

# “Necessarily Hidden Truth(s)”: Documenting Queer Migrant Experience in Rigoberto González’s *Crossing Vines*

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Published in 2003, Rigoberto González’s novel *Crossing Vines* depicts a California migrant worker community in ways structurally reminiscent of the Chicana classic . . . *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* [. . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*] (1971) by Tomás Rivera.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Rivera’s, González’s novel presents vignettes of a day in the life of migrants employed in a vineyard that Leonardo, one of the novel’s many characters, asks his mother to record for a class assignment at a university in Los Angeles. In this sense, the text also reminds readers of *The Rain God* (1984), the gay Chicana classic by Arturo Islas, whose narrator in part observes how Miguel Chico, one of the prominent gay characters in the text, understands his relationship to community and family while enrolled in a university in California in the aftermath of his uncle’s death. In her early analysis of Islas, Marta E. Sánchez describes this mode of gay Chicana writing as deploying “narrative strategies that highlight the ‘minority’ writer’s role of mediator between cultures” (285). Unique to González’s narrative intervention is his transparency in the observation of the community, which follows an ethnographic structure that the novel, as a piece of fiction, necessarily betrays. Rather than field notes, the novel presents vignettes of labor at the vineyard, providing the primary material for Leonardo’s project and details about characters that lie well beyond the scope of what his recording devices can capture. The narrative foregrounds memories of gay Mexican migrants that ethnographers and their research subjects both elide in the novel. González places documents, such as Permanent Resident Cards (or green cards) and Leonardo’s own project in the making, at the center of how queer migrant characters imagine the possibility and impossibility of gay identification in the United States, and he renders Leonardo’s recordings a space for his mother, doña Ramona, to imagine her own history.<sup>2</sup> In this context, *Crossing Vines* is not only about migrant labor and surveillance but also about how the experiences of gay migrants more specifically are textually mediated by ethnographic projects such as Leonardo’s.

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Although both these archives, the green cards and the ethnography, offer information about people, they only contain the data the government and the novel's ethnographer solicit. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 that declared hiring undocumented migrants against the law, making green cards the primary instrument of verification for entry and eligibility to work in the United States. The act retained an exclusion of migrants deemed "sexual deviates" (Luibhéid xiii) from the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, itself an adaptation of a ban against "psychopathic personality" from the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (xii). Green cards, by institutional design, are attainable most often through family sponsorships for spouses or children, largely precluding gay and lesbian migrants from accessing them unless they are parents to a citizen or permanent resident or were, before the 2015 US Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell vs. Hodges*, married to someone of the opposite sex. As Eithne Luibhéid explains, even after the removal of the exclusions from entry, "lesbian/gay migrants still face[d] substantial barriers," noting for example that "lesbian/gay relationships—unlike heterosexual ones—[were] not recognized as a legitimate basis for acquiring [Legal Permanent Resident] status" (xiii). In this context, González's queer characters offer a unique transnational perspective that differs from traditional accounts of family reunification and economic need that migration officials police through the inspection of documents such as green cards and that Leonardo attempts to document in his ethnography. The novel, presenting Leonardo's ethnographic project alongside the state surveillance of migrant workers, allows readers to understand these parties' overlapping interests in documenting an authoritative narrative about migrant communities. In doing so, it asks what purposes such legal, literary, and scholarly narratives serve. If one of the many goals of scholarship and literature is to populate an archive otherwise largely composed of the state's legal representations of our communities, we must attend to how these competing archives address the suspicions that queer migrants have toward methods of textual documentation and interpretation through which they are often studied and remembered.

Although González is notably prolific in a range of genres, scholarship on his contributions to US and Chicana letters remains comparatively scarce. While recent work by Colleen Gleeson Eils and Doug P. Bush has turned to *Crossing Vines* to investigate ethnographic surveillance in multi-ethnic literature and affective responses compelled by the novel, respectively, González's representation of queer migration in the novel remains largely untreated. Adding to their readings, I turn to queer characters such as Aníbal, a recent migrant and heir to a Mexican real estate developer, and Moreno, a migrant and former drag queen, who are unique in that they offer the most detailed accounts of life in Mexico before departing for the United States. González, in foregrounding the experiences of gay Mexican migrants in the context of Leonardo's academic project, offers us

an opportunity to imagine migrant queer life as possible despite the legal barriers and archival failures to textually attest to the presence of migrants such as the ones represented in *Crossing Vines*. In doing so, González depicts the ways migrants can sometimes, in turn, refuse academic and state documentation. In a shifting terrain of state surveillance practices where little is inaccessible unless intentionally avoided, González interrogates when and how the details of migrant lives become documentable within and beyond the prescriptions of the law. This gives queer migrant characters the unique opportunity to exercise narrative agency over the information the government and ethnographer solicit. Not recorded in Leonardo’s ethnography or accounted for by documents such as green cards, these queer experiences of migration are only accessible through those elements of the narrative only the reader, rather than the state or Leonardo, can interpret. This interpretive possibility is precisely what drives *Crossing Vines*. Rather than making a case against ethnography, the novel makes a case for fiction as a site where the stories that are too queer for the legal archive or Leonardo’s academic project are more freely told and imagined.

### Situating Queer Migrant Archives

Although Leonardo’s recording tools are never in close proximity to queer characters, the text fluctuates between those moments where the recorder is present and those that are only available through characters’ memories. Diana Taylor notes that memory is transmitted through various modes, including the *archive* of documented experience and the *repertoire* of embodied rituals and live performances that cannot be fully contained by texts and other archival objects (20). She explains that the archive exists in texts, such as green cards and Leonardo’s ethnography, “supposedly resistant to change. . . . What changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items it contains get interpreted, even embodied” (19). Beyond the always tender storytelling, González wages a queer critique of the normative impulses that animate literary and scholarly narratives of migrant experience by foregrounding memories that inform relationships that gay migrants already have to the archive. Through characters such as Aníbal and Moreno, González depicts the performances compelled from migrants by the pretense of being documented, recorded, and surveilled by foregrounding those subjects that archives are often designed to omit altogether. González thinks about these unrecorded moments as sites of fictional possibility that, while archived in the actual novel by González (they are textual representations, after all), are still reportorial within the novel’s narrative arc. As fiction, however, these narratives remain ephemeral representations of actual migrant experience.

