forces. Sianne Ngai defines cuteness as “an aestheticization of powerlessness” whose “soft contours suggest pliancy or responsiveness to the will of others,”¹⁶ a definition which situates the cute object as both subject of and axis for important power relations in a discussion of theming and theme park design. An example of the potential for the subversion of cute-ification: I might see a pancho statue, the iconic racist depiction of a Mexican “peasant” slumped below a cactus, as part of someone’s desert-themed yard. I can either feel demeaned by this or I can say, *My goodness, this person must be clueless or a hater, how quaint!* as a diminutive counter-act. It is no longer the caricature of the “Mexican” which is cute or aesthetic, it is the one who has so themed who is *cute*. - *tzintlán*, in its counter-occupation of the replica of Fort Whoop-Up, functions similarly. It approaches the fake fort, *the Fauxort*, as a cutely pathetic failure at interpreting

¹⁶ Ngai, “Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting,” 64.

place, land, and history, and, via Dr. Solís's pre-opening reports, which appropriate Walt Disney's authorial voice, proclaims the building as a boring structure in desperate need of updating.

Colonial cute-ifications go hand in hand with the miniaturizing effects that theming often has upon peoples, places, and events. In the 1800s, it would seem that every colonial habit of miniaturization had a life-sized counterpart: cabinets of curiosities were miniaturizations of dime museums and freak shows, miniature dioramas showed scenes of plantations and genocides, and wallpaper flattened natural resources actively being extracted into an aesthetic experience for a noble person's bedroom.

4. IMAGINARIES

You sit up from where you have been lying on the bottom of the boat. The land around you has changed dramatically. Cut banks go up on either side of you, a good fifteen feet into the air. Swallows fly in and out of mud nests embedded in the clay, their reflections mirrored in the river's smooth surface. Migueltzinta's voice still speaks to you through phonograph muffledness.

4.1 Branding the Wild West

Disembodied Migueltzinta Voice:

The permission the colonial imagination gives itself to self-entertain, self-assert, and self-aggrandize – at the expense of truth, reality, and the colonial subject's personhood – is remarkable. Overlapping with the histories of the panorama, the universal exposition (world's fair), and the dime museum, is that of the wild west show.

According to their own marketing mythology, wild west shows supposedly re-enact true events, true cultures, true personages, and true places. These shows still exist in theme parks and historical institutions, still reifying colonial might, rewriting and overwriting historical nuances, and positioning history through the white settler gaze of the wild west imaginary. The Calgary Stampede toes the line between a large-scale rodeo event and an attempt at historical re-enactment. In Germany, multiple venues uncritically celebrate the wild west imaginary with flagrant displays of redface and cultural appropriation.

Linda Scarangella McNenly breaks down the core elements of the wild west show, which we can see paralleled in the other lineages of theming discussed:

Typically a two- to three-hour extravaganza, Wild West shows consisted of a series of spectacular acts that fall into roughly seven major categories:

Grand entry: introductions of the heroes (and enemies) of the West, who rowdily rode in on horseback.

Cowboy pastimes: demonstrations of frontier and cowboy skills of horsemanship and marksmanship, such as trick shooting, fancy riding, lassoing, and racing.

Indian vignettes: reenactments of Indian ceremonies and life, such as a thrilling buffalo hunt or “savage” war dance.

Historical reenactments: reenactments of significant battles or famous attacks, such as the Battle of Little Bighorn or the attack on the Deadwood stagecoach; at the very least, an attack on an emigrant train or settler’s cabin.

Military displays: military drills or shooting, often including representatives of U.S. Army units demonstrating their techniques and sometimes representatives from other countries such as Britain or Japan or Devlin’s Zouaves.

Ethnic Others: other international acts that exhibited the diversity of the “races,” such as Russian Cossacks or Bedouin bandits.

Circus acts: variety acts such as dancing elephants and Arabian acrobats.

(McNenly 2012, 23-24)

As Rebecca Solnit points out in her essay *The Postmodern Old West, or the Precession of Cowboys and Indians*, the imaginary of the wild west represents a time and place that

never did exist.¹⁷ Yes, it pulls from real times, places and peoples, but it, as it is replicated in phenomena such as wild west shows past and present, has never been a single place or period one could hop into a time machine and travel to. We can tie this back to our question of coloniality itself as being a theme park, a simulation made of synthetic nations, built on acts of nefarious territorialization.

The title of this thesis work, *Western Attraction*, is borrowed from a conceptual plan for a theme park that showed an allotted space for a “western attraction.” I had to laugh at the genericness of this, marveling at how an imaginary can become so abstracted from any specific time and place that it becomes a territorializing force of its own.

It is a given that wild west shows were culturally exploitative of Indigenous, Black, and Mexican performers, even while becoming a performer was sometimes the most financially viable option: as performer, for example, one could legally leave a reserve. Overtime, wild west shows have produced and reinforced notions of the wild west as a conquerable territory, and its First Peoples and enslaved peoples as being available for and most suited to being exploited. Wild west shows, after all, miniaturize history – battles, movements, relationships – into a play that lasts at most a few hours. Where is the wild west show that tells the story of, for example, how the RCMP failed to defeat the Blackfoot, leading to the slaughter of the buffalo and consequent efforts to starve, addict, disease, and otherwise destabilize the Blackfoot Confederacy, a story which began 200 years ago and continues today?

¹⁷ Solnit, “The Postmodern Old West, or The Precession of Cowboys and Indians,” 22-39.

What is truly wild about the wild west show is that there was a kind of desperation underlying its spectacle, something that may not be fully evident until the wild west show is recontextualized in the colonial-political stage of the late 1800s, when Buffalo Bill Cody would create a new version of his show fit for touring Europe. Alessandra Magrin argues that Cody's tour of Italy, the process of presenting a mythology of America that would impress Italians, was the moment when the wild west solidified within the colonial imaginary.

The European version of Cody's Wild West was a great improvement on his earlier frontier melodramas and was crafted to fulfil the much lamented necessity of a 'unique' American performance (Warren 2005: 294). Cody's chief effort, therefore, was to present Europeans with a show about America's recent past which could compete with, and hopefully outdo, their own cultural performances, so as to confirm America's cultural position on a worldwide scale.

(Magrin 2017, 4)

The wild west show had an agenda: to brand America. It was intended to impress Europeans with the idea of American colonial territories as having a unique, recognizable, exciting, even sexy "identity," as being clearly imageable. Further, the wild west show embodied a desperate need to demonstrate, through simulation of an invented territory, that "The West" was a site of action-packed chaos *over which the white settler ultimately had control* via his military skills, outdoorsmanship, and demonstrated mastery over Indigenous life.

Wild west themed rides such as mine trains, sawmill or log rides, steamboat and jungle rides all bear in common the fetishization of discovery narratives, resource extraction, and encounters with the Other which may necessitate heroic acts of violence. These attractions create space for colonial utopias wherein this particular hunger-desire can be satisfied. Western attractions, particularly resource extraction themed rides,

purport to embody the spirit of “exploration,” but I would say what they embody is a desperation to prove something, and a desperation to possess knowledge and resources.

The same fixation on hi-fi immersive experience that could be said to exist in both *panoromania* and *Indianthusiasm* is evident in the shows of Coney Island’s amusement parks in the early 1900s, which went beyond the staging of wild west shows. The spectacles staged at Coney Island’s multiple competing parks, enacted everything from floods and fires to battles. The shows often employed real veterans and set real buildings ablaze.¹⁸ The productions were dangerous, expensive, and outrageously difficult to mount.

4.2 Western Attractions

Disembodied Migueltzinta Voice:

Curiously, most colonial mythologies around labour in the wild west are hugely homoerotic and homosocial, and so the western attractions are, by proxy, often rich with homosocial displays and often thinly veiled homoeroticism. One stunning example is found on my favourite mine train ride in Knotts Berry Farm, a theme park just down the street from Disneyland. The *Calico Mine Ride* is a miniature train that winds through a faux mountain, passing through mine shafts, gold veins, ornate caverns, encountering animatronic animals and miners. Recently, a recorded voiceover replaced the often-unintelligible live narration from train “conductors.” This narration announces the name of the main mining area as “The Glory Hole,” calling it the “site of

¹⁸ Burns, *Coney Island*, 1991.

one of the richest gold strikes in all of recorded history”¹⁹ but giving absolutely no explanation as to why it’s called “The Glory Hole.” What the rider sees is a large cavern full of animatronic bearded men in old-timey western workwear – long johns, overalls, cowboy hats, suspenders, canvas shirts – moaning, shouting, and grunting as they pick at glittering walls, pulling reluctant donkeys and cranking on dubious looking mining equipment.

The sudden wail of a train whistle makes your skin prickle with its loudness. You are now in a small box, a train car, the second from the front. Pulling your car, and the three empty ones behind you, is a small steam engine. There is a man in a cowboy hat in the engine car, smiling, one hand resting on a little lever pushed forward, the other tugging on a rope above his head that makes a recording of a train whistle sound. He turns his head toward you and you can see he has a small microphone near his mouth.

Thirstin West:

Howdy folks! It’s me, your train conductor, Thirstin West. Bet you didn’t expect to see me here. Well, I didn’t expect to see you here either! See, I’m not actually a train conductor – I just *stole* this here train. Yeah, the amateur porn business just didn’t work out so good for me. Too many real cowboys out there making good spank bank content these days. Then Pornhub deleted my videos – but you didn’t get on this train to hear my sob story.

Thirstin West laughs and makes the train go faster. Heroic music like from a western film plays loudly. You are tearing through a maze of hoodoos made of mounded plaster and painted poorly in red and light brown gradients. The train whistles again and you wonder that

¹⁹ Knotts Berry Farms. <https://www.knotts.com/rides-experiences/calico-mine-ride>

the tiny wheels do not fly off the tiny track. You see ahead a junction in the tracks. A sign points straight ahead that reads *Train Ride* while another sign pointing right says *Train Wreck*.

Thirstin West:

Train wreck? Well, that's me alright!

He pulls out a plastic gun and mimes shooting out his window at the lever outside that is meant to change the tracks. You hear a recorded gunshot and ping of metal, and the lever moves. The train jerks to the left, deviating from its trajectory. Thirstin West chuckles as the train trundles over a rickety trestle bridge. You hear the sound of rushing, crashing, thundering water that promises a giant waterfall but when you lean over to look you just see a series of hanging long, thin foil streamers being blown lightly by a fan. It looks so fake. The train finishes crossing the bridge and enters a tunnel in the wall, under a relief of mountains capped with fake snow. It is dark but for sets of glowing eyes and you hear some bat noises, the sound of fluttering wings. The train leaves the tunnel and you are blinded by the sun, and when your eyes adjust you realize you are surrounded by endless desert, lush with cacti, creosote, and ocotillo.

Thirstin West:

What is a desert to you? What do you think of when you hear the word desert? I think to lots of folks the desert is a place of defamil-ar-i-zation. But the desert isn't exotic to everyone. I grew up around the deserts of Souther California and the woods of Norther California. My own grandfather was from Baja California, home to this thing here. I grew up in the West and I feel I am of the West, which is why I got Wild West tatted on my knuckles, not that you can see that right now in this dark. But what does that mean?

If I think of myself as being of the West and the West is just an imaginary, just a construct, then am I real? How can we be from a place that doesn't exist? Easily, I guess. Afterall, we're surrounded by made up countries. We pay taxes to 'em and we go to war for 'em and we sing their made-up anthems. So, I guess yeah you can be from places that don't exist. Easy.

Thirstin West pulls hard on the train whistle which blasts a sonic hole in the air. The track curves and passes a large wooden sign that reads, "Theme Parks & Territory" in a hand painted, wild-west-y font.

5. THEME PARKS & TERRITORY

5.1 Colonial Utopias & Their Inverse Spaces

Thirstin West pulls out a map of all existence and smooths it against the train floor with grubby hands. He puts on a pair of reading glasses. When he speaks, his tone is different, now sounding like the Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice narrations.

