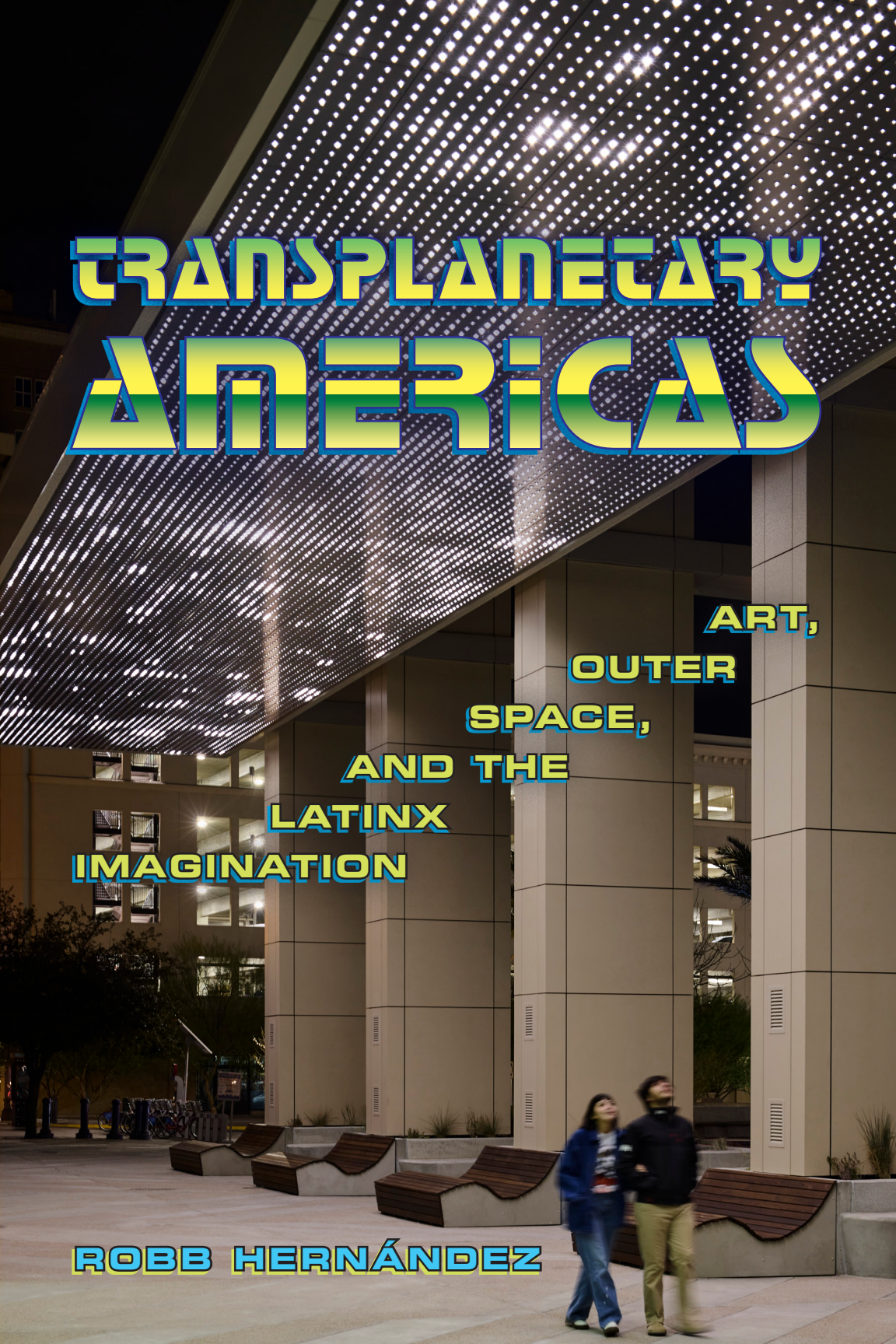




TRANSPLANETARY AMERICAS

ART,
OUTER
SPACE,
AND THE
LATINX
IMAGINATION

ROBB HERNÁNDEZ

**Transplanetary
Americas**



BUY

Transplanetary Americas

ART,
OUTER SPACE,
AND THE
LATINX
IMAGINATION

Robb Hernández

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In memory of
Robert M. Hernandez
(1951–2020)

For Lincoln

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Acknowledgments

Perhaps my first “transplanetary relation” took place in the discreet corners of my childhood bedroom in Boulder, Colorado, in the 1980s. A space capsule toy box brought US Cold War politics into our Mexican American household. Between this plastic monument to Project Mercury and my dad’s sojourns to the local video store, where cover art in the horror and science fiction section delighted my young eyes, these outlets stoked my imagination and unexpectedly opened strange new worlds for me. Besides kid amusement, space science and technology were always there. Rocky Flats was an ominous yet recurring name that provoked alarm and fear around my grandmother’s kitchen table. Fabled stories about radiation exposure and “running hot” sparked anxiety among my mom and her sisters, who worried over brothers, husbands, and cousins working long hours at this nuclear weapons manufacturer. Though these family members all bought homes, purchased trucks, and raised families, many had unexpectedly short lifespans or compromised illnesses. Little did I realize that this toy box, an innocuous relic of NASA space boosterism, symbolized the human price of this labor that my uncles gave to the US defense industry. Certainly this fraught relationship among corporations, government agencies, and vulnerable ethnic populations is not new under the auspices of racial capitalism and settler colonial violence, the ways in which our backs and bodies forged US space industrialists’ march toward the stars cannot be overlooked. My drive to look up or even occupy a plastic spacecraft with the fantastical desire to go skyward punctuated how outer space came home to us and other working-class Latinx households in ways left unsaid in the grand narrative of the modern space program. Could art history offer some answers? My efforts to crystallize that connection mark this book’s “one small step,” as Neil Armstrong put it, to reckon with Latinidades’ deep entanglements with space, art, and politics in ways not yet told.

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My collaborative work with Matt Shindell from the Space History Department at the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) on an oral history project entitled “*Estrellas y Cuentos*” (Stars and tales) gathered nearly twenty interviews with Latinx artists for whom outer space, space science, and science fiction were influential registers in art making and cultural expression. These dialogues took place under the unpredictability of pandemic lockdown when plugging into Zoom, computer terminals, and recording software ironically offered closeness through otherworldly suppositions and utopic outlooks. For that, I am deeply appreciative to Matt and the artist participants, whose words galvanized the transplanetary-relational framework that is the focus of this study, among them Elia Alba, Angel Cabrales, Beatriz Cortez, Hector Hernández, Dario Robleto, Clarissa Tossin, Rafael Vargas-Suarez Universal, Simón Vega, and others.

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Mary and I reunited in the aftermath of the sudden passing of our friend and colleague Angel David Nieves. Although he unexpectedly departed, I hope that this book is a testament to the lessons he shared with me in an ethnic studies classroom at the University of Colorado Boulder. Though as a queer of color scholar I am aware of the uncertainty of time, I was truly unprepared for the abruptness of his passing. Such precarity was a hard lesson that I, unfortunately, learned again. His death was shadowed by other losses: my dear cousin Rizzo Benavidez, former University of California Riverside English chair George Haggerty, exhibition designer extraordinaire Zaid Yousef, cultural visionary Adál Maldonado, personal trainer Jerry Christal, and Aunt Marianne Romero, a glorious matriarch in embroidered Mexican garments unafraid to remind me where I came from. One of my last conversations with Ricardo Ortiz was over boozy cocktails talking about this manuscript, my family, and the future. His loss is reexperienced with every trek down Fourteenth Street. Of course, the greatest of these travesties was my dad's passing from COVID-19 causes, sparking a search to rectify a story about art, space, and beyond in ways reflective of him. If anything, I surrender this visual archive as a testimony about his life and other kinfolk who turned to science fiction to remedy themselves and to better this and other worlds. Though his death opens this book, our journey does not end there as his presence pervades these pages and bleeds into my present in ways that inspire introspection and rediscovery every day.

To get through this, I found solace in a young man from Fullerton with the solidity of the Rockies and the buoyancy of a tennis ball. Stephen, little did I realize the unexpected journey we were about to find ourselves on. From the sand-dusted trails of Mt. Rubidoux to the lush hillsides of the Hudson

River, we imagine alternative futures together, and I can't think of anyone I would rather dream with. You remind me that "I tell jokes," and with side-splitting laughter this place becomes less grim. Your light conquers the folds and shines on me in ways that spell new adventure and invite the creature comforts of home, rich with plushies and the crackling sound of our fireside retreat. I look forward to each new morning with you.