Following Taylor's lead, I define the archive as consisting of documents (such as green cards, Leonardo's recordings, his prospective project, photos, or González's novel itself) subject to institutional interpretation. It is important to define archive broadly to encompass both personal items and documents and institutional catalogs, precisely because of how often migrants' personal archives are institutionally codified and interpreted to surveil them through the very processes that lead to legal permanent residence in the United States. Therefore, to speak of the archive in a migrant context requires us to account for those documents and institutional databases that present the basis of national narratives that mediate our relationships to the state. I find Taylor's framework a useful starting point because she underscores the limits of what a textual archive can alone represent and, as recent works by literary and cultural critics demonstrate, what it will not. Most notably, Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (2019) brings together a rigorous historical and literary study of black women in early twentieth-century New York and Philadelphia to imaginatively speak to and stress the presence of intentional gaps in the historical record. In an introductory note, she explains that the project "recreates the radical imagination and wayward practices of these young women by describing the world through their eyes. It is a narrative written from nowhere." She adds that "[e]very historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters" (xiii). While Taylor's framework distinguishes between the textual and that which the text cannot contain, Hartman's method suggest that archival documents can, however, attest to an archival record previously denied, even if it might not contain and reflect the generational experiential trauma those absences have historically enabled.

Authors such as González who foreground the experiences of the marginalized, specifically those of queer migrants, reflect a similarly fraught relationship with the archive. In his literary history of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mexican American communities in the Southwest, Alberto Varon asks us to understand Latinx literature "beyond resistance . . . to move past a notion of early Latino literature as recuperation or primarily a recovery project and into a more integrated intellectual history and US *national* narrative." He argues: "This requires us to decouple the idea of the Latino subject from immigration," a project that "counters the hegemonic view of Latinos as perennial immigrants by turning to Mexican Americans' long historical investment in ideas of national manhood" (7). Although González presents in Leonardo a student researcher that makes readers similarly skeptical of how easily the study of migrants can be folded into the broader study of US Latinx communities, his queer characters also challenge the idea of how a national narrative of masculinity could fully

represent gay migrant men whose national history in the United States is largely one of territorial exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Grounded in the kinds of absences Hartman prefaces in her study, González's work offers us an imaginative catalogue of characters informed by migrant experiences that those "endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor" have worked to omit (Hartman xiii).

Although archival representation remains a fraught space for queer and Latinx people, engaging with queer absence from Latinx archives has been integral to the history and development of the fields of gay Latinx and *jotería* studies. Tomás Almaguer notes the relative failure of early gay Chicana fiction to "discuss directly the cultural dissonance that Chicano homosexual men confront in reconciling their primary socialization into Chicano family life with the sexual norms of the dominant culture" and commends the growing contributions of Chicana lesbians (256). Working through archives of the Chicano Movement and scholarship from the era, Richard T. Rodríguez offers an incisive examination of the Chicano family, arguing foundational texts such as *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (1969) ask "for the categories [of] la familia and la raza to complement and service one another" (24). In that context, Rodríguez contends, "the family must necessarily exclude all who do not adhere to its traditional values (however those might be defined)" (27). Subject to these exclusions were gay authors such as John Rechy and Islas, both cited by Almaguer, who despite failing in being direct, engage with ways of being textually represented that encourage suspicion of how gay Chicanos are written into family histories.<sup>4</sup> As Rodríguez importantly argues, "Chicano gay men implicitly take aim at such responses [to their sexuality] through various modes of self-representation that form an archive too often said not to exist" (135). González's representations of queer migrants illustrate, as Rodríguez notes, that queer archives do exist but perhaps are rendered differently.

For gay Chicana literary studies, the archive has remained an expansive category ranging in scope from scholarly work and historical documents to the facts and fictions gay authors meld in their public and private writing. Frederick Luis Aldama's work on Islas also reflects the methodological imaginative exercise available in these kinds of seeming archival omissions. As he notes in his introduction to his biography on the author, "Islas conceived of writing as a blurring of private with public. . . . His life was a performance that constantly melted fiction into fact and fact into fiction; in a sense, he wrote fiction and fiction wrote him" (xviii). In this context, queer Latinx literary research is more complex precisely because scholars must wrangle with not only the gaps in institutional archives but also the facts and fictions authors have built into their most private and personal archives as a matter of self-preservation or by authorial choice, often one and the same. Rodríguez stresses that literature and other cultural production "must be considered important archival documents that offer vital information about the complexities of Chicano movement history and the cultural discourses

it evokes. . . . '[N]ontraditional' documents . . . must be read and analyzed for the purpose of unraveling the politics of gender and sexuality—especially relating to Chicano gay men" (141). As the work of authors such as Rechy, Islas, and González have gained more traction and a growing list of queer Latinx writers gains wider circulation, I would add that it is also now necessary to revisit traditional literary archives in nontraditional ways. In accounting for the experiences of queer migrants that institutional archives in the novel cannot or will not account for, González invites readers to interpret the queer possibilities imaginatively archived in his novel, possibilities neither Leonardo's nor state records can contain.