Thirstin West:

It's worth considering other sites where colonial imaginaries have been allowed to shape site into strange theme parks of hungry colonial impulse. These include Fordlandia, Henry Ford's corporate city dedicated to rubber production,²⁰ Pullman City, the present day German wild west theme park rife with Indian caricatures,²¹ the prairie artist camps that were set up for the purpose of settler artists to come and paint Blackfoot peoples, and even "Jefferson State," an area in the far north-eastern corner of California, a few counties over from where I grew up, whose heavily armed right-wing militias have threatened to succeed on multiple occasions.

When colonial utopia is created, a dystopia, its inverse space, forms elsewhere. As part of its core functioning, the colonial project must create a reserve, a ghetto, a plantation, a residential school, a factory, a mission, a waste site, a fort, and a prison for every gated neighborhood, country club, farmers market, national park, parking structure, mall, playground, and rainbow sidewalk it creates. It can't be overlooked that Disneyland is located within the same metropolis which saw three separate fatal

²⁰ To the point of ill-fated theming, the Indigenous laborers are said to have revolted because the company cafeteria insisted on serving them American food – though we can presume there were probably many other factors that seeded the revolt.

²¹ Taylor, *Searching for Winnetou*, 2018.

shootings by police in the first week of 2023 alone. A parallel history which I have been thinking a great deal about recently is that of Operation Wetback, a massive deportation initiative targeting Mexican immigrants, which happened to be underway in 1955, the same year Disneyland opened. Operation Wetback purportedly targeted immigrants who were undocumented, but it must be pointed out that the Bracero Program²² had only just ended. Many of those “illegal” immigrants had arrived in the US legally, answering the country’s urgent need for a cheap labor force during World War 2 as well as the Korean War. And so, while Disneyland was celebrating its utopic birthday, an inverse space was being created by the hundreds of thousands of Mexicans who were being uprooted and taken out of the United States.²³

In her book on the ways in which American filming of the Mexican Revolution imaged Mexicans within the American imaginary, Margarita de Orellana points to a similar inversion/projection, positioning Mexico as “the oppositional negative of the clear image that the American nation has of itself.”²⁴

The many turbulent fictions that Americans invented to represent what was happening in Mexico can be summed up as the American imagination of the Other. This space has a geographical location: the border region between the United States and Mexico, that offers Americans a constant temptation to impose their moral principles. Like the Wild West of the previous century, this imaginary space also has its inhabitants: ‘greasers’, Indians, bandits and revolutionaries. (de Orellana 2009, 109)

To *-tzintlán*, this notion of the inverse space is of great importance, and it is the story of that inverse site that *-tzintlán* wishes to make ‘come on the top.’

²² This is the program which brought my grandfather and eventually his family to the United States as a farm worker.

²³ I believe my grandfather’s younger brother was taken in one of these raids, as it was common – and still is – for families to be pulled apart because some are documented and others are not. He would have been taken away in a *perrera* (dog kennel) which was a truck with a cage on the back that would parade the streets after arrests.

²⁴ de Orellana, “Filming Pancho: How Hollywood Shaped the Mexican Revolution,” 109.

5.2 Aztlán

Thirstin West pulls on the train's horn again and you look around to see that the land has changed again. The landscape passing the train still looks desert-y but it is now a cartoon and a codex that you move through, its fine lines painted with natural inks on hand made parchment.

Thirstin West:

Besides Disneyland, *-tzintlán* has another important parallel place, Aztlán. It's worth thinking complexly about how Aztlán as an imagined place has functioned in the Indigenous, colonial, and postcolonial imaginaries. Aztlán (Place of Egrets) was first told of in Aztec stories of origin and migration. There have been attempts to locate places that might be this Aztlán, but more interesting to a paralleling of *-tzintlán* is the way in which Spaniards clung to and disseminated the idea of Aztlán as a "promised land" or "paradise" found in the north. These Edenic European notions would transpose over the eventual construction of Mexico's national imaginary as a supposed postcolonial nation, seen in the work of literary builders of the national imaginary such as José Vasconcelos. For, in the process of making itself a nation which rejected European rule, Mexico became a state force which sought – and still seeks – to erase the territorial, economic, and cultural sovereignty of existing Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous nations within the territories that had been so-called New Spain. The ideal Mexican of the new national imaginary was not an Indigenous person, but rather a *Mestizo/a*, positioned as being superior to the *Indio/a* for having European blood. Note that the narrative of this ideal hybrid did *not* encompass African-diasporic roots, even

though by the time of Mexico's independence, there were, and are still, wide-spread, and well-established Afro-Indigenous communities.

This pattern of territorialization would repeat. In the early decades of what would become the Chicano Movement, writers Rudolfo Anaya, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, and the poet Alurista, all addressed Aztlán as the specific areas that Mexico had ceded to the United States as part of the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848. In 1969, Alurista would pen a powerful manifesto asserting these territories as Indigenous lands but in the same gesture, muddying notions of who *exactly* is Indigenous to this swath of continent that encompasses hundreds of specific First Nation communities, cultures, economies, and language groups. Alurista's manifesto, *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (Spiritual Plan of Aztlán) was responding to several decades of political urgency amongst Mexican immigrant communities. Non-existent labour rights, lynchings, mass deportations, veterans' rights, police brutality, lack of access to education, and poverty in the barrio were among the many issues that necessitated a call to a 'nationalist' unification under the flag of Aztlán.²⁵

The Chicano Movement would see a mass-mobilization at the political level but also at a cultural level, and my own parents would be involved in this move toward the rejection of Mexican-Catholic and Mexican-Baptist worldviews in exchange for one rooted in *both* pre-Hispanic and post-Hispanic Indigenous practices. Their community encompassed a mix of Mexican immigrants, second generation Chicanos, Native people from the California areas, and from other Indigenous communities within the so-called United States, who together began making zines, visual art, writing multilingual songs

²⁵ Alurista, "El plan espiritual de Aztlan," 1969.

and poetry, holding ceremonies and gatherings, giving community talks, and providing aid to those in need. The result was a serious contact-zone, and looking back at the time when I would have been an infant, I wonder if my parents weren't simply pretendians reaching for what wasn't theirs, with nowhere to call home. Looking through an issue of *Calmeccac*, the zine my parents helped found, I found some suspect writings from a "Native elder" who, upon further investigation, would turn out to be linked to a sketchy non-Native nom-de-plume, a nom-de-non-Native if you will. So, it is understandable why a common criticism is that Chicax people are essentially all pretendians, understandable when considering, for example, the economic and political powers of Chicax people in San Francisco when compared to that of the Ohlone and Maidu bands currently active in the same area.

Why is this important to *-tzintlán*? Because I do not want to replicate these same acts of erasure. My own privilege, and repeated access to resources that would never have been offered to others, has brought me to a place where I feel I have a lot of power to say, do, and create what I like, a power I find overwhelming, dangerous, and embarrassing. I want the park to be an act of holding a portal open to empower the unseen and unheard. In a sense, how might the Chicax imaginary I was raised within, be *actually* in service to the many individual Indigenous nations that the Chicax, or more specifically *my* Chicax experience, unfolds in?

I will add that to the credit of the coalition work between the many movements that informed my parents' activism, and credit to my parents themselves,²⁶ Chicanismo as a

²⁶ During its key decades, the Chicano Movement was informed by, rubbed elbows with, and debated with movements such as the Black Power, American Indian, feminist and AIDs movements and activism.

self-asserted Indigenous identity, has endured as a powerful option to what is otherwise a racial group endlessly targeted by Evangelicals. The conservative “Hispanic” voting block is largely composed of Evangelicals, and if it hadn’t been for the intersectional frenzy – which would eventually discourage my parents enough to leave Los Angeles and move to the woods on traditional Konkow Maidu territory in the late 80s – Chicanx populations would probably be significantly more conservative and Christian today. I was surprised recently to find that family-friends in Mexico whose families had been practicing Mazatecos since time immemorial, were newly praising Jehovah on Facebook. Along with its problematics, Chicanismo does continue to offer potentials for decolonial firepower.

I say often that culture is a curse. Why would anyone want more of it? It is the thing you do not ask for, that you cannot hide from. It will always call to you in the end, for better or for worse. In diving into this work, I say that Aztlán has called for my extradition from Blackfoot Territory, and I have spent the last few years thinking deeply about what that means for me, and whether to return willingly or not. If Aztlán has called for my extradition, where do I return to? If Aztlán is a territory carried in the body, where is it for me? I am real – I think I am – and so must Aztlán also be real? If I am Chicanx is Aztlán wherever I am? Does this erase the Blackfoot Territory around me? Should the Blackfoot Confederacy consider deporting me back to Aztlán? Does Aztlán’s realness threaten the realness of the other Indigenous nations around me? And why am I using this land-policing language used by the state?

5.3 States of Nepantla & Parallel Realities

If this paper were not a ride, but a simulation of a ride, say, an on-ride video of a ride, here the video would pause. A pause is necessary here while I provide some deeper discussion of reality and parareality. I recognize this could be more elegantly handled, and that the ride, in its infinite capacity for story and reality creation could eject you at any moment into meta pararealities which allow the rider to be in multiple places at once. But for the scope of this paper we will use a simple pause. The ride will resume in a few sections.

To escape territorial entrapments, we have to slip between them. Not unlike Black *fugitivities*²⁷ and queer *elsewhere*,²⁸ Indigenous and Black futurities seek out ephemeral, in-between, layered, un surveilled, hybrid, time-travelling, and liminal spaces out of necessity. The Othered body becomes adept at navigating the in-between early in life, accustomed to navigating the multiple realities it shares with distinct worldviews, communities, shared truths and so on. Split/dual/parallel realities are crucial to a discussion of theme parks, which essentially are escapes into parallel realities.

For all my upbringing and education, it was the films *Black Panther* (2018) and *Wakanda Forever* (2022) which cemented for me an important notion in Afro/Indigenous futurities. Ryan Coogler's films suggest that rather than a bold new future to which we are aspiring – a colonial habit of futurity which imagines itself to be expanding infinitely where knowledge/technology only improves in the future while past knowledge/technology becomes obsolete, valueless – there already exists and has always existed an alternate reality, one which the Afro/Indigenous body has always had access to. I found myself saying in a class recently that those who do not understand the importance of the LandBack movement are

²⁷ Dillon, "Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State," 2018.

²⁸ Muñoz, "Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity," 2009.

living in an alternate reality. This, for me, is the only way to address and live day to day in a shared world with those who cannot fully acknowledge colonial histories, pasts, presents, and so on. There are those who can move between realities, who have always done so out of necessity, and there are those who cannot even acknowledge that theirs is not the only reality. To be clear, I am not suggesting that there are actual parallel universes – which would go beyond the scope of this work – I’m saying that the way power structures (i.e. white privilege, coloniality, capitalism, heteronormativity) function makes it so that our lived realities are dramatically segregated even as we cohabitate in the same worlds. The realization of these rifts is at once unsurprising and heartbreaking, particularly when one encounters dissonant realities with a loved one. I have enjoyed a close relationship with my grandmother, yet the impasse of my being trans remains a painful and unacknowledged rift between us, and I don’t doubt she will die without somehow signaling she has noticed I transitioned. My reality of being trans has all these years pressed back on her reality – one she has continually exerted – wherein I’m a woman.

Besides her landmark work which addressed the queer Mestiza as denizen of Aztlán’s borderlands,²⁹ Chicana writer and scholar Gloria E. Anzaldúa went on to write extensively on the idea of nepantla as both a place and a state of being. “Nepantla” means *between* in Nahuatl, and Anzaldúa frames this as a liminal space that one might travel to, seek out or simply find themselves in:

En este lugar entre medio, nepantla, two or more forces clash and are held teetering on the verge of chaos, a state of entreguerras. These tensions between extremes create cracks or tears in the membrane surrounding, protecting, and containing the different cultures and their perspectives. Nepantla is the place where at once we are detached (separated) and attached (connected) to each of our several cultures. Here the watcher on the bridge (nepantla) can "see through" the larger symbolic process that's trying to become conscious through a particular

²⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, 1987.

life situation or event. Nepantla is the midway point between the conscious and the unconscious, the place where transformations are enacted. Nepantla is a place where we can accept contradiction and paradox.