Impressive in the aftermath of Dad's passing is my family's resilience. Mom is a boulder, and like her birthright, she refused to crumble when the rest of us did. She was tested in ways that seemed insurmountable, but when I see her toiling in the garden and sowing new seeds, she proves each new spore is precious. As she communes with the most ancient of ways, Mom knows that tomorrow is a gift that must be nurtured. I am honored to be her son. My brother, Lonnie, rose to life's challenges with the acrobatics of a Jedi knight growing at each new responsibility (*leveling up*, in gamer speak), becoming a husband to Margarita and stepdad to Hayden in ways that would have made Dad proud. Last, and certainly not least, our lives changed when we welcomed my nephew, Lincoln Hernandez, into the fold. His arrival came when we needed him the most, and like his namesake, he formed a link anchoring us through turbid times. With his boisterous laughter, flair for science, and technological wizardry, he is the best of us. I pray for you a future where monsters are tamed, bubblegum is plentiful, and wishing wells give you everything that your heart desires. To you, and your new sister, Savanna, a better world is dawning.

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XXII ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Introduction

ART AT THE OUTER LIMITS OF LATINIDADES

“Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmission. . . . We will control the horizontal. We will control the vertical. . . . You are about to experience the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to . . . The Outer Limits,” warns the hijacker as the oscilloscope frequency bounces at the backdrop of the TV show’s title card. The sound wave crescendos over a booming score composed by Dominic Frontiere. The theme music’s foreboding chords warn of something ominous over the horizon.

Indeed, something ominous was approaching as the man watched *The Outer Limits*, a short-lived science fiction–horror serial that ran from 1963 to 1965. The DVD played despite his ailments from a COVID-positive diagnosis in October 2020. What he saw before the paramedics pulled him away is a matter of speculation. However, what that show represented to me, his son, was haunting during the confusing period that followed when social distancing, hospital internet goodbyes, and probate attorney appointments occupied my conscious attention.

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“Tourist Attraction,” the first *Outer Limits* episode on the disc I recovered from Dad’s DVD player, is set in a fictitious Republic of San Blas. The voice-over indicates that San Blas is located west of the Orinoco basin, a watershed encompassing Colombia, Venezuela, and Guyana.¹ However, the actual San Blas is an archipelagic chain of islands north of the Isthmus of Panama. The Caribbean tenor of the region is twisted and confused on-screen, as images of the Sierra Madre mountain ranges are shown instead of views of Central or South America. Thus, Mexico City forms the ambiguous “Pan-American” backdrop against which this creature feature unfolds.

The plot centers around US business scion John Dexter, who is participating in a science expedition to the ancient crater lake of Aripana. Using advanced sonar, hydrophones, and live feeds, his research team studies the depths of the water hole. When Dexter stumbles on a gilled beast hiding on the seafloor, he stops at nothing to capture it. His discovery, the *Ichthyosaurus mercurius*, is a rare primordial marine species that the country’s resident scientist, Professor Arivello, compares to a cross between a coelacanth and an ichthyosaurus, though with evolutionary differences that allow it to survive on land. When San Blas dictator General Juan Mercurio catches wind of the find, a battle brews over the specimen, pitting a greedy US capitalist against a fumbling Latin American communist ruler inept at science and technology but crafty when it comes to leveraging the beast against the businessman. Alas, San Blas’s feats of engineering and infrastructural modernization crumble by the episode’s climatic end. The native creature’s family hears its wails, rallies, and tears through the dam, thus returning the environment to a state where these ancient fish can live freely again (see figure I.1). With General Mercurio’s regime underwater and US corporate capitalists terrified to export the *Ichthyosaurus mercurius*, like coffee, to the Global North, the real monster is not the gilled giant. It is us.

As a genre, science fiction is lauded for its ability to parallel social ills and wield political commentary in ways that are subversive yet encoded. As scholar Samuel Ginsburg notes, “Science fiction narratives are not merely a method of escaping current realities; they are also a tool for articulating their lasting social, political, and rhetorical effects.”² Though he speaks in literary terms, can the same be said for art history’s response to the field?³ Certainly, science fiction’s aesthetic expression has found its way into this scholarship through mid-century modernists’ appraisal of the space age, and even recent curatorial evaluations about Afro-, Latinx, and Indigenous futurisms are germane to this conversation.⁴ However, a science-fictional art theory and method are harder to come by. Art historians, I suspect, are careful not



I.1 A scene from "Tourist Attraction" (1963), Season 1, Episode 13 of *The Outer Limits*, directed by Laslo Benedek. Production still.

to speak of the genre's lowbrow visual culture in the same breath as fine art. Traditional attentions to line, form, technique, palette, and other formal concerns are hardly bestowed on a man in a rubber fish suit, even though he arrived the same year as pop art cemented itself with the *Six Painters and the Object* show at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (see figure I.2).⁵ Despite this surprising popular culture turn in contemporary art, it is impossible for me to ignore the attraction that my dad felt to a TV show such as *The Outer Limits*, even with its caricatured portrayal of Latin America or Latin Americans.⁶ What was it about this low-budget genre and its cheap theatrics that resonated with him as a Mexican American at the alien edges of good health, wellness, and recovery? What indescribable pleasures did a nonsensical tale about the San Blas Islands rouse in him as he confronted life's end? More simply, what answers could a man in a rubber suit present to him about a world turned topsy-turvy by infection, lockdown, and quarantine? I like to think that Dad experienced this Latinx science-fictional representation as a malleable, adaptable, and recognizable site of identification that connected and empowered him, despite his ailments.⁷ My hope in writing this book is that others, too, will *feel* a similar transformation, with something higher up that breaks the surface and articulates a way of being



1.2 In a behind-the-scenes outtake, a puppeteer appears in the *Ichthyosaurus mercurius* rubber suit from “Tourist Attraction” (1963), an episode of *The Outer Limits*, directed by Laslo Benedek. Production still.

in communion with the speculative powers of this and other worlds, a topic rarely broached outside discourses of fandom or audience studies.

Losing Dad under such dire and chaotic conditions animated the outer limits, truer to life than genre fiction. Like Jayna Brown’s own curious ride with her clairvoyant father in “the bleak and bloody dimension we are taught to call reality,” I had not fully comprehended my parent’s impact on my thinking, seeing, and feeling about what was speculatively possible.⁸ I feel that my dad’s hand is guiding me still, leading me to that errant DVD disc, begging me to ruminate on the complicated ways in which Latinxs invest in, think with, and respond to a genre in search of something *más allá*: seeking a beyond outside present realities, even outside Earth. To “adjust the picture” and reclaim not just the horizontal but the vertical, as the commanding voice control of the hijacker in *The Outer Limits* says, evokes another kind of Latinx culture making. Adjusting to an upward scaling allows for another orientation of Latinx creativity, one unbounded by the gravitational pull of the physical world. Rather, this expressivity emerges from the abyss like the *Ichthyosaurus mercurius*, arising in search of justice, liberation, and answers from up there. Turning vertically, this book offers a way to study the ascendant attentions of

artists of Latin American descent that expand the terms of Latinx belonging, expressions which traffic in what I call *transplanetary relationality*.

Before I define this operational modus of the project, it is important to foreground an aerial redirection for the study of both art history and Latinx studies more broadly. This directional shift is necessary because of majoritarian presumptions that “defin[e] Mexico and Mexicans [and by extension Mexican Americans] as backward and technologically inferior,” according to Curtis Marez, or represent technology as the “techno-colonial and techno-authoritarian alienation of the Caribbean in popular narratives of space exploration,” as Samuel Ginsburg writes.⁹ As a result, major and minor players in Latinx creative cultures are crudely left in the rearview mirror in the story about the modern space program and its art-science inflections. Such disjunction raises an important question: Just how does an art history of outer space, science, and speculation grapple with someone like Dad? As a child born in 1951, he learned, played, and grew amid the space race pitting the United States against the Soviet Union in a truncated version of the complex geopolitics at that time. Television shows such as *Captain Video and His Video Rangers* (1949–55) and *Space Patrol* (1950–55) captivated viewers of all ages, especially children. Fast-forward thirty years, to when Dad would wear his *Captain Video* baseball cap while rummaging through his rat’s nest of wires, hi-fi components, and pirated VHS tapes, indicating his answer to the call of a 1980s home entertainment boom.¹⁰ His stylish, self-labeled “system” of speakers and subwoofers was adorned in sequined fabric selected by my mom, adding sparkle to his latest cable channel interception (see plate 1).