### Documenting Migrant Narrative

González opens the novel introducing the ethnographic project Leonardo has been assigned and underscoring the methods he uses to account for the experiences of migrant workers in the vineyard. Leonardo's methodology is important because it frames the limits of what he can access as an amateur researcher through traditional methods. Although, as Bush notes, "Almost immediately the reader is confronted with what appears to be an earnest son returning home to capture the history of his family" (36), this first impression unravels as he methodically composes an archive of family documents and recordings to interpret for institutional assessment. The question of what to capture is embedded in the structure of the novel, signaling brief lapses of time between vignettes, the first one opening at 3:05 a.m. and the second shifting perspectives to another character in the community by 3:45 a.m. The opening scene describes doña Ramona, Leonardo's mother, speaking into and replaying a recorder in the darkness of the early morning: "*I once heard talk about a woman. The machine repeated the phrase with a staticky sound. Doña Ramona pressed the stop button to reorganize her thoughts*" (3). The narrator suggests her recordings are not impromptu but intentionally organized and purpose-driven recollections. The stakes of the project are presented as quite high: "[T]his was Leonardo's college project and it would please him to know she was taking it seriously. God knew she could do very little else for her son, the future professor" (5). Her narrative is not without incentive, as Leonardo's good performance is contingent on her own. As Eils argues, "Doña Ramona is fully aware that her son has positioned her as an informant; as long as she can tell stories on her own terms, however, she is a willing participant" (40). Doña Ramona's own narrative, then, is mediated by Leonardo's current and future relationship to the university. As the novel progresses, doña Ramona periodically repeats the process: "She stopped the tape, re-wound it, replayed the last few sentences, and then pressed the record button once again" (González 6). These temporal gestures both introduce the

preconditions for the value of the stories doña Ramona will record and make the reader aware that the novel presents experiences beyond the record's scope.

González uses this narrative space to explore the skeptical relationship between migrants and institutional archives by foregrounding characters whose relationships with archival memory are far more ethereal. The narrator explains the pretense of the project as a demand for "[p]eople stories" instead of lore: "Leonardo had shoved the recorder against her face and she drew away from it with suspicion. . . . 'Anything you want. . . . You can tell me about your childhood in México. Or about the first time you crossed over to the United States. About your friends, your lovers'" (5). Chastising her son, doña Ramona apprehensively establishes parameters between the project's instructions and its intrusions. She allows him access to supplementary materials: "He came to take things from the family album, to make photocopies of birth certificates, church records, old post cards and letters," some of which are personal documents migrants are required to submit when applying for legal residency in the United States, that would confirm to Leonardo that she enthusiastically supports his education and future prospects. Although the novel does not dwell on the methodologies Leonardo learns, his approach to gathering data echoes surveillance practices familiar to those who make up migrant communities such as the one he grows up in and documents. Underscoring the deep contrast between Leonardo's approach to documenting doña Ramona's experiences and her own desire to share her stories, the narrator explains: "He even took her palm prints by pressing her blistered hands into a dish with blue paint. Now he wanted to take the stories she had been telling him all along. Now he wanted to pay attention, but through the little black box. As usual, documents held the only truths, the only valid facts" (5). In mimicking the biometric data gathering central to US surveillance of documented migrants, the text foregrounds Leonardo's mediation of doña Ramona's narrative through the methodology he deploys, balancing her narratives with what could be considered by an amateur researcher undeniable evidence, refusing what else the weathered hands could attest to.

Leonardo translates a legally refutable subject in the United States into an irrefutable narrative that derives its value from the process and means by which the story is archived and interpreted. The focus on doña Ramona illustrates, as Eils claims, that "The intimacy that interests Leonardo is not in relation to his mother but to her private stories" and the value they add to his research project (41). Before doña Ramona resumes her recording, the narrator intimates her stakes in the project: "Leonardo got his reward, and she got hers: listening to her own voice embedded in the static had the effect of someone else talking to her. Hearing the stories through a different voice made them sound so fresh and new" (González 5). Doña Ramona and Leonardo share a base source of materials—recordings, photocopies, and photographs—that they find respectively valuable in their newness and original contribution to his class, which deeply

affect how each narrates migrant life. The archive's potential to produce a new narrative is echoed by Leonardo's memories of enrolling in school and applying for financial aid. As the narrator notes,

When [Leonardo] filled out his college applications and financial aid forms he had been disheartened by the many times he had to write down his father's occupation. Embarrassed to fill in the line with the words "farm worker" he searched for alternatives. "Farmer" was misleading; . . . "laborer" was just a heartbeat away from "serf" or "peon." Finally he found the perfect word: "agrarian." (201)

Like his mother, he pauses to gather his thoughts before recording his responses. These first-generation student rites of passage become occasions for data gathering, soliciting personal details to produce an institutional archive about an individual, that compel Leonardo to reinscribe his experiences based on how he hopes to be institutionally legible. Like her son, doña Ramona's investment in the project and compliance with its surveilling demands are tied to the new forms of legibility made available through archives such as the tapes and the university's database.

*Crossing Vines* dwells on the permanence of Leonardo's archive: the stories it can, cannot, and will not tell. The closing vignette features a final altercation between doña Ramona and Leonardo, leaving the reader with an explicit condemnation of the experiences recorded on tape. She tells her son: "What good am I if not to entertain you with these senseless little tales? How else will you know I once lived? And what will you remember of me when the last word has been spoken, Leonardo? Even now I'm simply a ghost of a voice to you, aren't I?" (215–16). González concludes with a realization not only of the value of doña Ramona's story but also of how the records of it will come to stand in for experiences that Leonardo will not listen to without the mediation of the assignment and recording device. In noting that the record cannot confirm to Leonardo that she once lived, she stresses that there are experiences beyond the record's reach and that the life to which the tapes attest is not her own but instead one compelled by Leonardo's research agenda. Importantly, she does not describe her voice as ghostly but instead herself as only a ghostly voice, a reminder of the longevity of the archive and how it has and could continue to supplant her own stories. As with any assignment, Leonardo will make choices in content that will not only limit the way doña Ramona is institutionally read but also how she is personally legible to her son. In a sense, doña Ramona comes to understand that supporting her son's education in any way possible demands that she engage with a son being institutionally taught to read her differently. Like Leonardo rescripting his father's profession in the financial aid office, she realizes how the archive limits not only the story Leonardo can tell but also how Leonardo might rescript her life based on the audience for whom he interprets the recorded material.