(Anzaldúa 2015, 56)

While Anzaldúa presents nepantla from a cultural standpoint, it is quickly obvious that nepantla's *between* is more than just about cultural identity at a political level. It is an ontological, phenomenological, cosmological, and metaphysical assertion, puzzling together an understanding how one's worldview and embodied experience of reality fundamentally affects one's sphere of existence, relationship to time, and interpretation of meaning. This is a powerful concept to bring into a discussion of a theme park that seeks in part to shift our acceptance of a postcolonial reality, and envision things like what LandBack looks like now, has looked like, and will look like into the future. The postcolonial theme park, unlike Disneyland, is not an identitarian theme park which hopes to naturalize you as a model citizen and consumer. It is both a critique of the theme park and its colonial history, as well as a move toward a decolonized experience of reality, which hopes to create the parallel realities necessary to make this move.

If reality is only a description of a particular world, when a shift of awareness happens we must create a new description of what is perceived - in other words, create a new reality. When we have access to this type of expanded perceptive universe, our viewpoint, identity, and character change, and we can no longer view the world as a constant. (...) We must empower the imagination to blur and transcend customary frameworks and conceptual categories reinforced by language and consensual reality. To explore the "cracks between the worlds" (rendijas, rents in the world), we must see through the holes in reality ("seeing" is another type of perception).

(Anzaldúa 2015, 45)

5.4 Anti-Theming & Alt-Theme Parks

While I'm not totally sure what an "anti-theme" is, I did want to address some alternatives to the uncritical corporate theme park which this project has spent so much time interrogating.

These examples are ones that have had a lot of influence over *-tzintlán*, and it is thanks to them that every time I thought my idea would never take shape, I was able to see otherwise. *Killjoy's Kastle* was a project conjured up by artists Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, initially inspired – or perhaps instigated by - the phenomena of Christian hell houses.³⁰ The collaborative project invited queer and feminist artists, scholars, and activists to create and stage performances and installations under one spooky roof. A venture deep into the embattled satire-but-also-not-satire affect-scape of self-reflective feminist art, dancing at the edges of its 2nd and 3rd waves, *Killjoy's Kastle's* joke was in essence, 'You're calling me a feminist killjoy, but look! I know how to have fun!' The project emphasized the importance of its own process, with all the discursive elements that surrounded the attraction's design, build, and presentation being held as an immensely important piece of the experience as a whole. As Helena Reckitt puts it: "A mode of embodied encounter that courts humour and surprise, pleasure and pain, *Killjoy's Kastle* stimulated new forms of collective knowledge and visibility."³¹

There is something so powerful about the narrative authority that *Killjoy's Kastle* assumed, appropriating and 'perverting' the moral authoritarianism of Christianity and turning the tables on the hell houses' attempts to 'convert' people through fearmongering.³² This required an understanding of the same power of embodied narratives that I identify in dark rides and other immersive experiences, something which arguably queer feminists are often experts on.

The learning that occurred in *Killjoy's Kastle* was a thoroughly haptic kind. Travelling through a series of immersive, surprising, sometimes scary, and often humorous labyrinths and installations, visitors' senses of touch and smell, sound and taste were

³⁰ King, "Playing Demented Women's Studies Professor Tour Guide, or Performing Monstrosity in Killjoy's Kastle," 86.

³¹ Reckitt, "Inside Job: Learning, Collaboration, and Queer-Feminist Contagion in Killjoy's Kastle," 75.

³² *Ibid*, 60.

provoked. They entered through a wooden vagina dentata/glory hole rainbow with papier-mâché fangs that rested below a large sign that read “Lesbian Rule.” Visitors then walked, stooped, and crawled through fabric covered tunnel and rooms, each with its own spooky soundtrack. (Reckitt 2019, 66)

-tzintlán similarly is interested in the collaborative conversations, creative projects, and potentials for site specificity, and I would say it shares the same understanding of spatial and somatic considerations as well as a similar desire to co-construct and deconstruct space. While both projects are interjectionally engaged, I would say that *-tzintlán* does for the notions of postcolonialism and decolonization precisely what *Killjoy's Kastle* does for feminism and queer theory: it takes on an abstraction (a theoretical category, an academic field, a political movement), attempts to remove it from its gilded cage, and makes it a corporeal experience that helps you *feel it* beyond its institutional bounds.

Within the last decade, art theme park Meow Wolf has gone from having a single funky location in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to four busy locations across the United States. I visited their Denver location, Convergence Station, in Summer of 2022, welcoming the air conditioned space amid soaring outdoor temperatures. It was mind-blowing to experience an immersive theme park that was so perfectly targeted toward me as a consumer. Convergence Station is a cross between an art gallery and a theme park, hallucinogenic, highly tactile, and interactive. I feel what makes Convergence Station a theme park and not something more freeform, is the metanarrative that drives it: a story unfolds as you move through the individual spaces, telling of a Black graduate student in the sciences whose research into parallel realities is ridiculed. She quits her program and becomes a bus driver. An accident happens on one of her routes which opens a portal into other realities, entwining her story with those of parallel selves. This, at least, is how I understood the story from the bits and pieces of narratives I gathered along the way. Using a number of digital and IRL narrative

clue-leaving, a park guest uncovers bits of story in unique orders and at the pace in which they search.

Walking into each richly detailed environment, I felt truly sucked into the idea that I was in a different world. Unlike *Killjoy's Kastle*, Meow Wolf is high gloss and high production. The company contracts artists to design and build the different rooms and environments. It is simultaneously retro and futuristic, multicultural, and queer in ethos and aesthetic. For me, the gift shop was an overwhelming garden of delights, and while I spent too much money there, I also revelled in the feeling of being accurately marketed to.

Convergence Station gets a lot of things right. It supports and spotlights artists. It peoples future/alter-space with queer and brown bodies. It creates a wholesome space where small children, tired and jaded hipsters in their 30s, and boisterous 20-somethings high on gummies, can enjoy sensory delights side by side. But I found a different portal within the park that I have continued to think about. Developed by Indigenous writer, Erika T. Wurth, *Help Save My World* is an installation which bridges the fantastical parallel realities within Convergence Station with the colonial and Native realities of the territory on which the theme park is built. On Meow Wolf's website, *Help Save My World* is described:

In "Help Save My World", we meet Naiche. When the European invasion began, Native people of Colorado were given the option to move to another world. Naiche lives in a red world - under a red sun, where Native people live in a state of advanced, organic, technology - though there is fear of another invasion. You'll also meet people from Colorado's past - and Native American present. (Meow Wolf 2021)

A simple door with an eye surrounded in a starburst leads to a small room whose walls are painted with a mural showing a stylized, futuristic city on one side and three sisters plantings on the other: a lush garden of corn, beans, and squash in complementing pink, blue, and orange. At the center wall of the room is a goldish, textured mass with small flowers which

might be read as a tree trunk, a rock formation, or the flank of a large creature. Embedded in the mass is an oval screen, which plays a series of videos. Erika T. Wurth reads out loud a narrative about how her world is threatened. She goes on to say that a man will speak to the past and another will speak to the present, and that, by listening, the visitor can help save her world. Abner Goodbear then appears, and, also seeming to read from a script, describes how members of his family died in a massacre which happened not far from the site of Convergence Station. He describes how on April 29th, 1864, the Colorado Calvary attacked, killed, and mutilated hundreds of Cheyenne and Arapaho, mostly women and children. Goodbear's story is followed by another brief statement by Stephen Graham Jones who acknowledges contemporary Indigenous presence, futurism, and scholarship in Denver. In an interview with Native Max Magazine, Wurth shares that she, "wanted to incorporate and use that to build the room around the idea that Native people had been given some opportunity to have a life unfettered by colonization on another planet." Wurth describes *Help Save My World* as being "part of the speculative dreamscape that Meow Wolf is" and "a world you would teleport to" as part of the Convergence Station experience.³³ The article also points to other ways in which Convergence Station has sought to incorporate Indigenities into its design and practice. Some of these come off to me as cursory or coming from a place of anxious institutional list-checking. Wurth, however, did advocate for the inclusion of Arapaho language on the signage around the park, which already included English, Spanish and an "alien" language part of the park's metanarrative.

³³ Wurth as quoted in Native Max Magazine, "The Indigenous Inclusion and Involvement of Meow Wolf," 2021.

The effect of this experience, I feel, is one of anti-theming. It catapults you out of the immersive suspension of place and site which Meow Wolf has constructed back into the land reality of so-called Denver, Colorado. This effect of anti-theming is very important as it functions as an aperture or point of escape from the world the theme park – being a closed environment – has created. Meow Wolf is successful in creating spaces that are at once troubling, soothing, dystopic, relatable, chaotic, and reflective of our lived realities. But it seems a bit challenged by the movement through affects, switching from the stark, site-specific realities of colonization and fantastical imaginings of parallel realities and alternate temporalities. In this way, Convergence Station seems to struggle to move through the affects of acknowledging and speaking to political/historical realities – i.e. legacies of genocide and land theft – and making immersive space that transports the viewer from the downtown Denver which you just left outside. I feel this points to a kind of *post-political* affect that Meow Wolf takes on. It is not exactly apolitical, as, within its lore, its ethos, it is embracing radical values of representation, worldbuilding through creative expression, and decentering of Eurocentric notions of time, place, and embodiment. Sure, there are individual artists who seem to be given a degree of free reign in the designing of their installations. But they are still being contracted by a single company with a particular aesthetic and vision of what *Meow Wolf* is, who it is for, and what its flavour should be. Is that vision a politicized one? Or simply one which assumes everyone is already working from the comfort of pre-assumed values? Is the idea that Meow Wolf contains politicized content, which is there to be engaged with or not, but never asserts its values or politics?

I would posit here that this difficulty of moving naturally through affects of reality and unreality, is not a problem for the Other, because the Othered already live in the surreality which

has assigned them as an Other. The shock force of overtly expressed oppression is already part of the fabric of daily life; one from a young age already knows to expect it. Whether it manifests as the recounting of a violent history or a violent encounter in the present moment, shit can *get real* at any given moment. Perhaps what makes this *surreal* is that this is not a shared experience with the not-Other. While I was in *Help Save My World* several others came and went. There was a certain crestfallenness in the room: *well, this isn't fun*. I mean, of course it isn't! But why did this act of acknowledging Indigenous life become a moment of un-immersion for the park-goer? Is it because immersion in a theme park is coded as an escape from political responsibility? Ironic, given that in decolonial, Indigenous/Afro futurist frameworks for immersive experience, states of immersion are sites of political liberation and infinite possibility.

I feel it's important to reflect on these questions in the context of *-tzintlán's* design process. Where does *-tzintlán* overtly lead the experiencer and where does it allow for open-ended experience? Does *-tzintlán* make clear what it means when it calls itself a *postcolonial theme park*? Who is *-tzintlán* really for? Does *-tzintlán*, with its preoccupation with making 'the bottom come on the top,' immerse the experiencer in a hyperreality of the existing site itself, a kind of embodied metatextuality? Does it have the ability to affect-shift between the surreal, unreal and real? Can it speak to genocidal realities with the same honesty as it can to its alternatives?

I am possessed of an athletic, and sometimes uncalled for, ability to critically analyze anything and everything, often without also recognizing the thing's merits. So, I will say that my experience of Convergence Station was mostly positive and actually quite full of my own moments of identification with the immersions, futurities, and alternate temporalities offered.

From the narrative of a capitalist cult disguised as a Chucky-Cheese-esque pizza arcade to *Earth Spirits of the Subconscious Mind*, an art installation by David Garcia and Cal Duran which shows spirit faces, people, jaguars, buffalo, skulls, and turtles, growing among corn stalks, Convergence Station is pretty damn exciting to experience, something I could have only ever dreamed of.

Anti-theming and alt-theme parks inform ideas of *landed-ness* and relation to land in the multilayered wake of colony. The ideas of anti-theming and alt-theme parks can function as the territorial corollaries to decolonial futurities. In their complexities, decolonial futurities are already as concerned with the “where” as with the “when.” I want to underscore here the importance of being able to notice the *wheres* that are the postcolonial theme park as integrated with its *whens*. José Esteban Muñoz points us to the elsewhere of queer futurities³⁴, but rather than constantly displacing via that extralocation, I want to consider the existing multilayered potential of *here*.