These memories of Dad’s art, media, and technology choices spur a new understanding: The nexus they share offers a minor yet profound insight into Latinx culture making in ways little considered in a US space-age corpus, science fiction studies, and Latinx media studies, all of which appear unaware of the domestication of home entertainment systems in ordinary Latinx households. Evidence of technology’s intimate reach is observed from a 1982 snapshot (see plate 2). Dad, frequently seen at family functions with a camera in his hand, counters my uncle as Mom breaks into laughter at this dance of dueling photographers. This “mountain Chicano” precept precedes Graciela Iturbide’s much-lauded urban portrait of a Chicana versed in her own image making (see figure I.3). These pictures capture a photographic vernacular, demonstrating how a Mexican American visual culture was taking shape under a cyclopic optic. More than hobbyists, these Chicanxs were equally technophilic and even alien-eyed in appearance, expanding how Latinx cultural producers responded to a racist and invasive camera culture where intrusive lenses, spy



I.3 Graciela Iturbide, *Cristina tomando fotos en Los Angeles* (Cristina taking pictures in Los Angeles), from the series *White Fence, East LA*, 1986. Gelatin silver print, 16 × 20 in. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of Rose Gallery, Santa Monica, CA.

planes, networked satellites, drones, and space probes articulated policing advancements affecting US communities of color and the immigrant populace.

Despite these kinds of portrayals of high-tech Hispanics, the image archive about this contentious period of US-Soviet hostility typically focuses on artworks funded by NASA (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration), a topic I take up further in chapter 1. These artworks were completed at the behest of NASA administrator James Webb and the National Gallery of Art's curator of paintings, H. Lester Cooke, in 1962. US artists like Fred Freeman, Robert Rauschenberg, Norman Rockwell, and Andy Warhol (among others) honed a visual language that boosted the technology and future design of tomorrow with little consideration of minoritarian subjects' place in it.¹¹ The artists who are the focus of this study dare to reset the terms of these spacefaring visionaries, with machinic monocles being redirected and refocused as seen in these photographs; they reverse the lens, crash zoom, and, with ocular enhancement, link this world to other versions of reality in heightened ways.

This book's point of view amplifies creativity in a threefold way: art, science, and speculation. In its many cultural variations, speculation specifically

has stimulated gregarious forms of Latinx expressivity that embrace the interstellar traffic of outer space, prod celestial bodies, and propose astronomical idioms little explored in art history, cultural studies, science or technology studies, and cultures of media use and production. So why does art history—and, for that matter, *Latinx* art history—find it difficult to confront this multimodal register? One reason is that Latinxs have resided in the blind spot of the Cold War, portrayed as witnesses to but not participants in a battle for technological mastery and scientific superiority between so-called first-world superpowers. Keep in mind that although Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez was trailblazing, becoming the first cosmonaut of Afro-Caribbean heritage on Russia's Soyuz 38 mission in 1983, his symbolic flight on behalf of Cuban and Soviet cooperation did not alter the relations of power, technology, and colonialism. As Juan Toledano Redondo observes, "The country never created a similar aerospace industry. Its arrival to the stars was . . . by chance; a favor from our [socialist] brothers."¹² During the Cold War, devastation reigned over Latin American peoples, lands, and skies. US interventionism propped up dictatorships, reshaping the geopolitical terrain of the Americas throughout much of the twentieth century. This country's involvement was justified based on the threat posed by communist ideology. In particular, the United States as an agent of empire "had designs on Central American territory since the nineteenth century. . . . This land takeover would later produce the internal social upheaval of the 1980s, subdued to U.S. international interests in confrontation with the socialist bloc."¹³ This history of US corporate, defense, and economic investments was not specific to the "Northern Triangle," a region composed of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras; it also pervaded colonial efforts in the Caribbean, South America, and Southeast Asia. Often this is a story of hemispheric control over territory and sea. But as Tamayo's example reminds us, this story is also about air.

For these reasons I want to reset the representational terms of *Latinidades* beyond the ground and, instead, point the field toward its transplanetary relations. The book's premise is not predicated solely on the gestural act of looking up but, rather, on what that skyward turn means for being Latinx and on the artistic language calcifying in response to this cosmic alignment. In some ways, this study is about how Latinx artists engaged space science and the modern space race, specifically. As a result, this investigation traffics in unexpected junctures, like the founding of astronomy at Cornell University (see chapter 1), the first transborder telescope to traverse the United States and Mexico in pursuit of Mars (see chapter 3), and Latinx migration spurred by Halley's Comet (see chapter 1). It is also about the entanglements

of space, time, and planetary matters when the human-centered lessons of Latinx humanities loosen and embrace the vastness of the universe. When Latinidades are linked within a planetary nexus of interstellar connection, new emphasis emerges around vision, scale, movement, and visual and material expression (areas I will expand on momentarily). In short, this book demonstrates how, since the nineteenth century (and even in the ancient Americas), Latinxs have had intimate knowledges of astronomy if not of the universe and responded with creative innovation. But how to understand this vertically inclined conception of Latinx studies broadly?

Since the 1990s a transnational turn has refocused this ethnic study in response to a critical moment of late capitalism. Passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and the Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) a decade later increased global circuits of US domination in economic, military defense, and geopolitical sectors. These cooperation agreements of expunged tariffs and trade production expanded a colonial project with devastating consequences for precious ecosystems, natural resources, and vulnerable populations dominated by the exploitative and corrupt forces of nation-states and corporations. The Americas are the “extractive zone,” which Macarena Gómez-Barris calls “the colonial paradigm, worldview, and technologies that mark out regions of ‘high biodiversity’ in order to reduce life to capitalist resource conversion.”¹⁴ In a multinational corporate landscape, a workforce mainly composed of women and Indigenous laborers, vulnerable populations certain to expand profits and widen dividends, is plentiful. The growing manufacturing sector transformed the US-Mexico border region, for example, as well as the police state with militarized checkpoints, law enforcement, and private security firms concretizing regimes of legality/illegality. The transnational turn in Latinx studies affirmed how worldwide forces reshape immigrant lives in ways ill-conceived when ethnic studies programs were first institutionalized in US universities in the 1960s and 1970s. Whether making transparent Latinx immigration through stoop labor akin to the United Farm Workers movement or through factory work in predatory *maquilas*, the field conflates the Latinx body politic with land-based imagery as anchors, border dwellers, or mud people.¹⁵

Consider how South Texas artist Celeste De Luna’s print *Breach Baby* (see figure I.4) draws on this connotation. Here she interrogates xenophobic anxiety over immigrant women’s unborn children, which weaponizes fetuses as covert threats to a US citizen-body. These babies literally breach borders, trespass property lines, violate legal citizenship laws, and thus become the



I.4 Celeste De Luna, *Breech Baby*, 2015. Woodcut print, 24 × 48 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

means to subvert deportation and legitimately *anchor* the undocumented family in the United States. The grounded impetus of her print crystallizes a visual vocabulary tying the cisgender immigrant woman and her womb to the land. Her imagery underscores an episteme that scholars like Frances Aparicio observe in terms of Latinx ethnoracial formation: “The condition

of being Latina/o, today it is more strongly *anchored* in the social, everyday realities of our diasporic communities. . . . It now signals the mutual transculturations and *horizontal* hierarchies that emerge in these spaces.”¹⁶ Her comments implicitly point to the bidirectional axis that humanists and social scientists tether to Latinidades as a category, not to mention a preexistent and uniform reality.

These presuppositions aside, Latinx studies also scales upward, and this path is captured in concepts like the “vertical border,” which describes the multiple checkpoints from southern Mexico to the US-Mexico border that Central American migrants experience, most specifically.¹⁷ This northward transit is vertical “to critique the proliferation of immigration enforcement in Mexico’s interior” and thus to imagine “state power in a spatially linear, ahistorical and top-down framework.”¹⁸ As a social science advance in the field, it is inadequately flat. Nowhere is the vertical border outside the properties of the physical world, and so its meaning is metaphorically relayed. This connotative language is equally reminiscent of Gómez-Barris’s conception of “vertical seeing.”¹⁹ She articulates how colonial and state apparatuses operationalize “territorial oversight” into “visual regimes normalized [as an] extractive planetary view that continues to facilitate capitalist expansion, especially upon resource-rich Indigenous territories.”²⁰ Her point curiously pairs with the colonial surveillants mastering the land in a way that Nicholas Mirzoeff also observes (discussed in chapter 1). My position is not to diminish how this hierarchal visual arrangement or what Gómez-Barris calls the “extractive view” consolidates “an increasing planetary system of control.”²¹ However, aerial scaling in the broadest sense should not overlook the ancient Indigenous lifeways, cosmologies, and speculative discernments, which created sources of cultural knowledge indebted to intimacies, enmeshments, and looks toward the solar system.