## Imagining Queer Residence

González mirrors the transformative possibility of Leonardo's archive in the interpretive possibilities and foreclosures of other institutional archives through his focus on queer migrants. The first vignette that centers a queer character focuses on Aníbal Pérez Ceballos, a recent migrant to the United States whose narrative fluctuates between the experiences that take place during the workday and the reasons that prompt him to migrate. The son of a wealthy entrepreneur from northern Mexico, Aníbal's narrative runs counter to the stereotype of undocumented migration being exclusively prompted by economic need. González presents Aníbal's departure from Mexico as a resistance to the pull of his inheritance, asking readers what the implications of migration might be in the occasion that upward mobility is less or differently at stake.

As a context for the motivations for Aníbal's migration, the novel describes the place from where he migrates as a city segregated into resident and migrant communities that remain, however, mutually constitutive. The narrator explains that the difference between those that permanently reside in Mexicali—a border city in Baja California—and those who are seen as transient city dwellers informs both behavioral expectations for those who live along the border and those who cross it. According to the novel, "The unwritten rule was that if a man had roots on the border he maintained them. Only poor migrant campesinos from southern México actually crossed it; if they lived on the border they did so in ejidos, the barren outskirts of the city, with no running water and no street names. They didn't live anywhere and nobody really cared" (76). The border, in this sense, is depicted as a site where people who are acknowledged as legitimate residents live in mapped out and named places, whereas migrants, living in uncharted parts of the city, undergo a process of erasure that positions them at the margins of recognition, engaging with the transformative US-Mexico border before they even cross it. These processes illustrate what Mary Pat Brady terms the "alchemy" of the border, "which works in part as an abjection machine—transforming people into 'aliens,' 'illegals,' 'wetbacks,' or 'undocumented' and thereby rendering them unintelligible . . . [and] ontologically impossible, outside the real and the human." This inscription of the migrant is rooted in a dislodged temporality that locates a person differently on either side of the border where "someone [is] either more or less advanced, more or less modern, more or less sophisticated" (50). As the narrator explains, "if a long-time border resident took that extra step into foreign soil then everyone would wonder: no money? no pride in México? no place to hide?" (González 76). These questions reframe and reinterpret the migrant narratives that readers come to intimately know throughout the novel, including Aníbal's.

*Crossing Vines* situates Aníbal's consideration of migrant identities in queer contexts to define migration outside of financial need and introduce the

plausibility of his migration despite first presenting him as an unlikely migrant subject. In one of the character's memories, Aníbal and Jorge, his love interest in Mexico, sit on the second floor of a hotel under construction by the former's father at the US-Mexico border. Although prospective migrants remained largely invisible to Mexicali residents, Aníbal's father "had to admit the company stood to gain by this tragedy—. . . the new hotel had a better view of the international border's wire and steel barrier. México's Great Wall—a perfect tourist draw for the new hotel, and a discreet bonus for his father's company" (183). Jorge notes: "If you look closely you can see the wetbacks crawling through the shadows like rats. . . . If these people could actually think ahead they wouldn't be sneaking into the United States to compensate for their lack of education and money, not to mention common sense" (184). Jorge's observations underscore how "the border operates as a critical juncture for imagining community and exerting claims on either nation. In this context, the crossing *itself*. . . shapes the political disposition of the larger transnational community of unauthorized migrants" (Schmidt-Camacho 287). Jorge suggests that the presence of migrants, otherwise rendered practically invisible temporary settlers in the outskirts of the city, is only recognized at the moment that they become part of the legal spectacle of the border, which benefits Aníbal's father financially and allows Jorge to assert his own status as a privileged Mexican citizen. Aníbal, however, understands the irony of his lover's denigration of undocumented migrants given their own marginalization as gay men. In response to Jorge's characterization of migrants, Aníbal denies him a kiss, entangling his own responses to migration with the ways their affection could be observed. In the refusal, Aníbal acts both as a disgruntled lover and a citizen in response to his lover's expression of disdain, suggesting the border serves as a site of surveillance where border-crossings and the characters' sexualities are both available for legal observation.

Aníbal's relationship with Jorge, both through his perceptions of migrants and his later invitation to leave the city with him, renders the US-Mexico border a site where queerness emerges as a transnationally unsanctioned identity in González's novel. Filling the reader in on details of Aníbal's life in Mexicali, the narrator reveals that he was engaged before migrating to the United States. As Aníbal's commitment to marry Talina, the daughter of lawyers, "was about to be printed in the papers, . . . Jorge came forward, pleading with him to call off the engagement, to run away with him the way they fantasized after making love. Aníbal and Jorge. Forever" (González 76). González foregrounds the stakes of Aníbal's decision by contrasting the archival public announcement of Aníbal's engagement with the more ethereal fantasy of a life together with Jorge, illustrating how the archive produces a stand-in narrative for Aníbal's homosexuality, one that denotes Aníbal's conditional inclusion in both the family, business, and country. Interrupting the engagement through which Aníbal would maintain his roots at the border, he confesses his plans to Talina, who in turn shares them with her

father. This revelation depicts the border as a setting that "socialize[s] migrants in their passage from citizenship to noncitizenship, authorized status to unauthorized status" (Schmidt-Camacho 287). However, Aníbal's shift from authorized to unauthorized resident functions in relationship to his recognition by others as queer rather than to the popular local perception of migrant communities based on class and race.

Aníbal's migration, then, is multiply motivated by his former fiancé's and family's acknowledgement of him as gay, his financial estrangement from the family, and the erasure of his homosexuality from and through archival accounts of the broken engagement. The character imagines the public spectacle through headlines that would circumvent a public confirmation of his homosexuality: "*Talina had a change of heart; Talina's too young to marry, say parents; Young Pérez Ceballos needs to secure his future first,*" and he resigns himself to "the escape: the move out of his parents' household and into Nana's, the resignation from Industria Pérez, and the jump across the international border, without Jorge who had betrayed him" by migrating to the United States without him (González 76–77). After Jorge's deception, Aníbal is left free to step up to the expected narrative on which his future fortune is contingent but instead makes himself both subject to and the subject of the spectacle he previously witnesses with his then lover. Having a place to hide and access to wealth, his absence through migration would be understood publicly as a lack of pride in his country, according to the novel. However, as Ernesto Javier Martínez argues, "Queer Latina/o migration (from ethnic space to white queer space) is driven not necessarily by a desire to dissolve ethnic heritage and ties to communities, but rather a desire to express queer desire and sociability" (92), although these migrations "are never simply autonomous 'decisions' to move away in order to actualize alternative forms of sexual desire . . . but are always complexly motivated and related to realities of urban displacement" (93). Similar to migrants assumed by the community to be financially destitute, Aníbal's sexuality, precluding his family's financial support and employment, socially dislocates him and renders aspects of his life illegible to those considered legitimate citizens of the border city. The dissolution of his prospect for marriage and family in Mexico, the literal dissociation from marriage as economically or personally productive, renders him excludable both at home and in the United States.