Consider the semi-autonomous zones culturally governed by black and brown bodies. While these zones usually fly under the radar – unless they pose a direct territorial or discursive threat to the state – they exist everywhere as immigrant neighborhoods, reserves, small towns populated by seasonal workers, historically Black and brown neighborhoods – “ghettos” – and other spaces that make the colonial eye glaze over. In the Black Pantherverse, Wakanda and Talokan repeatedly perform an eluding of the colonial eye, which cannot see these culturally rich, highly advanced nations, in a sense because *it cannot conceive of them*. We can say this is a metaphor for the ways in which, since conquest, the colonial project has

³⁴ Muñoz, “Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity,” 2009.

only ever been able to evaluate land-based capital in monetary terms, failing to understand cultural life as the true enduring source of wealth.

In her essay “If History Moves at the Speed of Its Weapons...”, Candice Hopkins writes about imperialism’s material-obsessed “extraterritoriality,” and cites the Spanish’s northward colonial reach as having been driven by imaginaries of cities made out of gold.³⁵ (This is part of the feedback loop of imaginaries which moves the idea of Aztlán.) Hopkins uses this to lay out ideas on technology’s capacity to shape worldviews. This includes the understanding of how weapons/tactics/technologies can be developed as undetectable. Technology, temporality, and territory come together in the semi-autonomous zone, which endeavors through collective efforts, to advance its strategies towards survivance. Hopkins references the power of “undetectability” in ‘DIY devices,’³⁶ and I feel this notion of undetectability translates well to the semi-autonomous zone which hides deeply rich cultural and technological advances and talents in plain sight.

I grew up in the “semi-autonomous zone” that was the 17 acres of Konkow Maidu land my parents actively tended and fostered relation with for twelve years.³⁷ We had practices of gardening, maintaining some parts of the land while leaving others off limits to any interference, keeping multiple ceremonial sites, and enticing bears to certain areas with piles of wild apples to keep them out of the large garden. All this was informed by exhaustive values, theories, songs, research, and principles that shaped that relationship with the land. For a long time, I was embarrassed by our back-to-the-land because we did not fully

³⁵ Hopkins, “If History Moves at the Speed of Its Weapons...,” 118.

³⁶ Ibid, 130.

³⁷ The Konkow Valley Band of Maidu received land back in 2021. The band had not been allowed to hold their lands for 150 years.

subsist off the land. But I have an appreciation now that it wasn't just about living out a fantasy of homesteading. Our practices went hand-in-hand with a specifically Chicana Indigenous move to know and relate to place deeply. Our immersion in Concow was not fantastical. It was very real, marked with the real challenges that exist when learning how to be in place with limited ancestral knowledge specific to a place. Was it a cult? Kind of, yes. It was a somewhat closed and controlled environment, a kind of political and spiritual "theme park" of its own. Am I glad we eventually moved somewhere where my sibling and I could have more of a social life? Yes. Can a Chicana landedness ever exist as a non-ephemeral Indigenous territory? All good questions that I continue to think about. But I appreciate the importance of the radical Chicana land-centered autonomous zone my parents established, nurtured, and defended for a brief but meaningful decade.

6. -TZINTLAN

6.1 Naming the Park

When it came to naming the park, the obvious answer seemed to name it after myself in some way, as a satirical nod to Walt Disney. But what does my name actually mean? My parents had always told me that Migueltzinta meant “precious Miguel,” Miguel having been my paternal grandfather’s name and *tzinta* meaning “precious” in classical Nahuatl, one of the enduring mother tongues/common languages shared by many individual Indigenous cultures and nations in Central-ish Mexico still in use. Mexican Spanish is full of words and place names that have Nahua roots, and these have shaped the linguistic landscape of Mexico’s national imaginary as a supposed postcolonial nation state. My parents taught themselves a bit of Nahua, a gesture that was not uncommon during the Chicano movement of their time, and they would sometimes write poetry and sing songs in Nahua. But the Chicano Movement in its complexity is a game of cultural telephone, and many non-Chicanx faux-shamans, spiritualists, and “scholars” have taken liberties with language and ideas overtime. Ironically, many of these misinterpretations and outright inventions have gone on to form core ideas, symbols, and language that are reproduced as widely adopted components, signifiers, and tenants of Chicanismo.

My own research on my name would lead me to an image of a butt, or more precisely the lower half of a body, imaged by one of the many Nahua scholars who worked closely with Franciscan friars to document Mixtec, Aztec, and other cultures in the valley of Tenochtitlan and the surrounding lands. *tzin* functions as a suffix/prefix that attaches to other words to indicate behind, below, or smallness. *Tzintamaltzontli*, for example, means butt hair, *tzintamal*

meaning *buttock* and *tzontli* meaning *hair*. I believe my parents intended *tzinta* to function as a diminutive suffix, and my name would have to be Migueltzintamal to actually be *Miguelbutt*. But to think that I might through some misunderstanding be named Miguelbutt is too good. I loved the idea of a giant butt as a park logo, which included a slogan that would seem to contextualize the park's concept as a place that layered over place or that conjured the buried stories of a place to rise and have voice. And what is a postcolonial park with a butt logo without some sexual entendre? Hence the park's slogan: *Where the bottom comes on the top*. And so, the park was named *-tzintlán*, the dash implying that this land is a land that is added to other lands, on its own incomplete. *Tlán* in Nahuatl is used to indicate place and serves as not so much a reference as an echo to *Aztlán*, the Nahuatl place name that has over time become synonymous with the Chicano movement throughout its eras.

The style of the park's logo would take after the visual style seen in the codices, itself a blending of the Nahuatl scribes' native visual languages and European manuscript illustration practices they had learned from colonizers.³⁸ I was drawn to this style because I felt the traditions of complex metaphorical abstraction that you see in traditional and contemporary Indigenous Mesoamerican mother-culture arts are, in a way, cartoons. *-tzintlán* being a kind of postcolonial twin of Disneyland, it's worth considering the ways in which Disney as a producer of narrative images via animation has co-produced the idea of America and the Other in both subtle and not so subtle ways. Disney and his Imagineers were, after all, enlisted by the US government on multiple occasions, including to produce war propaganda during WW2, as well as, fascinatingly, an ambassadorial excursion to Latin America and South America to garner favour with multiple countries as they teetered between alliances. The

³⁸ Sigal, "Franciscan Voyeurism in Sixteenth-Century New Spain," 154.

cartoon is a powerful abstraction of reality that can carry narrative across generations, whether it is a codex created by Nahua scribes at a time of critical cultural shifts, or Donald Duck romancing his Cuban parrot friend and Mexican rooster friend in *Los Tres Caballeros* (1944).

Called an “Indigenous sign technology,” a “complex information system with layers of meaning, memory, and interaction” by Steven Loft,³⁹ the impact of the codices on contemporary Mexican and Chicana art is immense and can be likened to the influence of ledger art in other cultural realms of contemporary First Nations graphic works, art, and design. Artists Emmanuel Valtierra and Sandy Rodriguez both address the visual style of the codices in their own practices. Rodriguez also makes her own paper and pigments from the same materials the Nahua scribes did. Using similar graphic styles, she depicts scenes of border patrol raids and maps of detention centers, ringed by figures and glyphs similar to those seen in the codices. Valtierra’s work exemplifies the potential for a meeting between the cartoon and the codex, creating recognizable cartoons in the Nahua scribe style including characters such as Charizard, Spiderman, Totoro, and various Star Wars characters. Valtierra also created a codex of his own, a retelling and foretelling of the war between the Aztecs and the Spaniards, and its outcome had the Aztecs triumphed over the Spanish.

The logo for *-tzintlán* attaches two word-images or glyphs, the lower body half that indicates *tzin* (under) and the pyramid or temple shape that indicates *tlán*. The temple is made of seven levels, the uppermost level being The Barker’s signature top hat made from leather scraps. *Tlán* is a complex word piece as it can indicate any number of positions including besides, between, on, and beneath. As not fluent in Nahua, I cannot guarantee the grammatical

³⁹ Loft, “Mediacosmology,” 172.

correctness of the park's name, but I feel it works very well for a place name for a space that is ephemeral, fluid, both outside and inside of time, fictional and hyperreal. Below-place, under-under, behind-next-to, under-over, site of below... there are any number of placings this name could mean.

6.2 The Fauxort

The replica of Fort Whoop-Up where *-tzintlán's* first materialization takes place, sits a ways downstream of where the original fort stood. The original fort was built on the confluence of two rivers, Náápi Otsíí'tahtaan (Old Man River) and Iiskstaáí'tahtaan (Saint Mary's River). This confluence was (and is) critical to the cultural, political, and economic life of not only Blackfoot clans, but the many other nations who had established trade relationships with them long before the colonial campaigns which saw the building of the fort.

But I want to disrupt the linear impulse to begin at the "beginning." The fort which *-tzintlán* occupies is temporally queered by the fact that it is not actually a fort. In fact, we will refer to the replica of the fort as "the Fauxort" to underscore that we are not talking about a real historical site here, but a replica, a simulation of historicity. It is critical to flag the ways in which this building and its narrative attaché has active discursive power over Lethbridge's self-understanding as a place. What is actually real in this site? The cottonwoods, the Old Man River and a medicine rock that sits – having been moved multiple times during various eras of construction – a handful of meters from the Fauxort's perimeter. The traditional stories of the river valley are real, as are the memories I've heard people share but are not mine to recount. These are things that underlie and surround the over-engineered bulk of the Fauxort.

The Fauxort is made up of three general areas. There is a cluster of modern, finished rooms, a gift shop, a classroom space, a couple of offices, a galley kitchen for staff and events, washrooms, a screening room, and the Niitsitapi Gallery, which is currently undergoing a complete redesign under the supervision of curator Camina Weasel Moccasin. Beyond these rooms is an open courtyard within the Fauxort's walls. This courtyard has been the site of summer programming and festival events now also undergoing an overhaul. In the past, these have included horse wagon rides, live blacksmithing, dancing, and games. The courtyard is surrounded by the replicas of the barracks, a series of connected rooms themed with stage props and costumes, interpretive panels, and audio narratives that initiate with the press of a button. None of the objects housed in the barracks are considered artifacts.

The total experience of the space is a strange one. Is this a theme park or a museum? There is a sense that the space itself is "whooping up" history. The realities of the original fort's impact on First Nations were in actuality devastating. Narratives that the buffalo robe/whiskey trade had both benefits and drawbacks for Blackfoot peoples, and that having access to guns and metal was revolutionary for First Nations, make small and gloss over uncomfortable facts. By the end of the 1800s Blackfoot families were camping outside of the fort in desperate hopes of receiving food and medicine, their own sources of economic sovereignty and sustenance having been strategically targeted and destroyed by the Crown.

The Fauxort's original self-perception is made clear by the – possibly defunct? – Fort Whoop-Up Interpretive Society's website. The slogan shown on the site is "Founded by Scoundrels." Below the banner images, text reads, "Before there was an Alberta – Before there were Mounties – There was a Whoop-Up!"⁴⁰ A quick scroll through the banner images promises

⁴⁰ <https://fortwhoopup.com/>

Blackfoot dancers who “add a splash of color and tradition” as well as a “trick shootin’ demonstration.” Oversight of the Fauxort has in the last few years been turned over to The Galt Museum & Archives, and is currently in the throes of some long overdue soul-searching, which has led to exciting new interest in projects like *-tzintlán*. The Galt has created its own webspace for interpretation of the Fauxort, providing much needed Blackfoot perspectives and other updated and critical addenda to the existing narratives that revolve around the ominous building.⁴¹

Something remarkable about the Fauxort is that it is immensely haunted for being a replica of a historic building that is not even on its original site. This is what makes the Fauxort such an ideal site for *-tzintlán*, whose own anachronistic and anarchistic methodologies make a fine match for the fort replica’s rootin’-tootin’ self-invention. Embracing a queer relationship to and cavalier treatment of history and the archive, *-tzintlán* is not interested in *correcting* history, rather it is interested in interceding the methods of history’s production. But, if *-tzintlán* is turning the tables of fetishistic colonial re-enactment by supplanting the Fauxort’s narrative, performative, and architectural assertions, is *-tzintlán* just, to sort of paraphrase Audre Lorde, attempting to use the master’s tools to build a theme park in the master’s house?