Precedents of this transplanetary-relational shift exceed contemporary times. We need only consider how “[Hernán] Cortés was able to easily defeat the powerful Moctezuma, an accomplished astronomer and astrologer, in part because Moctezuma recently had witnessed eight omens that had come to him in a dream, suggesting the end of his reign.”²² One interpretation from the Florentine Codex predicted that the collapse of the Aztec civilization came on the tail of a comet that the emperor observed in the sky. Visions, visionaries, and reenvisionings animate a relationship with outer space that complicates the status of verticality in transnational approaches in Latinx studies. To grasp this directional transformation for the field, another

framework is needed to shift this ethnoracial population's Earth-bound definition elsewhere. But what are we to call a Latinx study in community with celestial bodies, astronomical phenomena, and other worldly realms? More specific, what happens to a racialized visual field like Latinx art when faced by the alternative terms of representation that I am describing? And what approach to take?

This book proposes a theory and method of doing an art history of the Americas that I term *transplanetary relationality*. The four modalities that support its operation—aberrant vision, elevated scale, star-powered movement, and scientific visualization/materialization—I explore more fully in the first chapter. For now, I introduce the historical and cultural scaffolds undergirding my rationale for a transplanetary-relational turn. I explain why Latinx artists practicing at the cusp of art, science, and speculation are little regarded—obscured, even. And I explore the whys behind this veil: a triangulation of how “science fiction art” mediated lowbrow channels in the first half of the twentieth century, how the Apollo program galvanized artistic responses that contradicted or fit uncomfortably around the political tumult of the civil rights era, and how identitarian discourses of nation and period in US and Latin American art historical canons struggled to assimilate the propulsive pathways produced by these artists who frustrate categories of time and place. The introduction closes by elucidating how transplanetary relationality pairs with scholarly alternative futurity projects, which have yet to grapple with Latinx creatives’ space-based thinking: artists for whom aerospace technology, ancient cosmology, astronomical data visualization, or modern space history is central to their practice.

Could lunar regolith simulants or outer planets ever be as important as an aerosol spray can is to Latinx creative expression? The artists centering this study believe so. This art-science and speculative overlap nuances how the dispersed group of Latinx visionaries discussed here are linked because of viewpoint and vertical orientation: being in community with the vast expanse of outer space. Together, they find alternative forms of expression in transplanetary relation, reclaiming and remaking a place between this and other worlds.

Toward Transplanetary Relationality

Transplanetary relationality presents an ongoing yet little-conceived approach for art history, a field with not only less favorable views about science fiction as art but also remarkably little discussion about how these artists

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access speculative expressions and what to discern from that extrapolation. This simplicity misses the transformative process that results when we invite the possibilities of trans- or trans-ing the planet into the art-making fold. Because the Latin root of *trans-* refers to “across, to or on the farther side of, beyond, over” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, I am compelled to think about the way this prefix traffics in *change* in ways proposed by Afrofuturist writer Octavia Butler, who argues that science fiction, “more than any other genre, deals with change—change in science and technology, social change. But [science fiction] itself changes slowly, often under protest.”²³ Although Butler exposes the genre’s perpetuation of whiteness, she also lauds the field’s historic courtship of change, advancement, and, more to the point, transformation. In this way, her advocacy for minoritarian intervention in science-fictional customs curiously pairs with both transgender studies and visual culture studies as areas inherently interested in speculation and the beyond. Francisco Galarte makes this conjunction clearer because “transformations that are material, discursive, and affective . . . might describe forms of attachments, disciplining, and enmeshments that are not solely attributed to bodies that subjectively identify and/or are identified as being transgender.”²⁴

These “enmeshments,” as Galarte describes them, could also be “temporal practices” that align alongside higher, metaphysical, and celestial bodies.²⁵ To be in *transition* with this and other planets, we are afforded “expansive forms of difference, haptic relations of knowing, uncertain modes of being, and the disaggregation of identity politics,” according to Jack Halberstam.²⁶ The strange shapes that emerge from that kind of communion with the universe’s vastness are less preoccupied with an “abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on,” as Gayatri Spivak observed about the globe.²⁷ By grasping the trans-ing potential of Latinx art and speculative study, our attention is no longer about a colonial project of conquest or mastery of territory and less still about an exploration of space for extractive capital purposes. Rather, the relationality provoked here is akin to Spivak’s “species of alterity”; as “planetary creatures,” we belong to biodiverse systems, remap our social worlds and even elevate our viewpoint to the outer limits with an aerial climb.²⁸ By dethroning a human-centered domination of this and other planets in ways that underwrite astronomical knowledge, a transplanetary relation covets the solar system to sidestep a “techno-dominance” posturing, which Ginsburg refers to as “the ways technologies and technology-based rhetoric or imagery interact with, maintain, and facilitate colonization and authoritarianism.”²⁹

Rather, it espouses a linkage to outer space to elicit another kind of transitioning when the body adapts to, aligns with, and even feels the cosmos.

While I expand on specific modes of transplanetary relationality in vision, scale, movement, and visual/material expression in the first chapter, this trans-ing enmeshment reoccurs and has critical consequence for the meaning, interpretation, and making of Latinx art as it cuts across other worlds, timescales, and bodies (of physical and cosmic proportions). Because this creative register negotiates with astronomic objects of grand immensity, what is perceptually legible and thus categorically recognizable as Latinx art must transform. Timothy Morton's argument about hyperobjects as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" is insightful in this regard.³⁰ *Hyper* in that they "occupy a high-dimensional phase space that results in their being invisible to humans for stretches of time," these "entities," as he calls them, "cause us to reflect on our very place on Earth and in the cosmos."³¹ Whether we consider the ancient geoglyphs of the Nazca people in the Andes or even that oscilloscope frequency bouncing on my dad's flat-screen television, we confront "scalar dilemmas" in which our coexistence with geological, climatic, ecological, or planetary dimensions envelops us in ways that complicate an anthropomorphic centering of the universe.³² According to Morton, "Hyperobjects have magnified this weirdness of things for our inspection: things are themselves, but we can't point to them directly."³³ Because the magnitude of the universe is something that we are always in, these trans-ing "enmeshments," as Galarte calls them, hint at how the art practices centering this study bristle at Latinx art's present space-time orientation.³⁴ Even as I employ this art category in my analysis, I do so to encourage a means of visual study that embraces Latinidades' immensity, strange shapes, and "weirdness of things." By thinking speculatively, art historical operations about artworks in observable reality or mediated by firsthand visual investigations destabilize, change, and even ascend. As a result, pursuing a study of this type inherently questions what can be satisfactorily assessed with the naked eye and, in turn, considered a "good object" to submit to visual study's evaluative protocols.

With a transplanetary-relational approach, we expose fine art's frustration to make sense of "bad objects" that upset aesthetic experience, linear chronology, scope, and first-person assessments contrary to our grounded surounds. In this way, a meteorite is equal to Salvadoran art as both become reflections of a common liminal place in art historical discourse. Such comparisons grow more salient in Beatriz Cortez's *Cosmic Mirror (Sky over Los Angeles)* (2022), where steel boulders plot dual pathways to the stars and

Central America, a biomimicry of Latinx art that, like rafa esparza's adobe platforms, sends audiences into a relationship with the planet that is transitory (see chapter 3). As A. Joan Saab puts it about ways of seeing wondrous and fantastic curios, "The viewer must simultaneously suspend rational belief systems yet also maintain certainty in the authenticity of the object on display or the site in question and their transcendent powers."³⁵ While she is mainly speaking of devotional or divine objects, the art-science and speculative intersections germane to my study pose methodological quagmires because this kind of relationality and its expressive articulation complicate a Latinx art grounded in present space-time. This investigation assembles cross sections of artworks in transplanetary relation to show how these unusual pairings, combinations, and co-conjugations demand another approach for a creativity that weirdly entangles with other timescales, expanses, and cosmic bodies beyond the Western colonial foundations of the seeing world. This approach is necessary to explain how other folks of color like my dad transform being in touch with or touched by otherworldly existences. By transitioning Latinx visual culture study toward its outer limits, we can delimit which lane is suitable for arts research from the ground up.