Although the novel does not describe Aníbal's crossing of the US-Mexico border, passages that narrate his experiences as a migrant in the United States restage his departure from his family through his fantasies of following seasonal grape-picking routes with a fellow migrant worker and assumed love interest, Carmelo. Although Aníbal was ready to commit to accompanying Carmelo, "The understanding was clear, but left unspoken. Carmelo would keep his girl on that side of the border, and his male companion on this one" (González 77). Unlike his exchanges with Jorge, the novel presents neither Carmelo's invitation nor an

extended conversation with Aníbal. Rather, the invitation is only referenced by the narrator who explains: “[L]ately Carmelo had been more aggressive with his invitation, almost desperate. Accepting Carmelo’s proposition would give him more distance from the border, from Jorge and Talina, and from his parents” (38). Because his reflections on migration are always tied to following or leaving a love interest, the novel appears to follow what Martínez critiques as a late twentieth-century assumption that queer Latinx migration operated as a “counterhegemonic acknowledgement that they were negotiating new subjectivities and knowledge through the very act of surviving collectivities through movement” (81), or what he calls a model of “migration-as-emancipation” (80). Imagining Carmelo as a fellow queer migrant allows Aníbal to fantasize about their collective queer survival, but González’s novel refutes the precarious model by explicitly noting the character’s inability to document their relationship.

In one instance, Carmelo asks Aníbal to photograph him in front of a house with a well-kept lawn. Not included in the photograph, “Aníbal imagined the look of envy on the faces of those who saw those pictures across the border. . . . Little did they suspect that it was the eye behind the camera that saw the truth, the whole truth, the necessarily hidden truth” (González 77). Queer desire, left undocumented, is a truth only possible through the character’s fantasies in the novel. Unlike his engagement to Talina, his relationship to Carmelo allows him the liberty to imagine a romantic relationship that can circumvent the demands placed on him by the prospect of marriage. Later the narrator intimates that Aníbal “was so good at making things up, at inventing identities, creating romances and projecting a sentimentality on the unsuspecting victim of his desire” (189). Never confirming or denying the relationship between the two, the narrator simply points to the archival impossibility of the relationship and whether it, if ever real, could counter the narratives inscribed in texts such as the photo. Only Aníbal, behind the camera, sees and knows the necessarily hidden truths of the relationship or the necessary fantasy archival material, such as the photo, can never capture.

González also depicts green cards as archival tools queer migrants use to imagine alternate identities and relationships beyond those the documents are intended to legally signify. After Aníbal migrates to the United States, he quickly gets promoted from the field to the warehouse where he weighs and packages grape. As the narrator notes, the story of his migration can be traced through his shifting names: “Aníbal became Juan Carlos Macías Leyva,” the name on his counterfeit green card, “who became Scaleboy, one transformation after another as if that took him any farther away from the shame” (77). Like other migrants in the field, Aníbal takes on other identities prescribed by his position at work and the name registered on his falsified green card. The narrator explains: “Most of them had carried false IDs like he did. Aníbal mused at the thought of dying, wearing the name on his fake green card: Juan Carlos Macías Leyva. Aníbal

Pérez Ceballos would dissolve completely" (37). Although migration offers him the opportunity to reimagine his own fate through the use of the counterfeit documentation, the imagined identities these credentials make possible are contingent on the documents not being acknowledged as unofficial. These forms of identification allow González to challenge the narrative of migration-as-emancipation through "attention to what it feels like to be negotiating hostilities in place and space" (Martínez 94). The novel shows the imagined liberating possibilities available to Aníbal through the identity of Juan Carlos Macías Leyva while aware that his documents can be subject to state and federal inspection and lead to prospective deportation. As Lionel Cantú, Jr. explains, "Identity papers are one component of citizenship and serve the preservation of the status quo—in a stratified system of 'citizenship,' some are 'more equal' than others" (45). If Aníbal were to die, as the narrator notes, his actual identity, erased by the fake document, would leave behind a corpse whose name, if officially identified, could only be confirmed as a noncitizen alias.

González frames Aníbal's departure from Mexico and his current life in the United States textually to highlight an archive that documents experiences quite differently than how Aníbal actually lives them. Like the imagined headlines announcing the delay in his engagement or the photograph of Carmelo in front of a manicured lawn that hints at a middle-class life inaccessible to him, Aníbal's green card allows him to imagine a life otherwise legally unavailable to him. Aside from appearing to be eligible for work, a reason to procure the green card he shares with other undocumented migrants regardless of their sexuality, Aníbal also is able to imagine himself as a gay permanent resident of the United States. As the eligibility for a green card was by design largely limited to children or opposite-sex spouses of permanent residents and citizens, Aníbal would not then have access to the state-issued document as a queer, single, and childless man without having to do the very thing he left Mexicali to avoid. Aníbal does not necessarily aspire to appear to be a desirable migrant subject. Rather, through the use of the falsified green card, he embodies the very subject that the process that leads to attaining one is designed to exclude. He illustrates how counterfeit documents sometimes make legible queer relationships or desires that then render queer migrants ineligible for green cards altogether. In other words, González reveals that in addition to access to labor, these documents can allow migrants imaginative access to identifications, desires, and experiences deemed excludable in both Mexico and the United States.