6.3 Historyfucking The Fauxort

⁴¹ <https://fort.galtmuseum.com/history>

In his essay, “A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future,” Indigenous futurist, Jason Edward Lewis, lists five “preliminary typologies” of “the future imaginary.”⁴² Of these, the first three are temporally concerned. In Lewis’s words, these are:

- Manifesting the Future: imaginings of the future state of Indigenous individuals and communities;
- Hybridizing the Present: re-imagining of contemporary Indigenous lives and culture;
- Altering the Past: counterfactual narratives that re-imagine historical events, often to create more positive contemporary and future realities for Indigenous people
(Lewis 2016, 44)

These three typologies work in tandem in *-tziñtlán’s historyfuck* methodology, an approach I have used in past works, including *This is Not A Bike* aka *The Gay Villain Rides Again: The History of a Queer Biker*.⁴³ Indeed, there is much shared here between the ways in which queer and Indigenous non-linearities are deployed to heal the temporal wounds in colonized, heteronormalized time-space. History has already been fucked by the construction and maintenance of the Fauxort. *-tziñtlán’s historyfuck* methodology manifests the future while hybridizing the present by altering the past.

In practice, working with the Fauxort proved to be a rich experience of being in conversation with a space. While a white walled gallery feigns neutrality, the Fauxort asserts itself materially, politically, and somatically from the moment one approaches its large log-built doors. To create, build, install, and perform work within the already heavily themed site was a challenge: the walls of colonial narratives are thick, spiked, and heavily guarded. The Galt

⁴² Lewis, “A Brief (Media) History of the Indigenous Future,” 44.

⁴³ Staged as a formal academic online presentation, attendees slowly begin realizing the presentation is not a “real” historical narrative at all – or is it? <https://youtu.be/ypWITtdDnvY>

support staff were instrumental in their willingness not only to throw open the Fauxort's gates for *-tzintlán*, but also lend a generous hand in the installation and operation of the park. I feel this is a critical thing to highlight, as it is an important example of settler institutional surrender to a deterritorializing of both space and discourse. Also, we had fun.

Initially, I was concerned that the body of *-tzintlán* would not be enough to "fill" the space, and that the existing theming would swallow up the works. However, it was pointed out to me by several people that the site was already full, and it was, after all, the point of *-tzintlán* to illuminate, appropriate, repurpose, and critique the existing theming rather than override it completely. Multiple experiencers of *-tzintlán* commented that they were unsure where the Fauxort ended and where *-tzintlán* began. I think this is evidence of important troubling and unsettling of those very ideas of history, narrative, imaginaries, and immersion. It is my hope that theming and anti-theming were working in tandem, their net effect one of the very layering which moves toward a "realer" experience of time and space.

Attractions changed and were modified during install as well as during the three days the park was open to the public in efforts to respond to the site. I will give specific examples of these changes in the individual attraction descriptions and discussions. But I do want to briefly touch on the ways in which, generally, *-tzintlán* functioned as a space for active self-(re)narration of site. While I won't go into details of the works, given that they were performance projects of other participants, a favourite example of dynamic relation between site and performance was that of two performances which were meant to be separate. In the performances a prisoner in a blue jumpsuit staged his escape from the Fauxort, while another was a pink-clad *-tzintlán* Border Authority agent who was there ostensibly to search and interrogate visitors as they entered the park. Over the course of the days, the border agent

lost all interest in manning the park's entrance. The prisoner engaged more and more directly with the children who attended the park, such that children became deeply involved in aiding the prisoner's escape. By the end of the three days *-tzintlán* ran, the prisoner and the border agent could be found lying together in the grass just outside the Fauxort staring up at the clouds.

-tzintlán's most powerful effect on site and embodiment lay in something totally out of my hands: the individual immersive experiences felt by visitors. With each person entering the space with their own contexts, expectations, desires, and imaginaries, I could not and did not wish to have full control of these. The resulting breadth of interpretations and responses from people visiting, participating, and immersing themselves was deeply humbling for me. From Blackfoot families watching family members performing live music to local white gallery curators tentatively riding dysfunctional bicycles across gopher hole-ridden fields, *-tzintlán* was most important not as a place-moment itself, so much as a maker of apertures for place-moments to occur.

6.4 The Attractions

6.4.1 Banners

Fashioned after carnival and circus banners, these large acrylic on canvas banners advertise various attractions throughout *-tzintlán*. The banners are objects of theming but contribute to the effect of immersion. They are large and very textured, carefully distressed to look like they have been flapping in the wind, have flapped in many places, bearing the marks of wear, use and travel. One of *-tzintlán's* central characteristics is that it generates its own discourse as part of its becoming. That is, *-tzintlán* materializes its own existence through telling its own story, before it has even come into being. The carnival banner as a device heralds the arrival

or opening of the attractions before they are accessible. As a mode of advertising, the banner's purpose is to invite imagining, and is freed of the responsibility of keeping the material promises that it makes. The banners I've painted include a general *-tzintlán* park banner with text and logo, and attraction banners for *Experience the White Cube*, *The Last White Tyler*, and *LANDBACKLAND*. Another banner shows various characters one might encounter in the park. The banners are aesthetically anachronistic, fashioned after circus and carnival banners of the early 1900s. But the content of the banners, their references, and visual and textual humour places them in a contemporary context. Installed, these banners are critical in the sensory experience of the site, providing immersion not only visually but also aurally through the flapping sounds of the canvas in the wind.

While not as detailed as the banners, a series of hand-lettered signs and digitally printed flags were also instrumental in populating the park with a sense of "branding" and carnival-esque immersion. The signs (acrylic on plywood) were fairly practical, announcing where to find the gift shop, refreshments and various attractions. However the bright colours and inexpert lettering brought to life the tired aesthetic monotones of the site.

6.4.2 Pre-Opening Reports

Prior to Disneyland's opening, Walt Disney produced and televised a series of broadcasts which heralded the arrival of the soon-to-open Disneyland. My mother remembers seeing these broadcasts, and of how enticing, fantastical and ultimately inaccessible the promise of Disneyland felt to her as one of eight kids in a Mexican farming family where one hamburger was shared twelve ways and shoes were only worn to school. Walt Disney's measured showmanship is a stark contrast to the carnival barker. Rather than whip you into a frenzy, he

performs a creepy future-daddy, whose warm, gentle promises fall before your feet, an experience designed just for you, for everyone. Disneyland as both place and narrative is territorialized before you even arrive, with what must have then been impressive helicopter footage of the orange orchards that Disneyland was built upon.

An explicit mimicry of Walt Disney's broadcasts, Dr. Solís's pre-opening reports, like the banners, serve to create a place ahead of its existence. Satirizing Walt Disney's paternalistic theme park daddy vibe, the videos are narrated by Dr. Solís, a character who introduces and situates himself as overseer of the project. In a calm, all-knowing voice, Dr. Solís narrates the intent of the park, making promises of what can be expected. Between Dr. Solís's affect and the grainy quality of the videos, these pre-opening reports are temporally coded via similar strategies for anachronism as the banners. The videos look and sound like they might be archival footage from the 60s or 70s, but the content points to futuristic, postcolonial presumptions. This is the first place one encounters *-tzintlán's* strategy of worldbuilding/worlding through assuming that a thing is already widely accepted, elevating subaltern truths via the mechanisms which settled dominant narratives in the first place. Screened at the park on a tv screen in one of the barrack rooms themed to look like a dormitory, it's worth noting that these videos are the only time Dr. Solís appears in the park. He is mentioned from time to time by The Barker in other instances, but Dr. Solís exists only within the world of the screen, as an actor of promise-making.

6.4.3 *mestizXXX: The Ride*

This attraction was perhaps the most challenging out of all the attractions and was not operational the first day of the park. The *mestizXXX* virtual coaster was designed to be an autotheoretical ride, experienced on a vintage exercise bicycle set up in an immersive

projection space. However, I would encounter multiple challenges in the design and concept of the ride when put into practice. Annoying technical, workflow challenges aside, I do want to touch on the conceptual challenges. I made multiple ride designs inside of the *Planet Coaster*, a virtual theme park simulator, struggling with the use of its existing tools for theming and terraforming. This was always the intent with this project, for while creating digital space and objects from scratch using, say, Unreal Engine, was always an option, it was not really the point. In the way *-tzintlán* works within the site of the Fauxort, so was the intent of this virtual coaster to work within the constraints of the game's virtual world.

My attempts in making the coaster included using many theming props, trying to combine and contradict them to give them a sense of remixedness. This was frustrating and time consuming, and the coaster by its nature moved too fast to even be able to appreciate any nuances in the theming. I also experimented with multiple recorded narrations, both in performance character and out of it. I tried various types of coasters and other rides. I tried making faithful copies of the existing terrain around the Fauxort, which, besides being exhausting, felt weighed down by realism's fallacies and entrapments like those found in colonial landscape painting.

Ultimately, I found myself stripping the ride down: *mestizXXX: the ride* is a "bad simulation," an infidelity. From the cardboard hood that houses the screen to the scant theming within the ride, the *point* of the ride is movement through space. Most roller coasters are this, as much as they may try to be themed after fighter jets or Harry Potter characters. Gravity, motion, and the body always win out. But in this way, what *mestizXXX: the ride* attempts is a trueness to my own experience of land, a dream of flying, cycling, and feeling through Treaty 7 territory. Of holding ephemeral memory-based territories inside you even as you move through other

territories. Sensuous and dizzying, the ride flips, loops, and drops above, under, and through the land itself.

The ride begins in a covered loading platform made of logs much like the Fauxort which surrounds you. As the train begins moving, you pass signs which say, “mestizXXX: the ride” and enter a dark space inside a mountain. The space is lit by multiple searchlights which fleetingly illuminate pine trees and golden forms which are difficult to parse in the moving beams of light. This space was my attempt at expressing through sensation rather than through literal representation what my internal sense of land and culture is. The train moves through the space which opens to an exterior space full of wrecked ships. Here, signs suspended in the air read in series, composing a sentence in succession: “mestizXXX is an immersive experience.” As you approach a climb, another sign reads, “a wild ride.” As the train climbs, the rider is surrounded by photos which accompanied an essay I wrote about mestizXXX as method rather than fixed identity.⁴⁴ These photos, on virtual billboards that engulf the rider, show me as a kid in various landscapes which are overlaid with images of me restaging those photos as an adult. On the ride, they are so large, it is not easy to make out what the images are of, and the point is more so of having the experience of moving past the images in a 3D virtual space. The train crests the climb and, as the drop begins, moves past more signs which together read, “mestizXXX is movement + time” and “how you move through land shapes you.” Gravity then launches the rider into a series of drops, twists, and rolls over a digital land which looks like the coulees and prairies beyond the Fauxort walls

⁴⁴ <https://asapjournal.com/transmedial-autotheories-mestizxxx-an-autotheory-migueltzinta-c-solis/>

without being its replica. Again, the interest is in the *feel* of the place rather than its simulation. The ride slows at another climb where the rider encounters more signs which say, “mestizXXX is unbelonging.” This references my previous work on understanding *unbelonging* as a method by which to have an active relation with land and territory that is not your own, a question that shaped performance work for my MFA thesis. Beyond these, at the crest of the climb, the rider is briefly faced with a panel of text, an excerpt from the same mestizXXX essay. Like the photos, the rider only sees this briefly and may only catch a few sentences or words. The train drops into another series of twists and falls, crossing rivers, threading tunnels and cut banks. As the coaster begins to slow, the train approaches a hole in the earth over which signs read, “how do you move through this land?” With that, the train moves into the station where the ride began.

This virtual ride was screened on a monitor housed inside a cardboard hood, cut and painted to look like the head of a spotted cat, a cultural reference echoed in many places throughout the park, from the Ocelocyclist to the spots on the fortune teller’s hands. Tucked in a corner of the dormitory room in the Fauxort barracks, experiencers would first see the cat’s head, then catch a peek of the ride in motion on the screen, eventually taking a seat on a simple black bench in front of the screen.