When we move toward these artists' ascendant reach, the terrestrial definitions of Latinx creativity retract, as previously discussed. Instead, this art making's scientific and speculative potency is enhanced and accentuated. As my father's obscurity as a purveyor and custodian of the finest "bad" science fiction media foretells, speculative expression is innovative, and Latinxs, as this book reveals, have long participated in image making versed in the genre traffic of science fiction, fantasy, supernatural horror, the paranormal, weird tales, and, in a Latinx context, the satirical and political narratives of the "illegal alien." These gregarious proposals are unevenly addressed in Latinx art history and even visual culture studies more broadly despite their pervasive presences. When they appear, they are typically under the guise of graphic novels, cartoons, comic book illustrations, or slash fiction (areas worthy of study but unrepresented in this book because of this tendency in literary studies). Even scholar John Morán González underscores the genre's political efficacy because it empowers Mexican American writers "to articulate their most pressing aesthetic and social concerns," a trajectory he predicts will trailblaze the future of Chicanx literature.³⁶ Since the time of his writing, a spate of publications, special-themed journal issues, anthologies, monographs, art exhibitions, and conferences have posed bold questions about not only Chicanxs' but also Latinxs' "collective futures" where "the hoary ghosts of colonialism and modernity . . . continue to exert force

through globalization and neoliberal capitalism.”³⁷ According to Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson and B. V. Olguín, “Since at least the 1970s [Latinx cultural producers] have continued to repurpose and blend genres of sci-fi, horror, and fantasy to defamiliarize the ways in which the past continues to haunt the present and future.”³⁸

Of course, situating Latinx science fiction in terms of a post-civil rights timeline obscures its precursors in not only literature but also visual arts. Had these genre aficionados turned to the artistic record, they would have seen an incredible image archive complicating claims like those lauded by Christopher González, who asks, “Why are there so few such [science fiction] works created by Latinos in the United States?”³⁹ To examine artworks or performance arts would unveil a Latinx penchant for space science history, technology, and extrapolations about the universe that spans the Americas in several watershed moments from the history of Latin American art. Some readers may consider works not extensively analyzed in this book, such as Rufino Tamayo’s steel sculptural ruminations on the cosmos, Raquel Forner’s “astrofauna” spacefaring adventurers, Édgar Negret’s “aparato mágico” (magical devices), and Remedios Varo’s flying contraptions. While these creatives could be called “science fiction artists,” their citations are manifold in postwar art history, though they are often appraised opposite their Latinx counterparts in the United States.⁴⁰

This divide aside, I want to underscore how speculative fiction and popular science have dually excited the creativity of the artists centered in my study. Again, these literary forms combine image and text in ways that influence not only Latin American readers but also stateside Latinx creatives. These encounters through the printed page bolster interdisciplinary visual vocabularies with great impact for these visionaries. *Transplanetary Americas* points to the ways in which science fiction writing inspires artistic questions and practices. One might consider how Clarissa Tossin read Octavia Butler for the writer’s speculative attention to a dystopian Amazon (chapter 5), Vincent Ramos exchanged correspondence with an aged Ray Bradbury and found Venice anew (chapter 4), Dario Robleto was drawn to the popular science writing of Carl Sagan in his production of nineteenth century–inspired vitrine displays (chapter 2), and Vincent Valdez and Ry Cooder were exchanging ideas through the dime-store paperback illustrations of Gerald Gregg, the airbrush trailblazer who coincidentally was born in my dad’s hometown of Lamar, Colorado (chapter 4).⁴¹ Simply, the way speculative print culture was bandied about by artists of the Americas demonstrates how transplanetary relations were nurturing viewpoints from literature to the sky.

Artists like those included in this study remain neglected not only in Latinx art history but across other disciplines as well: literary studies, performance studies, speculative studies, and popular science studies, to name a few. This myopia more than demands an interdisciplinary rebuttal. Such obscurity persists because studies of race and genre in literature and visual culture confront a triple bind.

First, because science fiction circulated in the commercial channels of the wonderfully distasteful record of cheap paperbacks, periodicals, and pulp magazines (a shorthand referring to the pulpwood paper they were printed on), the cover art that formed a “gateway” for readers is deemed too lowbrow to merit attention.⁴² In addition, despite the early contributions of Latinx creatives such as Ale de Cañedo, Alex Schomburg, and Luis Senarens of *Frank Reade Library* fame, most cover artists worked for hire.⁴³ Their contributions to short fiction writing, design, cartooning, and graphic arts are rarely tracked as Latinx cultural texts; and so, their legitimacy as arbiters of the field since the first half of the twentieth century is missing or minimized. As a result, the history of science fiction cover art and illustration is remade into what Merla-Watson and Olguín call “historically . . . a largely white, male, Eurocentric, and heteronormative genre.”⁴⁴ Catherine Ramírez concludes that the genre cultivated “a middle-class, white, male, adolescent nerd” culture, exactly the group whose preparation for meeting Cold War threats was considered vital.⁴⁵ Minoritarian subjects were left out of the equation entirely, while no one seemed aware that these fictional gateways to elsewhere were cultivated by artists of Latin American descent.

Second, the US space program was created in the image of white heteromascularity, with cisgender men composing the earliest astronaut recruits. The Anglocentrism of the Apollo program, in particular, eclipsed gender and ethnic minorities from the nation’s pictorial history of astronautics in image and photojournalist archives. As historian Neil Maher concludes, “Strong, masculine, physically active astronauts appealed to Americans because they symbolized a nation of strong, masculine, physically active men.”⁴⁶ Scholar Sean Topham also notes, “Their pictures were all over the press, they were used to endorse products from cameras to cars, and they even appeared on television chat shows . . . [bringing] a human face to the space age.”⁴⁷ Indeed, that human face was without racial or gender differences even though NASA subcontractor Dr. Randall Lovelace had thirteen women undergo the same rigorous testing that the *Mercury* crew candidates endured in New Mexican

facilities. His efforts were thwarted by order of Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, who told NASA, "Let's stop this now!"⁴⁸ What did emerge were pictures of the Mercury 7's wives as domestic window dressing in the pages of *Life* magazine.⁴⁹ Instead of mirroring the many civil rights actions during this period, the astronaut program perpetuated a vision of space rife with misogyny and gender exclusionism.⁵⁰

Third, this myopia further extends under a modern and contemporary art museum and culture industry suspicious of aesthetic expressions predicated on any of the elements just discussed: lowbrow amusement, dime-novel illustration, and scientific data visualization. Although exceptions are found, the reach of Latinx and Chicax creatives is largely omitted from this repertoire.⁵¹ Part of this book's intervention reintroduces artists who over the past three decades have responded to or practiced in the United States. However, this study thus extends this orbit from the perspective of US racialization to an art-science and speculative conjunction. What happens to "being Latina/o" when *racial formation*, a term that scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant define as the state structures, laws, and other apparatuses of oppression that organize race into social hierarchies, extends to the cosmos?⁵² Emphasizing how these artists' heterogeneous connection to science fiction and space science twists and turns makes it necessary to complicate the identitarian rubrics in which Latin American and American art are based, the nation-period organization of art historical study, and terrestrial definitions of national belonging. Arlene Dávila crystallizes the affordances that "national privilege" provides Latinx artists, which grants access to an art marketplace broken into categories by country, chronology, or even national movement.⁵³ Such saliency allows uncomplicated or "geographically bounded definitions of authenticity."⁵⁴ As a result, one's national identity can enhance access to promotional circuits in which art dealers, gallerists, festival programmers, curators, and tastemakers improve an artist's standing and legibility. Dávila's point further crystallizes the terrestrial investments of major art establishments predicated on geopolitics and territorial delineations.

While I do not dispute the powerful material regard for mobilizing "Latinx art history," I also forward "art of the Americas," aware of the unsatisfactory application of terminology for artists whose space-time, viewpoint, and outlook on reality are transitory and thus incompatible with a US system of racialization in the present. Artist Beatriz Cortez captures this sentiment when she argues, "I don't have an investment of having a US centered identity, even though I see myself as a US artist, I don't have an investment of imagining Central American nationalism. . . . I'm interested

in the Central American experience of people.”⁵⁵ For Cortez, like other artists in this study, the imaginative project of *Latinidades* makes speculation a profound contribution to cultural identities in its trans-ing capacities, its strange shapes, and its aerial standpoints. Cortez and others in this book do more than create art about outer space; they demand institutional regard for alternative experiences and expressions that are “more of a hyperobject than a human life.”⁵⁶ Her comment underscores Sjoerd Van Tuinen’s supposition that “whereas aesthetics already binds the contemporary to the empirical status quo of its immediate past and implements the hermeneutic relations between the object and its observer or reader, only a new, speculative proposition can make us grasp contemporary art in its heterochronic contemporaneity.”⁵⁷ The challenge that this expressivity presents to the field of art history and Latinx cultural studies writ large is how affiliating with outer worlds “cause[s] us to reflect on our very place on Earth and in the cosmos,” as Morton writes.⁵⁸ A transplanetary-relational approach strives to understand how and why these artists’ propensity to look outward and upward is an important cultural reset because it nuances Dávila’s contention that national categories “[make] Latinx creativity impossible to imagine.”⁵⁹ In fact, impossibility is invigorating here. If one recognizes art practices that are simply at the outer limits, the definitional categories matter less and *Latinidades* takes ascending forms.