### **The Limits of Queer Migrant Imagination**

Unlike Aníbal, González treats the sexual identity of Moreno, another prominent queer character, more implicitly by contrasting others' speculation of his

sexuality with his former experiences as a drag queen and rumored film star named Tiki-Tiki in Mexicali. Moreno, a field worker in the same vineyard, becomes one of the novel's central figures by housing his cousin's husband when he leaves Chela after her second pregnancy. The ambiguity with which the migrant community acknowledges Moreno's sexuality is presented when readers first meet him waking up in a room shared permanently with two fellow migrant workers, Ninja and Tamayamá, and temporarily with Cirilo. Avoiding blame for the foul smell of the room, Cirilo accuses Moreno, the only other person awake, of undercooking the previous night's dinner: "All three of you were firing cannons in your sleep, thanks to those beans. . . . I thought all you jotos knew how to cook." Moreno responds by kicking Tamayamá saying, "I'll show you a joto. . . . Wake up, you cocksucker." After Cirilo lightly reprimands him, "Let him sleep, Tiki-Tiki . . . don't be a cabrón," Moreno replies: "I'm letting you get away with that shit only because you're sometimes family" (González 26). González, placing high stakes on whether others understand Moreno as queer, suggests that "when migrants in the United States claim gay, queer, or other identities, these claims do not simply reflect assimilation to dominant Western sexuality norms. Rather, they reflect complex processes of cultural transformation that occur within relations of power" (Luibhéid xxxi). Immediately, Moreno is framed as a laborer waking for a day at the vineyard, a roommate who has taken up domestic responsibilities, and family Cirilo can rely on, all roles that allow him to negotiate and evade the rumors about his sexuality and earlier drag performances.

Cirilo's banter, although playful, presents Moreno's sexuality as still at stake in the latter's relationship to his familial and labor communities. Moreno's introduction presents what Cantú describes as the "queer standpoint" that "reveals not only how 'homosexuality' as a marginal sexuality influences migration but also how 'heterosexuality' as a normative regime shapes the social relations and processes of migration" (26). Surrounded by his sleeping roommates, the scene frames Moreno's sexuality as both a private family matter and a public concern for the community, both of which shape his experiences as a migrant. With this domestic depiction, González offers a counterpoint to the crises of social and financial standing that drive Anibal to migrate, one that looks beyond same-sex desire to represent queer migration and highlight other ways heterosexuality shapes his relationship to family, community, and archival documentation.

In a later episode, and the final featuring them together, the four characters are driving back to the vineyard for a second shift when they are stopped first by an immigration officer and then the police. On the road, Ninja asks Moreno, rumored to have starred in films as Tiki-Tiki, the origin of the ideas for the unseen archival evidence of his queer performances. Asked by Cirilo to drop the subject, Ninja responds: "It's only talk. . . . We all know Moreno likes women. Right, Moreno?" (González 145). Ninja's unanswered question reveals the permanence of the archival texts in relationships to the stories they tell themselves about each

other to foster more hospitable living and working conditions. Although the narrator is careful not to depict the roommates as homophobic, these moments allow readers to wonder how much each of them already knows or assumes about Moreno despite the absence of the archival footage. On the one hand, Ninja's question can be interpreted as a denial of the performances altogether, affirming the public narrative that Moreno is heterosexual. However, as characters who share a racialization through their nicknames, Ninja, Tamayamá, and Moreno/Tiki Tiki also demonstrate a bond reminiscent of a drag family whose shared names and mutual care imaginatively recreate familial ties when they are otherwise foreclosed. Thus, the question can also be read as affirming the ethereal nature of the evidence of his performances.<sup>5</sup> If "it's only talk," then it is still a story that Moreno and his closest friends and family can carefully treat and negotiate. The conversation triggers Moreno's memories of his performances as an underage drag queen in Mexicali. The narrator carefully describes Tiki-Tiki as an "olive-skin geisha. Clad in a gold kimono and an obi lined with Austrian crystals. . . . The pair of ivory chopsticks sticking out of the wig's bun was studded with abalone shell. Tiki-Tiki exploded with sparks each time she bowed" (145). Although a risky orientalist representation, González maps out the remainder of the memory in a way that folds Moreno into Mexicali's histories of Asian migration, histories that are only available through word of mouth in the novel, like Moreno's queer performances.

As Moreno tells the story of Tiki-Tiki's inception, the novel weaves together Mexicali's Chinese history in the early twentieth century with the character's own migration. As the narrator notes, "Moreno didn't learn the difference between Chinese and Japanese until much later in life," which allows González to provocatively offer a multinational history of migration of both Mexicali and Mexico more broadly (146). Moreno recalls a memory of his father telling him as a child "that the Chinese lived beneath the city, within a labyrinth of tunnels that only they knew how to enter and exit. As proof of that theory he pointed out the time *la Chinesca*, the Chinese business district, was ablaze in flames. Out of nowhere, hundreds of Chinese materialized. Even the firemen became distracted; the invasion made them stop to look for a minute" (145).<sup>6</sup> *La Chinesca* attests to a community whose story is largely left off the record. As Scott Warren et al. underscore, Chinese presence in Mexicali was historically rooted in increasing hostilities against Asian migrants on both sides of the border, as the 1884 Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States "effectively ended Chinese immigration into [the US] through legal means" (65), leading Asian migrants to relocate to Mexicali in some cases through the same rumored "[u]nderground tunnels, used to smuggle both undocumented Chinese migrants as well as alcohol during Prohibition" alluded to in the novel (68).<sup>7</sup> Moreno's father concludes the story, asking his son: "[W]here do you think they all came from?" (González 145). The question, while seemingly referencing the rumored tunnels, also implies

suspicion about the national origin of the communities the narrator describes as invaders, a suspicion similar to the kind Moreno comes to experience after migrating to the United States.