At one point, I was walking around as The Barker and, moving through the dormitory, noticed that an adult was sitting at the virtual coaster with a child on their lap. They were moving the child up and down and side to side, adding a live motion element to the ride, much to the child’s delight. I smiled because I used to do this with my younger sibling when we watched videos or simulations of coasters. *mestizXXX: the ride* is a simulation ride, but what exactly it is simulating? Multiple experiencers of *mestizXXX: the ride* commented on the feeling of being

and moving inside a body, which is exactly what the ride intended. But whose body? The body of the land or the mestizXXX body? The answer of course is both, all. In this form, *mestizXXX: the ride* succeeds in shutting up, and just feeling and moving. If my intent was to put the rider in an immersive experience of myself, I feel this succeeded, through its unrealness imparting a real first-person experience of being, one that is understood through the felt, rather than the intellectually understood. An Indigeneity itself “rooted” in migrant stories and ephemeral territories, mestizXXX’s complexity as a Indigenous-not-Indigenous worldview and land-relation is very well characterized as an experience of being on a digital coaster. It is a wild ride which moves through space and time in all directions, resisting stasis, knowing the land through movement rather than rootedness.

6.4.4 *Bike-Go-Round*

The *Bike-Go-Round* is an attraction which has undergone multiple re-designs. It began with my love of bicycles, a love so profound I truly feel that cycling for me is a spiritual practice. The *Bike-Go-Round* has had a design as a carousel type merry-go-round, inspired by the Voladores de Papantla, a contemporary Indigenous dance or ceremony that is common practice in the central regions of Mexico. Four Voladores, tied to the top of a very large pole by one foot, descend slowly, spinning themselves gently, while a fifth stays atop the pole playing flute and a very small drum. An offering to the divine, the dance is very old and is something I remember seeing since I was little. In Mexico City, the presence of the Voladores is part of the sonic and topographic fabric of Bosque de Chapultepec, the city’s massive park which houses several museums, historic sites, family attractions and other cultural sites.

But the *Bike-Go-Round* changed after spending some time at the Fauxort as well as seeing archival footage of Mounties running through exercises on horseback. To me, they look

absurd, marching in strange configurations whose usefulness in combat is highly questionable. I related this to the *Bike-Go-Round* design because the carousel as a ride was first named after a 12th century military training exercise that involved knights on horseback riding in a circle and throwing around a ball. What would it mean to escape the military entrapments of the ride? I thought about the merry-go-round in *Mary Poppins* (1964) where the ride's horses escape with their riders from the ride's confines and end up joining a horse race with real (cartoon) horses. How could the *Bike-Go-Round* facilitate an escape of the Fauxort?

The *Bike-Go-Round*, in practice, came to be immensely important to the ethos of *-tzintlán* as it served as the point of escape from the Fauxort on many levels at once. A ride on the *Bike-Go-Round* entailed signing a release form – a process facilitated by the Ocelocyclist character – before picking out a bicycle from the awaiting herd. The boarding area was staged behind a paddock-like area of the Fauxort, adjacent to large doors which opened onto the field which surrounds the south and west sides of the Fauxort. These were kept open during the duration of the park's opening hours, to facilitate both the *Bike-Go-Round* and also to generally encourage the public to visit the attraction located in the field. The herd of bicycles leaning against the fencing, awaiting riders, were individually decorated, and each bike had a small, hand-painted wood plaque hanging from the front and back with its name. It's important to note that these bicycles were all *quirky* in some way or another. The only “full-sized” bicycle was a chopper style pedal bike, with a rusting seat and bent pedal. The rest of the bicycles were small vintage-style crate bikes, kids' bikes and BMX bikes which had had their pedals removed to make them into striders. The decision to only have small and dysfunctional bikes was important not only aesthetically but also somatically. I wanted the rider, particularly the

adult rider, to have to be conscious of and considerate of the bike itself and one's interaction with the bicycle. I also wanted that scary feeling of a cheap carnival where part of the thrill is the sheer precarity of the ride. The adorable, fuzzy-eared Ocelocyclist is both a cute cat and a predator who, smiling, invites you onto a dangerous ride on a pink, tasselled bicycle with a bent wheel: undeniably, a queer impulse.

After picking a bike, riders were prompted to make their way into the field and visit *Experience the White Cube* as well as listen for a sound installation by Tareq Abu Rahma playing from the top of one of the Fauxort's bastions. Something I had not fully anticipated was the sheer joy which riders would express as they passed through the gates of the Fauxort into the world beyond, free to teeter, bumble, coast, and topple as they made their way down the gravel and dirt road. Riders encountered hand-painted signs and arrows on either side directing them in the general flow of traffic, and prompting questions such as, "What is your first bike memory?" and "Stop. Look up. Good clouds?" While other attractions approached the question of postcoloniality more directly or intellectually, I feel the *Bike-Go-Round* embodied the sublime facets of unsettlement, allowing the rider to perform fugitivity and making space for queer – or at least *queered* – joy.

6.4.5 *The Last White Tyler* and The Barker

The Last White Tyler takes the place of the carnival freak, and it is unclear what is so special about him until you are presented with the context that he is the last of his kind. The audience wonders if there is anything special about him beyond this fact. The Barker, presenting *The Last White Tyler* as an exotic, unique and disappearing body, sure makes it sound like you are

having a once in a lifetime chance to see something remarkable. But *The Last White Tyler* might only be as interesting, exotic, and unique as *The Barker* talks him up to be. He juggles but not amazingly, he performs some of his habits and shares some traditional practices, drinking a Pilsner and playing a version of *The Who's Behind Blue Eyes* on an acoustic guitar. But how is this a spectacle?

This is, of course, a gesture of reversal of the practice of exhibiting human beings who are racialized, have disabilities or somehow exoticizeable, as freaks. An example of this is the story of Máximo and Bartola, a brother and sister from El Salvador who were presented to audiences as “The Aztec Children” in the mid 1800s. Extensive and entirely invented lore accompanied the exhibition of Máximo and Bartola, including a fictional travelogue that was made available to audiences, which detailed the journey that led to their “discovery” and detailed the invented Mesoamerican city where they were supposedly from. The act was investigated eventually, but not before scientists, including some phrenologists, studied Máximo and Bartola and used them to make conclusions about the Indigenous peoples of Central America. Ironically, Máximo and Bartola both had developmental disabilities that were unlikely genetic, and so any conclusions made on them as part of any “race” would have naturally been totally wrong.

While the flipped script or reversal is amusing, *The Last White Tyler* is more interesting in the way it situates the temporal givens of the park as a whole. By situating a white Tyler (note how it sounds like “white tiger,” a little nod to Siegfried & Roy) as the last of his kind, *-tzintlán* establishes that, evidently, if there are other Tylers in the world, they are not white. This given then begs other questions: Why is he the last white Tyler? Are white children not being named Tyler anymore? Did something happen that specifically targeted white Tylers? Is it even true

that this is The Last White Tyler or is that a carnival lie? But The Barker as the keeper of The Last White Tyler does not have these questions. He presents as given that all would appreciate the rarity and specialness of this being The Last White Tyler, who needs not be especially unique other than being himself. This point of assumption is one that likely sits uncomfortably with many white people. In *-tzintlán's* present – whatever that is – where and how are white people in general situated, if The Last White Tyler is being displayed as a “the last of his kind?” *-tzintlán's* own axiological assumption would suggest that it isn't too concerned with that question. It is too focused on a need to preserve the last of a vanished species, regardless of whether white Tylers have actually ceased to exist or not.

In the performance, The Barker presents The Last White Tyler who begins pantomiming being inside an invisible cage. The Barker explains that TLWT was found by Dr. Solís, wandering around in the wilderness, doing nothing, starving to death, and Dr. Solís took him in. TLWT now performs in *-tzintlán* as an act of gratitude toward Dr. Solís. The Barker explains that while the cage is not real, he indulges TLWT's insistence that it is real as to do otherwise sends TLWT into a fit. The Barker demonstrates this, then must quickly reassure a panicking TLWT by miming the walls of the cage. While The Barker addresses the audience again, TLWT can be seen puzzling over the spot where The Barker just demonstrated the cage's falsity. The performance moves through a series of further interactions, with TLWT being dressed and restrained – at TLWT's own insistence – in his invisible manacles while being moved from his Invisible Cage to his Invisible Stage. Once on the invisible stage, TLWT performs a series of acts with various gags worked in, which all end in him being “triggered” by a volunteer from the audience and needing to be returned to his invisible cage. The Barker rushes to reassure the audience, then rushes to reassure TLWT.

It was important that the performance be designed, choreographed and scripted as an active process between myself and the other performer, my close friend and colleague Tyler Stewart. I felt it critical that the person being “exhibited” have a sense of agency, and the performance became a space for a satirical work of critical collaborative clownery Tyler and I co-constructed. An ode to similar campy, darkly humored performance works by artists such as Coco Fusco, Diego Luna, and Vaginal Davis, this work functioned on multiple registers. The sense I got from the audience was one of many feelings and thoughts happening simultaneously. Laughter was sometimes nervous, sometimes diabolical. Upon being invited to throw praiseful roses upon the attention-loving TLWT, there was often a cringey moment of indecision and hesitation on the part of some spectators. Indeed, *The Last White Tyler* provides one of the park’s more important moments of visitor implication, being an attraction which is encoded with multiple layers of meaning depending on how the individual audience member is situated in relation to the different layers of site and place which *-tzintlán* is engaging with. Postcolonial and Indigenous futures experience uncomfortable bifurcation as the layers of joke accumulate over the course of the performance.

I wanted to add that while The Barker’s main role in an attraction was in *The Last White Tyler* performance, The Barker (played by myself) was important to the moment-to-moment function of the park. In his leather patchwork top hat and coat, The Barker wandered throughout the park from opening to closing, engaging guests, inviting them to play carnival games, try different attractions, giving directions, and answering questions. I felt it was better that The Barker be this character rather than, say, the dry and paternalistic Dr. Solís.

6.4.6 *Postcolonial Fortunes Told*

Postcolonial Fortunes Told is inspired by automated fortune telling machines, specifically Zoltar brand automatons which are still in production today. They generally consist of a small booth which houses the automaton, a torso, which makes hand and face movements when money is inserted into the feeder. Audio of the character speaking delivers a few lines of pithy but also nonsensical words of advice, after which a small card with a fortune written on it is dispensed. The characters housed in the booths are varied, from cat princesses, to Elvis, to racist caricatures. Zoltar, “the Great Gypsy King,” is the original character the company made automatons of, an Orientalist fantasy of mashed up ethnicities, races and cultures in one turbaned, goateed man.⁴⁵ Other Zoltar fortune teller caricatures which drew my attention were a “Frida Kahlo” fortune teller and a “Medicine Man” fortune teller. The “Frida Kahlo” automaton, housed in a Mexican restaurant in Las Vegas, is dressed in a Tehuana style huipil, has a unibrow, and speaks in a Spanish-esque accent, which sounds very much like someone imitating the *idea* of a Spanish accent. I rather like the Frida Kahlo fortune teller and find her a degree less troubling than other “Hispanic”-coded fortune teller caricatures. As tired as the Frida frenzy is – could we even call it Frida Frenzy? – at least she is a specific cultural figure. The “Medicine Man” fortune teller machine, on the other hand, is a fairly grotesque replication of the Indian shaman stereotype. He is a dark brown man with weathered features wearing a sad resin and faux-fur imitation buffalo horn headdress and beaded chest plate who offers advice in broken English. He is surrounded by an odd assortment of objects: a dream catcher, crystals, fake coins, some Chinese lions of green stone, and rattle. When you insert a dollar, stereotypical Indian drums and flute sound, and the “Medicine Man” waves a stiff hand over the blinking orb before him. “How! You seek wisdom?” he says, eyes moving side to side under

⁴⁵ <https://zoltar.org/>

thick fake eyebrows, “Heed my words, for I am great medicine man with words of wisdom from the all-knowing spirits of Mother Earth. You cannot wake person who pretending to sleep. And you do not slumber but see world around you. So go out and make the most of today! See world. Find love.”⁴⁶

The fascination with the Other as receptacle for arcane, intuitive, and forbidden divine knowledge has long been a bizarre playground for the colonial imagination. This force of seeking out feels at once compelled and threatened by the purported secret information it insists on accessing from the Othered subject. The racialized Other is sought after for specialized knowledges even as they are caricaturized, miniaturized, and automated. From Orientalism to Primitivism to “Indianthusiasm,” this demand for spiritual insight, *even as the racialized Other is being belittled for their spiritual life*, is itself fascinating and more than a little psychotic. One might imagine that Zoltar machines are themselves an automation, miniaturization and caricaturization of some real-life version in some imagined carnival world. But are they? Or are the Zoltar machines an imaginal technology of divination themselves based on an imaginary of an imaginary?