Many Futures | *Muchos Futuros*

The artwork I describe here may appear to represent a more traditional return to the genre’s origins when Hugo Gernsback’s “scientification” discourse from the US interwar years boosted “anecdotal tall tales spiced with technically inclined questions” and, in turn, forwarded “new methods of story-telling” with plausible techno-science outcomes.⁶⁰ More important, these visual vocabularies also reflect on what Cortez refers to as “untimely conversations.” She argues, “We can create a community across time. . . . The idea that we can choose our own contemporaries, they don’t have to be the people next to us, our contemporaries can be the people that we decide . . . including the ancestors that were building in stone.”⁶¹ Building with the ancestors is another way of accessing “new methods of story-telling” and “new technologies” of space, time, and futurity that aren’t so new after all.⁶² Artists focusing this book establish how transplanetary-relational approaches in art making are done. Less about replicating first-world science with its firm grip on planetary resources and extractive

colonial intent, they work in collaboration with and on behalf of the planet, universe, and ancient epochs.

Understanding Latinidades' outer limits means that the hierarchical powers of aerospace technology are subverted. Earth's atmosphere democratizes as Latinx creatives enable a vertical borderland for liberation and imaginative possibility. Kapton tape, lunar regolith simulant, solar panels, capsule modules, and shiny exterior plating may appear to be the inventory for a NASA space mission, but these items also form the material register through which these artists commune with the cosmos and remake the US space program in the image of themselves and their communities. By reclaiming the skies and speculating on space histories detached from the grip of Westernized space-industry capitalists, they articulate other ways to express political concerns and to stage actions that commune with the planetary systems to which they belong.

These transplanetary-relational pathways are made with an anticipatory impulse that echoes what Catherine Ramírez dubbed *Chicanafuturism* in 2002.⁶³ Her influential neologism forwarded a way of doing Latinx science fiction closely inlaid with art and feminist of color differential consciousness that “permits functioning within yet beyond the demands of dominant ideology”; like “kinetic motion,” it “maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners,” according to Chela Sandoval.⁶⁴ By transfiguring the hegemonic voice of *Chicano* cultural nationalism, Ramírez equally ponders, “What happens to Chicana/o texts when we read them as science fiction?”⁶⁵ Her work covers a swath of important visual and literary publications. She locates science-fictional tendencies in the writing of Gloria Anzaldúa but also contemplates the work of Hispana folk artist Marion Martinez, who salvaged circuit boards and computer waste from New Mexican landfills to re-create Indigenous and Catholic icons in a wired technofuturist image of tomorrow. Ramírez writes that Chicanafuturism is “Chicano cultural production that attends to cultural transformations resulting from new and everyday technologies (including their detritus); that excavates, creates, and alters narratives of identity, technology, and the future; that interrogates the promises of science and technology; and that redefines humanism and the human.”⁶⁶

Her definition is indebted to the important foundations established by *Afrofuturism*, a term first coined by Mark Dery in 1994 and later operationalized by Alondra Nelson, who grew an online community connecting people for whom “technology, fantasy, and ideas about the future could advance

Black life” in the early days of the Web 2.0.⁶⁷ Ytasha Womack clarifies how Afrofuturism operationalizes Black epistemology, ontology, and aesthetics, identifying the concept as “another dream tool in the arsenal to contemplate what may be coming.”⁶⁸ Such preparedness expands on the forward-sighted foundations of Afrofuturism because “artists . . . invoking space through sound, word, and visuals that appear to collapse time to help us reexperience ourselves—unveil a new lens on the potentialities around us.”⁶⁹ Her commentary complements that of Ramírez, who concludes that Chicana futurist art “dares to imagine new ways of being in the future,” affirming that these futurity projects are in close proximity as both praise the empowering promise of dreamers, whether as a toolkit for social justice or a legislative compromise for foreign-born children raised in the United States seeking citizenship.⁷⁰ Although these open-ended outcomes anticipate “freedom” in different ways—“terrestrial bondage” signifies differently for an African diasporic population than a Mexican American one—both frameworks “imagine a future as such within the limits of the here and now[,] ultimately rais[ing] speculative questions about how material conditions would have to be transformed in order to support widespread expectations of the future,” as Curtis Marez notes about the “imaginative labor” farmworkers forged in pursuit of better tomorrows.⁷¹

In their mutual investigations into the elsewhere, the imaginary, and the impossible, artists of color are jointly aware of the politically empowering promise of the genre and, as chapter 4 makes clear, are proposing their own speculative cycles in film and other media arts. Certainly, transplanetary relationality also attunes to the “potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema,” as José Esteban Muñoz puts it.⁷² However, as a theory and method, it differs through its emphasis on the gestural language of looking up, a radiant arc for Latinx futurity that reconfigures the terms of art making and accentuates the meaning of celestial bodies, planetary systems, constellations, and star clusters for the study of Latinx creativity. As this skyward comportment once stirred an eagle-eyed Moctezuma, who foresaw the fall of the Aztec empire in the stars, these artists do the same linking themselves in stretches of generations, species, eras, and even worlds. Although the future has always been present in civil rights movements, mobilized in ways that “dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds,” as Muñoz argues, a transplanetary-relational approach for Latinx art and cultural study separates from that “horizon,” seeking answers through the

enormity of the universe.⁷³ What is demanded is another way to do art history, to seek appraisals that deliberately transgress the bounds of progressive time and cogent realities, embracing expressions that activate Earth's terrestrial stage through unapologetic ascent.

As a result, a traditional art history committed to Western progressive chronologies must be rethought, emptying terms like *modern*, *contemporary*, *new*, and *now*. Artworks of a transplanetary relationality propose a “futural vector outside of historical time and chronological determination,” making “all those forces that never cease to invert the whole system of the fine arts and its orderly linear progression into a simultaneous multiplicity of virtual becomings.”⁷⁴ This temporal patchwork invites the “suspen[sion] [of] rational belief systems,” as Saab argues, and illuminates the invaluable role of the not-yet, the to-be-seen, and the what-is-to-come.⁷⁵ To practice visual study in this way allows for classic counterfactual questioning to grow in importance for cultural assessment. By applying “what if” inquiry to categorical definitions of “contemporary art,” “contemporary performance,” and “contemporary craft,” we find that “the temporal tangle” of artists in transplanetary relation ultimately resets the terms of Latinx art and art of the Americas more broadly.⁷⁶ Just as Armen Avanessian observes that “despite [art historians’] interest in and engagement with contemporary art, most . . . have trouble evaluating art that is being created in their own time, art that points the way, i.e. the way to the future,” the unevenly heterochronic or asynchronous orientation of these creatives’ ascendant orientations demands speculative ways of evaluating art making on pace with different existences, different clocks.⁷⁷

A mélange of artists in this book fits uncomfortably around Western and colonial timescale, reality, and becoming and thus illuminates other relationships with Earth that place as much emphasis on ancient Mesoamerica as on future outer planets. By honoring their “knotty and porous relationship to time,” I advocate for a transplanetary-relational approach that allows these image makers’ experimental questions about the inner workings of the universe to guide a more robust and counterfactual art history. By looking up, unveiling how the tools of visual study may have more in common with those of astrophysicists, aerospace engineers, and practical effects technicians than of fine-art arbiters and aesthete gatekeepers becomes possible.⁷⁸

This ascendant viewpoint remains the most profound yet unsaid register of Latinx creativity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. “Where to go, if not up?” the creatives investigated in this book appear to ask. Think

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of a transplanetary-relational approach as the star map outlining the routes Latinx cultural responses to the outer limits have taken, still need to take, and will use to get there.

Structure of This Study

Four case studies ruminate on Latinx creatives' art, science, and speculative scaffolds. This book offers a transdisciplinary theoretical and methodological framework indebted to a cross section of fields: art history of the Americas, speculative studies, cultures of science and technology, critical ethnic studies, performance studies, queer of color critique, transgender studies, Chicana and Latina feminist thought, Latinx cultural studies, and museum/exhibition studies. The approach showcased here further benefits from other fieldwork practices: close and comparative picture reading, literary analysis, media narrative analysis, art ethnography, curatorial study, and archive historiography. The voices of artists enrich this study, drawn from interviews conducted by space historian Matthew Shindell and me for the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.

As for the origins of speculative studies, literature and motion pictures foreground case studies with four foci elucidating how media-specific practices like public art, installation and spatial aesthetics, practical effects technology, and art activism sharpen Latinx transplanetary-relational approaches with respect to image, materiality, and scale. Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of a transplanetary-relational framework. It explicates how this art, speculation, and science fulcrum is made possible through four modalities rarely explored in Latinx art, performance, and visual culture studies. Aberrant vision, elevated scale, star-powered movement, and scientific visualization/materialization enhance different scaling, showing how looking up is attuned to viewpoints that are vertically aligned, scientifically proficient, and perceptually aware of encounters with the universe from present astronomical resources and ancient Indigenous perspectives. Artworks by Amalia Mesa-Bains, Celia Alvarez Muñoz, Alexander Maldonado, and Simón Vega nuance a vocabulary of art making about celestial phenomena. By bringing aerial surveillance, telescope history, stargazing, and scientific visual renderings into an important amalgamation, they debunk terrestrial definitions of Latinidades and show how migration and border discourse share much with space-based thinking.