The novel places this recollection alongside the first stop by law enforcement to foreground the tensions between Moreno and the archival texts that identify him. Remembering his performance days while turning paper into origami figurines, Moreno is shaken back into the present when “An INS squad car flashed its lights behind them. . . . ‘La migra.’” The officer greets them, inspects their documents, and asks, “What’s the problem, amigo?” When Ninja complains the procedural inspection would make them late to their shift, Cirilo cautiously responds, “Don’t piss him off, pendejo.” Although Tamayamá fears the officer has walked away to report them, the officer hands back their green cards and apologizes for the inconvenience after asking “a series of trite questions that Cirilo answered politely” (148). Unlike Ninja, who is silenced by Cirilo, Moreno’s voluntary silence in the scene demonstrates that in a precarious moment when a legal performance is compelled by the document he provides at the risk of facing a threat of removal, he resists rehearsing the inspection procedure, choosing to instead carefully assess the story currently unfolding. As Martínez argues, “queer Latina/o identities and subjectivities are harnessed in direct engagement with the *spatialization* of knowledge and power in the social realm” (81). These direct engagements do not necessitate explicit responses to the officer, for Moreno’s silence limits the evidence immigration officials can use to justify his deportation to the documents the agent inspects, suggesting a person’s performance of legality can make evident characteristics that cannot be accounted for by official documentation.

The migrant workers are soon stopped again, this time by a police officer who fatally shoots Moreno after a more explicit resistance to the procedural inspection: “‘They are out to get us, all right,’ Moreno said shaking his head. . . . Moreno slid his green card out of his wallet again. He immediately recognized Ninja’s laminated photograph: brown lips, dark skin. Anyone could have made the same mistake, he thought, tapping the stiff, unbendable card against the dashboard” (González 149). The narrator’s observations suggest that the people in the car are not only indiscernible to the state’s careful surveilling eye but also that the migrants themselves, regardless of whether their documents are official or even correspond to them, are compelled to generically perform legality irrespective of who the card itself identifies. As Alicia Schmidt-Camacho asserts: “The condition of being ‘undocumented’ does not simply imply a lack of legal protection or status but rather entails the active conversion of the migrant into a distinct category of stateless personhood” (302). Lisa Cacho further elaborates that such dehumanizing effects rely on rendering undocumented migrants “*ineligible for personhood*—as populations subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them” (6). Through the description of



Ninja's lips and skin tone on the green card, Moreno demonstrates familiarity with harassment by law enforcement and foreshadows the officers' own scrutiny of the document.

Without inciting suspicion by exchanging cards or offering a justification, they would both be presenting the wrong identification, producing suspicion regardless of the authenticity of the documents themselves. In this moment, the card ceases to be an identification tool and becomes a benchmark the migrant must meet, a performance Moreno refuses in favor of another. When the characters are ordered to step out of the car, invoking the history that informs his drag persona, "Moreno turned around and laughed at the young and obviously inexperienced police officer. The Chinese star twirled in his hand. . . . Moreno decided to poke fun at him by aiming the Chinese star and flicking it toward him" (González 150). Even in his closing moments, the author affords Moreno the dignity of throwing a paper star that says more about who he is and has been than Ninja's green card ever could. His description recognizes the officer's inexperience based on his own ample experience being stopped, echoing his generous interpretation of the first officer's confusion in returning the green cards. Through the implied anticipation of the rationalization of the murder and arguments for the likely exoneration of the officer that fatally shoots Moreno, González demonstrates how the scrutiny of one's queerness limits the ability to document the deaths of undocumented migrants.

The subject of Moreno's loss, although not precipitated by his sexuality, is put to rest when Cirilo urges Chela to reconsider the investigation of her cousin's death out of fear that Moreno's queerness would serve to dismiss the importance of his lost life. Cirilo, wondering how productive the investigation would be, asks Chela: "What's the use in raising hell? . . . Even if we manage to get some fancy lawyer to consider the case, he might change his mind after he finds out Moreno was a transvestite. I've seen this type of information used on television to humiliate the dead. Moreno deserves his peace, doesn't he?" (196). Chela then contemplates the weight of the archive of queer representation on how Moreno's story might be circulated and interpreted. The novel suggests that following up on the murder would only be productive if the victim's past and present performances of gender measured up to legal and cultural expectations, painfully demonstrating that the death of a queer migrant can be more respectfully acknowledged through a community's dismissal of the act of violence rather than through the state's dismissal of his life as one worth legally accounting for. Moreno's queer performances, largely unacknowledged by most characters in the novel while alive, become the primary way in which his identity can be acknowledged by his community and the state after his death. Chela, however, makes evident the consequences of the potential dismissal of Moreno's death to the community: "This is the reason the gringos get away with all this mierda they throw at us. We have to fight back, throw some chingada mierda their way.

It's not so hard. You just pick up the stinky brown stuff and aim" (197). Although Chela feels compelled to respond to the death of her cousin, her eventual compliance with Cirilo's suggestion reflects the dehumanizing implications of the way the story of his loss, and those of migrant communities more broadly, is told.

## Off the Record

Each of the narrative arcs analyzed in this article concludes with a character dwelling on the permanence of the record beyond a physical absence. Doña Ramona, who introduces the stakes of archival representation in *Crossing Vines*, laments Leonardo's disinterest in her life story beyond the parameters of his assignment. Aníbal dreams of the death that Moreno, holding his roommate's green card, later experiences. Moreno, who is only known to the reader through a nickname and stage name, leaves behind a community anxious enough about the rumored queer archive of Moreno's performances to forgo legally contesting his murder. Rather than the tapes doña Ramona carefully records or the counterfeit green cards around which Aníbal and Moreno imagine the possibility and impossibility of queer migrant life, González's novel critiques the institutional processes by which their stories are gathered, interpreted, and violently cross-examined. In other words, the novel foregrounds concerns about method that highlight the blurred lines between studying and surveilling our communities. Doña Ramona's closing confrontation with Leonardo demonstrates that while the archive can contain what she recorded, it cannot reflect the very domestic tensions the archive's production itself enables. Although the scene serves as an illuminating point for doña Ramona, this interpretative tension between the archive and the experiences it struggles to document is the starting point for the queer characters in the novel. Aníbal and Moreno, like doña Ramona by the end of the novel, have haunting archives of their own leveraged against them from their respective introductions in the text, ones they carefully navigate following their migration to the United States. Although González centers undocumented people in the novel, he directs our attention to how they engage with unpeopled documents, or institutional texts that narrate definitive accounts that differ from the experiences of the subjects they purport to identify and define. That is, rather than holding the migrant accountable to the document, González puts pressure on the documents for not accounting for migrants' actual experiences.