In *Postcolonial Fortunes Told*, I created a deconstructed fortune teller booth in which my mother, herself a tarot reader, offers tarot readings. I painted panels, a portrait of my mother’s reading persona, *La Zombra*, and a panel with the question, “What is time?” which then were arranged around the tarot card reading space. Behind the table and seating area, a pyramid-shaped panel announced, “Postcolonial Fortunes Told.” This installation performance invites a rethinking of divination or “fortune telling” as something alive, as an encounter with real,

⁴⁶ JF’s Productions, “Fortune Teller Frida Kahlo (Frida’s Fortunes) at the Casa Don Juan Restaurant, Las Vegas, NV,” 2023.

living diviners or advisors. By asking what time *is*, the installation also hopes to disrupt both the temporal and value assumptions of what a “fortune” is. The deconstructed booth is a performance space for a real interaction. It’s worth noting that initially the booth was designed as a box, but with hot temperatures being a concern for participants, I decided it would be best to stage the elements under an overhang. Similar to the ways the *Bike-Go-Round* offered means of escape against the Fauxort’s rectangular geometries of spatial understanding, I felt the deconstruction of the fortune telling booth was ultimately very important.

Reading tarot cards is an outward, shared spiritual practice that my mother and I have shared for a long time. And while we have differing approaches to and understandings of the spiritual, I deeply appreciate what I have been able to learn from her in terms of how to use the cards to create space for personal and interpersonal reflection. For me, tarot has been important as a way to order meaning and feeling in my mind, especially when anxiety and depression are enforcing negative narratives I may have constructed. Because the cards are based in story, they have felt accessible and non-threatening to me as someone who grapples with notions of the sacred and spiritual.

Another important element of *Postcolonial Fortunes Told* was the custom tarot deck (just the major arcana) I created to be used in the readings. I combined the major arcana from the Rider-Waite deck with photographs from my personal archive and scans of one of my Abuelita’s Avon catalogues. I was interested in the layering of these images and texts, wanting to ask visual questions of culture, commodity, and fortune. I was interested in how tarot has over time been both a code and a site of cultural encoding. Tarot is already such a copy of a copy of a copy etc. of cultural, spiritual, and religious references that it has overtime

abstracted into a kind of spiritual public domain. The form has made itself a perfect site for personalization, and artists from all walks have used the divination system as template for many reimagings. Tarot can be both a game and dead serious, and I think it's interesting that at times playing cards have been used as divination objects, safely encoded. These complexities lent themselves well to Avon as an important aspect of my grandmother's later life, where Avon became an important part of her social, material and even spiritual life. At the height of her Avon career, she was a much-respected vendor, and came to swear by the properties of Avon products such that they might have been imbued with spiritual properties. Collaged into the visual and textual languages of Pamela Coleman Smith's original tarot cards and my Abuelita's Avon catalogues, are my own personal family photographs. My family members appear as well as pictures of different practices we've had over time. After their postcolonial tarot readings, the fortune told received takeaway cards, which depicted a "postcolonial fortune" that read:

Your Postcolonial Fortune

That thing you are
so afraid of
just let it go
decolonize time
then future is now
and now
and now
in the past
future
present
the not-yet
has already survived

6.4.7 Experience the White Cube

The white cube gallery performs the neutralizing of space; just as there is the expectation for every Starbucks to sell identical products across its locations, there is an expectation for the

white cube gallery to provide smooth white walls with even, modular lighting. One might say that the white cube gallery functions as a franchise for housing creative expression. The white cube gallery has over time informed the experience of viewing art such that it has fundamentally shaped our expectations for an art viewing experience. Further, it has shaped expectations for what the place or site of exchange between the artist and non-artist should look like and function. With much of my work being about place, site and ephemerality, I have always struggled with creating work intended for a gallery setting. I have often found the gallery to be a barrier to meaningful exchange between a place and an artist. I wanted to satisfy this personal vendetta against the white cube gallery by creating a narrative in which the idea of the gallery was misunderstood, presumably due to the passage of time or a paralleling of worlds. The contemporary context of *-tzintlán* – whatever that might be – is incapable of understanding the white cube gallery through its own modern sensibilities and social values.

Additionally, *Experience the White Cube* comments on interpretive assumptions and interpretive language which historicizes not only site but objects in site, particularly interpretive language which addresses Indigenous life. A few meters from where *Experience the White Cube* was installed, there is a bronze plaque adhered to a large boulder marking stones laid out in the shape of a tipi rings in deep grass and surrounded by a paddock fence.

The text on the plaque reads:

Stone Circles

The beautiful skin tipi used by the nomadic Plains Indian was a perfectly adapted dwelling. It was anchored with rocks, and when the buffalo herds roamed the prairies, thousands of rock circles marked the Indian campsites. Now the buffalo no longer roam free, the prairies are plowed and these links to a Native culture are fast disappearing. These two tipi rings of

quartzite, granite, and limestone boulders were mapped and transferred from the Lindy Campsite 7 miles southeast of Lethbridge.

In response to this, I decided to make a plaque of my own to accompany *Experience the White Cube*. Providing both context and direction, the plaque read:

The White Cube

The noble White Cube Gallery was a place for showing Art. Smooth white walls were ideal surfaces for mounting rectangles of varying sizes depicting visual translations of places, beings, and objects.

Popular among these rectangles was the Landscape Painting, which presented land in replica as an unpeopled purely visual experience. Today the landscape painting is gone, and the ruins of the White Cube Galleries are turning to ash and dust. We can only imagine what it must have been to stand inside four white walls full of rectangles showing the outside decontextualized inside. While the real experience is lost to time, we have created a simulation of a Landscape Painting Exhibition. We invite you to buckle into the provided viewing chair for 3 minutes and imagine what it must have been like to Experience the White Cube.

While the attraction is somewhat satirical, *Experience the White Cube* is also intended to genuinely create a space where the white cube is a nostalgic ruin, and the experiencer is physically bound to a moment where they are free to gaze at land. The ride performs a constraining of the experiencer much as the gallery does. But here the walls are transparent, abstracting the idea of white, square spaces in which we have experiences of beauty and meaning-making into a series of ghostly lines. *Experience the White Cube* functions as a panorama attraction that very simply immerses you in the place you are already in. An anti-theme attraction, the ride performs a creating of transparent walls which encourage presence in place as it is, in its real form. The viewer is invited to be in place, in real place in real time, being present in it via their own subjective experience of it, rather than via an interpretation of it, such as a landscape painting.

6.4.8 LANDBACKLAND

LANDBACKLAND is a collaborative space dedicated to showing works by many contributors from the local area where *-tzintlán* materializes. The space invites contributors to envision or express what LandBack, as a movement, as a dream, as a futurity, might be or *already is and has always been*. The space plays on the theme park practice of showcasing conceptual drawings, designs, maquettes, and advertising of future park expansions. Initially, *LANDBACKLAND* was planned to be just a banner, with the hope of someday expanding it into a call for submissions from other contributors. But with the involvement of the LandMarks students, *LANDBACKLAND* became more than just the promise of more to come.

Arnell Tailfeathers would popularize LandBack as a rallying point around 2018 through a viral meme. While I was familiar with recent land/water defender and Idle No More mobilizations, around 2020, the idea of LandBack as a contemporary movement would gain momentum in the light of the Wet'suwet'en demonstrators fighting for their land rights against corporate/federal interests in natural resources. The political moment would see support and solidarity protests, demonstrations and blockades spring up around the continent and beyond. An intersectional movement, LandBack in the past years has intertwined with conversations about police brutality, MMIW, the legacy of the residential school system, issues around Indigenous health, wellness and addiction, and critical examinations of what it means to "Indigenize."

In beginning the installation of *LANDBACKLAND*, after Jackson insisted that we all install this part of the park together, I had a sudden realization that perhaps this was the most important part of the park. Rather than *LANDBACKLAND* being a future land within or adjacent to *-tzintlán*, it seems far more logical that *-tzintlán* is a land within *LANDBACKLAND*. I feel in the future, when presenting this as a pop-up collaborative art project, I would present it that way.

I feel this truly fulfills the intent of *-tzintlán*, fostering a space where decolonized futures become not only possible, but we realize they are already here, that non-colonial life has always been – and so *LANDBACKLAND* collapses the linearity of time. To this point, if *LANDBACKLAND* had a slogan, I feel it could be *The Future That Has Always Been*.

From the World's Fairs to Walt Disney's future-dabbling enterprises like Epcot and Tomorrowland, the theme park, besides being obsessed with the past, is also preoccupied with aspirational future-tripping. But these futurisms are very invested – sometimes literally – in advancement through commodity, capital, conquest of territory and other expressions of power over time, matter, and space. Epcot, originally designed to be a utopic city, was very much designed by white people, for white people. *LANDBACKLAND* also approaches future, but it is essentially just a site where the decolonial futures that already *are* can take up space. *LANDBACKLAND* invites everyone to contribute, asserting that in the LandBack paradigm there are not “winners and losers.” This is to counter the fear/scarcity narrative that if colonially held lands were to be returned to First Nations, as scared settlers say, “They would do to us what we did to them.” This sentiment clearly comes from an inability to imagine other outcomes besides those perpetuated by a colonial system, assuming that settler surrender would have a bad outcome for the settler body. Having a settler positionality in the Blackfoot Confederacy myself, as well as being of a people who would not be given back anything, I have to say that LandBack sounds worth a try: after all, what poses a greater obstacle to migrant identities than national borders and colonial (mis)understandings of movement and trade? I feel it is critical to the movement that everyone practice envisioning *LANDBACKLAND* as part of a process of speaking into being. Again, *LANDBACKLAND* does not

dictate what LandBack is or must be, it is simply a space to think compositely and collectively about what it *might* be.

7. CONCLUSION

You enter a room of stars.

Disembodied Miguelzinta Voice:

There remains one form of immersive experience to mention, that existed thousands of years before the first Imax theater or the first panorama. It is the oldest dark ride, the oldest immersive experience: the sweat lodge. I remember being a child, maybe 5 or 6, and coming out of the lodge on a crisp mountain night and looking up to see the stars curving over us, another layer of immersion. I remember thinking it was the realest thing I'd ever seen.

The early 2000s were still not a friendly time for queerness amongst Chicax/Indigenous communities, even in California, and it would be around then that, feeling rejected by them and, feeling betrayed by the revelation of my father's affairs and abuses, I rejected my family's Chicax practices.

It is possible that the impulse to design a postcolonial theme park is uniquely necessary to my Chicax subjectivity. Maybe I am the only one who needs a theme park. Perhaps it comes from a very specific reach for place that would never be felt by someone rooted securely in their own ancestral place. But landedness is complex. "Don't ask for permission to make new tribes, just do it," says photographer Hulleah J. Tsihnahjinnie.⁴⁷

You know, there are wounds I'm really tired of licking. I'm tired of mistrusting my elders and ancestors. I'm tired of my own fear of rejection, of rejections that happened a while ago, things that happened to someone else who is now a different person. I'm

⁴⁷ Tsihnahjinnie, guest lecture for *Indigenous Women*, March 29th 2023.

tired of looking outside and elsewhere, of always suspecting the tricks of made-up places will only yield a realness that is itself false. I want to love my postcolonial theme park, its false horizons, forced perspectives, and Pepper's ghosts. I want to slip through the cracks between the worlds. You know, as a kid I was always trying to find a portal to take me to a different place. I would even dream of portals on that Konkow land and go look for them and be so sad that they weren't there. But they *were* there because I was already there. I was already here. I'm there again now. I'm here and there, and all of this is real.

There is nothing to see here. You just float through the dark with the stars around you. You really wonder if they are real. Perhaps you hear water underneath and an occasional whir of machinery. But mostly you just float in the silence. It's an odd thing to end on. After all, many rides end with a musical number, with many characters singing in unison, bidding you goodbye. But as you continue you begin to marvel at how the stars *do* seem to be singing a final song in a language too old for you to understand.