Chapter 2 pivots on Ernest Hogan's urban science fiction adventure *Cortez on Jupiter* (1990) to unfetter the future of street art. *Barrio futurism*,

as I term it, was no work of fiction but an important strand of post-1960s Chicana public art practice. Transporting multiethnic publics in Southern California to outer worlds, mural activations like Richard Haro's *Outer Space* (1977), the lunar surface in the East Los Streetscapers' *Moonscapes* (1978), and stars' natural longevity, featured in Vargas-Suarez Universal's *Starcycle* (2014), bring this form of postrevolutionary Mexican political communication someplace beyond material reality. In turn, Latinx viewers arrive at other points of departure that necessitate another evaluative language for murals placed in the vastness of outer space. These futurist musings reveal the muralists' stakes in astronautics, further demonstrating a Latinx cultural politics invested in human spaceflight and off-Earth address.

Beyond the static expression of painting on walls, chapter 3 addresses site-specific installations where stairways, portals, and platforms sensorially cohabitate with deep space. The chapter focuses on Central America as an uncanny playground of Cold War violence and a terrestrial landing from which the NASA Artists Cooperative Program pontificated on the United States' astronautic future in the 1960s. Artists such as Beatriz Cortez, rafa esparza, and Jacqueline Arias reverse these aerial surveys and engage in an "untimely conversation" with ancient Indigenous worldviews that undercut Western and colonial definitions of timescale and progress. Here immigrant laborers build the physical pathways to the stars by "terraforming" the gallery. By recodifying a device familiar to science fiction writers and planetary geoengineers, they resurface sanitized white cubes with extraterrestrial grounds. Together, they rejoin the hands of the builder, toilers of soil, and keepers of the planet in muddy incubators. Whether calcifying these interventions in adobe bricks or oxidizing metals, they stand to remake the museum into a more hospitable environment, one in the image of a great brown world to come.

B-movie rubber suits and flying saucers on strings punctuate an important register combining Latinx creativity with art and technology in chapter 4. Turning to not the sophisticated annals of fine art but instead the pulp archive from the first half of the twentieth century, artists such as Angel Cabrales, Vincent Valdez, and Vincent Ramos revisit science fiction's penchant for gimmicks and low-budget scares to interrogate the monsters stoking atrocities experienced by Latinxs, like border violence, mass deportation, and gentrification. Working in what I term a *Latinf/x sensibility*, they reinvest a rarely considered cultural register—B-movie practical effects—to combat social inequity with lowbrow flourishes and unapologetically bad amusements. Written like a drive-in billing dubbed "Tequila Sci Fi" after Cabrales's poster

series, this chapter invites a reading with 3D glasses where the illusory realm stands out to expose the volatile spectacles targeting multiethnic populations. By bringing pulp art into proximity with Latinx art, these creatives dare to make distasteful media palatable and thus propagate a racialized visual language more conversant with late-night cable creature features than with international biennials.

Chapter 5 examines the artistic responses to the “second space race,” where private aerospace corporations spearheaded by billionaire tech giants are revitalizing a for-profit defense industry with direct impact on the local Latinx residents in Texas. While companies like SpaceX and Blue Origin are merging their corporate entities into recognizable cultural registers, some Latinx creatives are reacting to the future of spacefaring and spacecraft in ways that their postwar Mexican American predecessors could not have foreseen. Women and queers of color are on the front lines of this battle. Using their incipient Latina space feminist knowledges to reignite art activism, they protest the environmental threat these organizations pose to delicate ecologies, housing markets, and healthy biosystems. With a specific look at the insurgent curatorial and exhibition programs of Celeste De Luna, Nansi Guevara, Josué Rawmírez, and Clarissa Tossin (among others), new fault lines and threats mount, which results in a space art resurgence among Latinx communities. Here a burgeoning cultural field arises from which Chicanas and Latinas defend home, land, waterways, and, more important, airspace. Together, they fight for a future free from impending devastation.

In sum, the art, science, and speculative conjunctions harnessing Latinx creativity in this book are by no means complete. The scope of transplanetary relationality is expansive. The speculative aesthetics underwriting it overlaps with the subgenres of cybernetics, robotics, magical realism, comic book narratives, fantasy, and utopia/dystopia, though these tenets are little rehearsed here as they have been explored to different degrees in other important Latinx cultural studies investigations.⁷⁹ However, the approach I present here shows how, despite the sprawl, artists throughout the Americas continually turn skyward for answers. And yet no book-length study has addressed this overlap for Latinx studies, science and technology studies, or art history. Suffice it to say, the synergistic dialogue documented in *Transplanetary Americas* is a first step proving how any position apathetic toward or dismissive of Latinx creative responses to the US space program and its adjoining technologies is willfully misguided.

If anything, this project strives to move us closer to Carmen Lomas Garza's *Camas para Sueños (Beds for Dreams)* of 1985 (see plate 3). Here two

young women retreat to a roof, moongazing into a humid Kingsville night. Dual variations about dreaming appear in the work: One site is an enclosed preparatory interior space, the girls' bedroom, and the other site is the exposed landing on top of the house, where wondrous dreams also happen. As the gazers recline, visions stir among them as they stare at what lies beyond the clouds. Flecks of white paint add dimension to the darkened vista, appearing as stars, light probes, planets, or even satellites that imbue the sky with fantastical possibilities. The figures in Lomas Garza's work comport in transplanetary relation, tilting their heads and pointing up as they give physical vibrancy to this extraterrestrial sighting.⁸⁰ Together, this pair asks the viewer to grasp other perceptual realities in tandem with the universe. What do these young women see beyond their earthly existence? What life exists outside the terrestrial arrest of South Texas and the oppressive grip of gravity, of time and reality? Daring to go to the outer limits at the tips of trees, the arch of asphalt roofing, and the depths of the solar system, this work asks the viewer to dream of life beyond what may seem possible. With a turn of the neck, as Beatriz Cortez gesticulates in chapter 3, these Tejana girls embody an extrapolative act perhaps intended only for Anglo-Texan readers of the *El Paso Herald* in 1927, decades before this scene. "Well, a little star-gazing by El Pasoans now and then won't hurt," it reads. "It's better to look upward than downward."⁸¹

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Notes

Introduction: Art at the Outer Limits of Latinidades

- 1 The original airdate of “Tourist Attraction” was December 23, 1963; it was directed by Laslo Benedek. It was preceded by an episode ironically titled “The Borderland,” though this story was not on the disc that I retrieved.
- 2 Ginsburg, *Cyborg Caribbean*, 6.
- 3 This comment is not to overlook the white and colonial hegemony that characterized the history of science fiction literature. I am moved by scholars like Isiah Lavender III, who argues that “invoking race and racism in an outwardly white genre is necessary. Coloring science fiction is an absolute and radical commitment.” Lavender, *Black and Brown Planets*, 10. His comments acknowledging how “skin color matters in our visions of the future” boldly put pigmentation and colorization into conversation, complicating discourses about alien races and other extraterrestrials (6).
- 4 Much art-historical assessment has been done not in scholarly monographs but in exhibition catalogs, especially on the topic of alternative futurisms over the past decade. Worthy of closer recognition are notable shows such as *The Shadows Took Shape*, at the Studio Museum in Harlem (2013–14); *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures*, at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (2023–24); *Past Futures: Science Fiction, Space Travel, and Postwar Art of the Americas*, at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art (2015); *Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas* (2017–18), at the University of California, Riverside, ARTSblock; *Fronteras del Futuro: Art in New Mexico and Beyond* (2022–23), at the National Hispanic Cultural Center Art Museum; and *Indigenous Futurisms: Transcending Past/Present/Future* (2020–21), at the Institute of American Indian Arts.
- 5 For more, see Whiting, *Pop L.A.*, 3.
- 6 Billie Doux notes, “Dexter’s confrontation with General Mercurio seemed to focus on how Latinos are more comfortable touching and kissing other men than Americans. What was going on there?” Doux, “Outer Limits.”