At stake for doña Ramona by the conclusion of the novel is not necessarily what is contained in Leonardo's recordings but instead what he will omit in shaping them into something of academic value to him and what those omissions do to transform the ways her carefully crafted narrative is personally consumed by him. This interpretative relationship between the archive and one's experiences is the starting point for the queer characters in the novel. Similar to how the

recordings allow doña Ramona to participate in her son’s education, Aníbal’s and Moreno’s use of counterfeit documents allows them to participate in an archival economy of migration while simultaneously living and imagining queer lives for which texts such as green cards, doña Ramona’s recordings, and Leonardo’s project do not, often by design, account. González, through both characters, asks us to consider what we do when our stories will not be told, when even the semblance of curating our own is foreclosed, and when the story the documents we carry tells the legal stories of others or other selves. The narrative demands intellectual accountability for why and how we turn to ourselves and our communities for research by highlighting how state surveillance practices might overlap with our own research methods. He illustrates how police and immigration agents have violently trained migrants to keep their actual stories to themselves. While Aníbal does not encounter the same fate as Moreno in the novel, they both underscore that their prospective and present interactions with law enforcement actually have little to do with confirming who they are and more with determining whether they can successfully perform the identity the documents ascribe to them. Notably, neither character expresses an interest or yearning for becoming a legal resident. Instead, they both use forged documents to appear eligible to work on record, like many others, and also to more fully imagine themselves as lovers, performers, and queer residents of the United States. These imaginative exercises, as Moreno’s account demonstrates, find their limits in documents’ institutional interpretations.

However, fiction is not beholden to the same interpretative limitations to which archives such as green cards or Leonardo’s project are subject. The novel sheds light on the tensions the archive produces both in the communities it tries to document, such as those between doña Ramona and Leonardo, and those it often tries to elide, such as Aníbal and Moreno. In other words, González’s *Crossing Vines* captures something Leonardo’s project, which he eventually titles “*Crossing Vines: A Field Study of the Culture of Work (Grape Pickers Are People Too!)*,” does not. Similarly, the novel represents queer characters in ways that the documents they carry and the state institutions that issue them will not. Leonardo notes the affordances of fiction as he sifts through his collected archival material: he “rolled his eyes and shook his head. Why hadn’t he stayed enrolled in that fiction writing class? He would have learned to invent his family history. Too late,” even if, unbeknownst to him, he is already doing precisely that (204). Although, given González’s characterization, the reader would be justified in being concerned about the kind of fiction Leonardo would produce about his family and community, the novel, as an eponymous alternative to Leonardo’s field study, shows the possibilities that fiction makes available for subjects already skeptical of the representative limits and shortcomings of institutional archives. More so than his other works, *Crossing Vines* stakes a claim for fiction as currently and urgently relevant to Chicx studies by foregrounding the erasure that queer

experiences are still subject to through traditional research methods and methodologies. Whereas Leonardo's project and the inspection of green cards puts pressure on the migrants in the novel to disclose information to produce or cross-reference an institutional archive, González asks us to put the limitations of the documents under scrutiny. *Crossing Vines* depicts Leonardo's project with a degree of skepticism but simultaneously presents in fiction a space where that skepticism of how stories are extracted and mobilized against migrant communities can be productively challenged, critiqued, and retold. Fiction offers, more than a product of the documentation and interpretation of a subject's experience, imagined possibilities composed intentionally for wide consumption and interpretation. In representing what these archives cannot, *Crossing Vines* makes a case for the utility and centrality of fiction in attending to the often intentional oversights of institutional archives, including those of our own fields of study.

## Notes

1. I use the terms Chicax and Latinx, even when referencing works that would have been described as Chicano at the time of their publication or living authors who might identify as Chicano today, in the inclusive spirit of the terms' current use and the interpretative possibilities they gesture to in their current political activation. Rather than a refusal of historical specificity, my use of the "x" signals that when we center queer works in our understanding of Chicano literary history, we are not only placing the weight of Chicano history on gay Chicax texts but also placing the weight of contemporary Latinx cultural politics on our assessment of our own exclusionary histories.
2. Permanent Resident Cards are more popularly known as green cards. I use "green card" throughout the article to foreground González's choice of terms and to account for both state-issued and counterfeit versions of the document.
3. A notable example of this phenomenon is the aforementioned exclusion of homosexual migrants from entry to the United States under the category of "psychopathic personalities" in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, upheld as constitutional by the Supreme Court in *Boutilier v. Immigration and Naturalization Service* (1967), and in effect until removed by the Immigration Act of 1990.
4. Both John Rechy's and Arturo Isals's debut novels, *City of Night* (1963) and *The Rain God* (1984), respectively, open prominently featuring the family. Rechy's preface describes the family that the anonymous protagonist leaves in El Paso and the second opens with Miguel Chico, one of the protagonists, visiting his family in a town inspired by the same border city.

5. Although the use of Tamayamá could imply that the character is himself of Japanese descent, I describe it as a nickname because its recurring use in the novel signals a particular racialization of the character, even if it is his surname.
6. Lore about the tunnels dates back to at least the 1923 fire that took over the district's main callejón, likely the one referenced by Moreno's father. Other similar fires have sparked local and Mexican national interest in the tunnels, with the most recent taking place during the summer of 1992.
7. In Mexico, the hostilities took shape through racially motivated assaults against Asian migrants, most notably *La Matanza de Chinos de Torreón* of May 1911, when over three hundred were killed, falsely accused of being complicit with the military forces of Porfirio Díaz after Maderistas took the northern city in the state of Coahuila during the Mexican Revolution.

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