You gently round a corner in the dark, and suspended in that dark above is a warmly glowing neon that says in curling letters: "The bridge (boundary between the world you've just left and the one ahead) is both a barrier and a point of transformation."⁴⁸ You hear a loud clank at the same time that you feel your gentle boat run aground of some machinery, locking into a chain system. Engaged, the chain begins to ratchet you upward and you are pitched back at a sharp angle. Looking upward you see more words in neon, lining a long tunnel. The next one is already over you reading, "By crossing, you invite a turning point, initiate a change."⁴⁹ More

⁴⁸ Anzaldúa, "Light in The Dark = Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality," 137

⁴⁹ Ibid.

clacking, your boat jerking forward bit by bit. The next sign is over you: “And change is never comfortable, easy, or neat.”⁵⁰ You continue in this dark, your boat now pitched so steeply you fear you will topple backwards. More text: “It’ll overturn all your relationships; leave behind lover, parent or friend who not wanting to disturb the status quo or lose you, try to keep you from changing.”⁵¹ The climb is interminable. You realize you hate these rides, the water rides that take you up very far and then drop you down. “OK, so cambio is hard. Tough it out, you tell yourself.”⁵² You wonder how far the drop will be, if it will hurt. “Doesn't life consist of crossing a series of thresholds?”⁵³ asks another sign as it passes over your head. Suddenly, a spotlight turns on at the top of the tunnel, illuminating an owl animatronic. Its head turns around to face you, and you can hear its beak and eyelids clacking as it says in Gloria Anzaldúa’s calm, clear voice, “Conocimiento hurts, but not as much as desconocimiento.”⁵⁴ You pass under the owl but you still hear its voice speaking in the darkness around you, somehow audible over the clacking of the upward conveyance, “In the final reckoning, it comes down to a matter of faith, trusting that your inner authority will carry you across the critical threshold.” If you know the trope of these rides, you know the drop is nearby. Indeed, the ride crests and you pause long enough to just barely take in the view. From the top of this ride you can see across time, you can see all creation and all the universe, and it all – everything – for a brief moment makes complete sense. Then you hear Anzaldúa’s voice say,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

“You must take the leap alone and of your own will.”⁵⁵ The mechanism releases and your boat falls.

Your stomach seems to switch places with your heart for a few seconds, and then comes the slam of the landing, your knees digging painfully into the padded side of the boat. Water sprays all over your face, arms, and chest. Despite all this, you laugh at the same time you vow you will never do it again. The boat bobs around a lazy curve that absorbs your forward momentum and shunts you onto a wide conveyor belt that pulls you into a narrow station. You realize you have come full circle. You exit the boat in the place you boarded the first car, and, steadying yourself on a leather wrapped handrail that seems to have been touched by generations, you follow yellow arrows on the ground which point you toward an exit sign. You pass through a set of plastic flaps that separate inside from outside. You step outside. You are surprised to find it is daytime, although you cannot quite remember what time of day it was when you went in. How long were you in the ride? Minutes? Days?

You approach the threshold of the archway but pause as you notice a mannequin dressed in a blue graduation gown and mortarboard. The mannequin’s arms slowly rotate mechanically, holding a diploma sleeve that says University of Lethbridge. It has been made to look like Miguelzinta, but you can tell someone just took a generic clothes display mannequin and glued some fake facial hair on him. The glue is coming off. An eyebrow hangs by a thread of hot glue.

Are you relieved or disappointed to be back in real life? Are you back in real life or in a simulation of real life? Are you re-immersed in your own immersion or a simulation of your own experience? The sun feels real on your skin – but perhaps they are just lamps. You are

⁵⁵ Ibid.

still wet from the ride, and you wish you had brought a change of clothes. You stop moving for the first time in minutes, hours, days, years. You turn your face toward the light, shutting your eyes, letting the sun/lamps dry you. But your body has grown used to constant movement. Eyes closed, you have the sensation that you are still moving. It doesn't go away.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF WORKS

-tzintlán Banners Series
Bike-Go-Round
Experience the White Cube
LANDBACKLAND
mestizXXX: The Ride
Pre-Opening and Opening Day Videos
Postcolonial Fortunes Told
The Last White Tyler

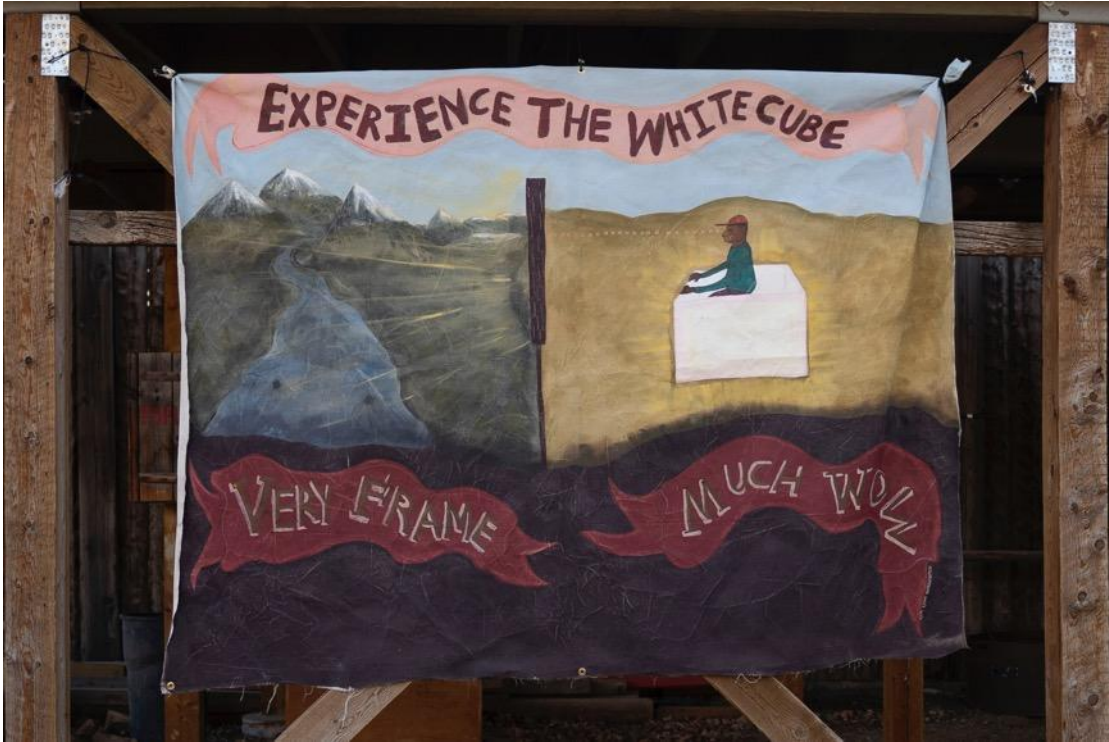
APPENDIX B: DOCUMENTATION OF WORKS



-tzintlán park banner (photo by of Angeline Simon)



The Faces of -tzintlán banner and the artist (photo by Angeline Simon)



Experience the White Cube banner (photo by Angeline Simon)



A functional carnival sign (photo by Angeline Simon)



-tzintlán experiencers enjoying the *Bike-Go-Round* (photo by Angeline Simon)



Detail of one of the *Bike-Go-Round* steeds (photo by Angeline Simon)



The Barker posing at the *Bike-Go-Round* entrance (photo by Angeline Simon)



-tzintlán experiencers experiencing *Experience the White Cube* (photo by Angeline Simon)



A historical plaque near *Experience the White Cube* (photo by Angeline Simon)



Rider's perspective of *Experience the White Cube* (photo by Angeline Simon)



LANDBACKLAND banner surrounded by LandMarks student works (photo by Angeline Simon)



Installation view of *The Garden of Toppled Monuments* (photo by Angeline Simon)



Still from *mestizXXX: the ride*



Installation view of *mestizXXX: the ride* (photo by Angeline Simon)



Installation view of *mestizXXX: the ride* (photo by Angeline Simon)



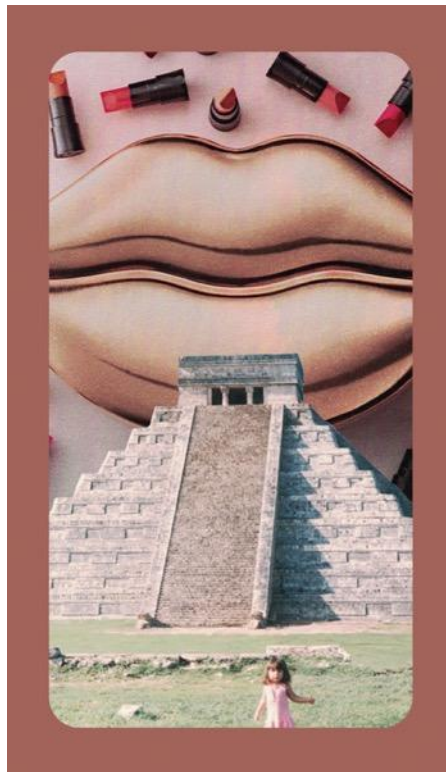
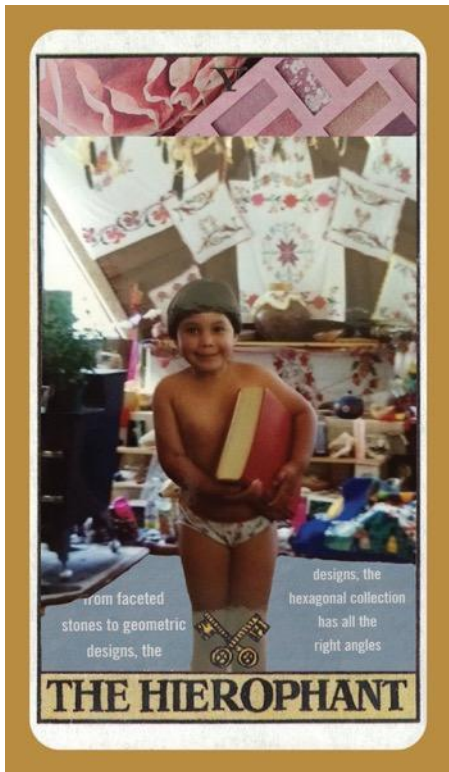
Still from *-tzintlán Opening Report #1: The Barker*



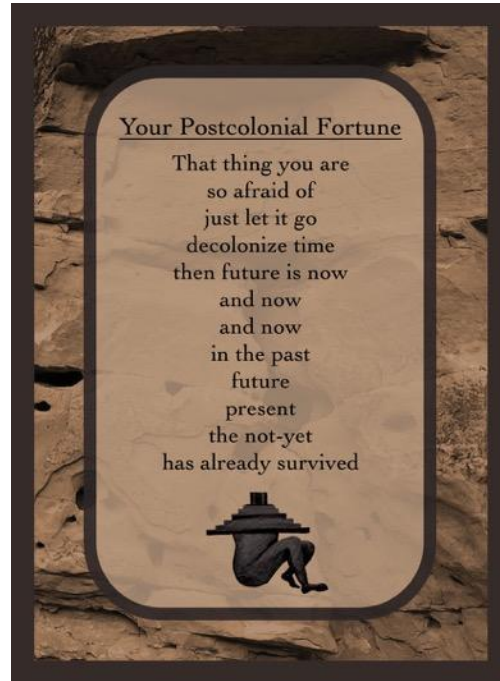
Still from *-tzintlán Opening Report #2: Dr. Solís*



Still from *-tzintlán Opening Report #3: The Fauxort*



Samples of custom tarot cards to be used by *La Zombra*



Detail of *Postcolonial Fortunes Told* (photo by Angeline Simon) and a fortune card



A -tzintlán experiencer enjoying *Postcolonial Fortunes Told* (photo by Angeline Simon)



The Last White Tyler inside his invisible cage (photo by Angeline Simon)



The Last White Tyler and The Barker (photo by Angeline Simon)



The Barker presenting a beer for The Last White Tyler (photo by Angeline Simon)