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- 7 *Latinx* is a broader term referencing the process of US racialization for those people of Latin American descent raised in or living as long-term residents of the United States. As Arlene Dávila notes, “While many Latinx artists have roots or connections with their home countries, at the root of the Latinx identity is the ‘neither here nor there’ condition that places them at the margin of geographically bounded definitions of authenticity.” A. Dávila, *Latinx Art*, 25.
- 8 Brown, *Black Utopias*, 2.
- 9 Marez, *Farm Worker Futurism*, 6; Ginsburg, *Cyborg Caribbean*, 69.
- 10 *Captain Video and His Video Rangers* was the first US TV serial in the genre and aired from 1949 to 1955. A spin-off series called *The Secret Files of Captain Video* aired on Saturday mornings from 1953 to 1954. My father, who was born in 1951, was a child at this time and likely viewed them in contemporaneous reruns, a treasure trove of bad media for him.
- 11 This is not to say that the NASA space art program was entirely devoid of participants of Hispanic descent like Mario Cooper, who was born in Mexico City and taught advertising art and illustration in New York universities, including Columbia and Pratt Institute. He also contributed drawings to the US Air Force Art Program and illustrated short fiction and mystery serials by the likes of Agatha Christie. Most striking in the archive are the artists once considered for this and other space art-related projects. Records suggest that Salvador Dalí was in contention to make work responding to the cape at the Kennedy Space Center. Artist Julio César Fernández had a watercolor included in the National Gallery of Art’s *The Artist and Space* (1969), curated by H. Lester Cooke. Also, an artist in residence program at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in 1977 considered diverse artworks by Puerto Rican conceptualist Rafael Ferrer, Cuban artist Juan González, and even Japanese sculptor Fumio Yoshimura. On Dalí, see National Gallery of Art, “Art Program Projects” (ca. 1962), ephemera, SC-008, Hereward Lester Cooke Papers, box 2, folder 5, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. On Fernández, see Julio Fernández file, correspondence from H. Lester Cooke to Fernández, NASA Art Program papers, Art Curatorial files, folder 15, Aeronautics Division, National Air and Space Museum, Washington DC. On Ferrer, González, and Yoshimura, see correspondence from Bill Good to Carolyn Martin, March 10, 1977, NASA Art Program papers, Art Curatorial files, folder 28, Aeronautics Division, National Air and Space Museum, Washington DC.
- 12 I borrow this citation from Ginsburg’s astute observation and translation. See Toledano Redondo, “El Regreso,” quoted in Ginsburg, *Cyborg Caribbean*, 75.
- 13 Alvarado et al., “Introduction,” 5.
- 14 Gómez-Barris, *Extractive Zone*, xvi.
- 15 See, for example, P. Gonzales, *Mud People*.

- 16 Aparicio, "Latinidad/es," 113 (italics mine).
- 17 For more on the vertical border, see Cornejo, *Visual Disobedience*, 148–49.
- 18 Vogt, "Arterial Border," 193.
- 19 Gómez-Barris, *Extractive Zone*, 6.
- 20 Gómez-Barris, *Extractive Zone*, 7, 6.
- 21 Gómez-Barris, *Extractive Zone*, 7, 5. Her emphasis on aerial technologies supports an argument about technology and "colonial theft," adding that "digital technologies contribute to the diminishment of regional national sovereignty over natural resources by enabling a grand-scale view from above" (8).
- 22 Saab, *Objects of Vision*, 3.
- 23 Oxford English Dictionary, "trans- (prefix), Etymology," December 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7495348567>; Butler, "Lost Races," 185.
- 24 Galarte, *Brown Trans Figurations*, 12–13.
- 25 Galarte, *Brown Trans Figurations*, 13; Halberstam, *Trans**, 5.
- 26 Halberstam, *Trans**, 5.
- 27 Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 71.
- 28 Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 72, 73.
- 29 Ginsburg, *Cyborg Caribbean*, 3.
- 30 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.
- 31 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1, 15.
- 32 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 19.
- 33 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 12.
- 34 Galarte, *Brown Trans Figurations*, 13.
- 35 Saab, *Objects of Vision*, 30.
- 36 Morán González, "Aztlán @ Fifty," 176.
- 37 Merla-Watson and Olguín, "Altermundos," 4.
- 38 Merla-Watson and Olguín, "Altermundos," 4.
- 39 C. González, "Latino Sci-Fi," 211.
- 40 Readers may want to consider Norma Ávila Jimenez's exhibition catalog, *El arte cósmico de Tamayo* (2010), which appraises famed Mexican abstractionist Rufino Tamayo through his astronomical iconography. A 2015 Bowdoin College Museum of Art exhibition catalog, *Past Futures: Science Fiction, Space Travel, and Postwar Art of the Americas*, edited by Sarah Montross, explicates US and Latin American postwar artists' speculative impulses, bringing figures like Raquel Forner and Roberto Matta into conversation with Robert Smithson and Nancy Graves.

- 41 For more, see Schreuders, *Paperbacks*, U.S.A., 207.

- 42 Telotte, *Movies, Modernism*, 110.
- 43 On Schomburg, see Gustafson, *Chroma*. For more on Senarens, see Goodwin, *Latinx Files*, 7.
- 44 Merla-Watson and Olguín, “Altermundos,” 4.
- 45 C. Ramírez, “Cyborg Feminism,” 376. Here it is worth considering Patrick McCray’s important study about adolescents’ involvement in Operation Moonwatch after the launch of Sputnik in 1957. See McCray, *Keep Watching the Skies!*
- 46 Maher, *Apollo*, 145.
- 47 Topham, *Where’s My Space Age?*, 19.
- 48 Maher, *Apollo*, 155.
- 49 Maher, *Apollo*, 158.
- 50 Maher, *Apollo*, 159.
- 51 Exceptions include works by Latin American artists Juan Downey, Rufino Tamayo, Raquel Forner, Enrique Castro Cid, Xul Solar, and Joaquín Torres-García (among others). See Montross, *Past Futures*; and Estrellita Brodsky and José Falconi, cocurators, *Elsewhere(s): Other Worlds, Other Times, Other Territories*, Another Space, Chelsea, New York, March 21–June 17, 2022.
- 52 This premise underscores racial formation theory. For more, see Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*.
- 53 A. Dávila, *Latinx Art*, 26.
- 54 A. Dávila, *Latinx Art*, 25.
- 55 Beatriz Cortez, interview by the author (with Matt Shindell), January 15, 2021.
- 56 Cortez, interview.
- 57 Van Tuinen, introduction, 6.
- 58 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 15.
- 59 A. Dávila, *Latinx Art*, 15.
- 60 Stableford, “Science Fiction,” 30.
- 61 Cortez, interview.
- 62 Stableford, “Science Fiction,” 30.
- 63 See C. Ramírez, “Deus ex Machina.”
- 64 Sandoval, “U.S. Third World Feminism,” 3.
- 65 C. Ramírez, “Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism,” 190.
- 66 C. Ramírez, “Deus ex Machina,” 157–58.
- 67 Strait, introduction, 10.

- 68 Womack, “Afrofuturism as Space and Being,” 27.
- 69 Womack, “Afrofuturism as Space and Being,” 24.
- 70 C. Ramírez, “Deus ex Machina,” 159.
- 71 Marez, *Farm Worker Futurism*, 11, 10. “Terrestrial bondage” is from Weems, *Barnstorming the Prairies*, xiv.
- 72 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 97.
- 73 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
- 74 Van Tuinen, introduction, 6.
- 75 Saab, *Objects of Vision*, 30.
- 76 Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 10.
- 77 Avanessian, “Asynchronous Present Past,” 11.
- 78 Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 10.
- 79 At the time of this writing, a spate of scholarship has been published on Latinx speculation, though with emphasis on literary and film study. Consider Díaz-Basteris and Urca-regui, *Latinx Comics Studies*; Gil’Adí, *Doom Patterns*; Hudson, *Latinx Revolutionary Horizons*; Díaz-Basteris and Urca-regui, *Latinx Comics Studies*; and Zimmer, *First Contact*.
- 80 This image is not the artist’s first foray into outer space. Consider her artwork *Tito’s Gig on the Moon* (2002). For more on this piece, see C. Cortez, *Carmen Lomas Garza*, 96.
- 81 *El Paso Herald*, June 25, 1927, 15.

Chapter 1. Planet Anew: Toward a Transplanetary-Relational Approach

- 1 Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 109. I would like to thank Stephen Hong Sohn and Nancy Carranza for pointing me to this text.
- 2 Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 110.
- 3 This passage translates to “How do you say it, satellite? One of those Sputniks?”
- 4 Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 107.
- 5 Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 110. Cornelius’s laughter may also resonate with the equally ridiculous vision of Latinxs in space, with comedian Bill Dana’s performance as accidental astronaut José Jimenez on his album *Bill Dana on Earth* (1961) being emblematic of such buffoonery. Incidentally, Dana’s racist portrayal was so popular that even astronaut Alan Shepard “used [standup] excerpts in his radio communications to Gus Grissom on his Liberty Bell 7 flight on July 21, 1961.” Topham, *Where’s My Space Age?*, 25.
- 6 Véa, *Gods Go Begging*, 107.