

SPATIAL JUSTICE AND ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

IN SESSHU FOSTER'S *ATOMIK AZTEX*

by

NICHOLAS E. MACHUCA

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Student: Nicholas E. Machuca

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This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in the Department of English by:

David Vázquez, Ph.D:	Chair
Sarah Wald, Ph.D:	Member
Laura Pulido, Ph.D:	Member

and

Sara D. Hodges	Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
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Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Nicholas E. Machuca

Master of Arts

Department of English

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Title: Spatial Justice and Environmental Racism in Sesshu Foster's *Atomik Aztex*

I examine Sesshu Foster's 2005 alternate history speculative fiction narrative *Atomik Aztex* using geographer Edward Soja's concept of "spatial (in)justice" as an analytical lens, arguing Foster focuses on mobility and its links to transportation justice that emerge through a spatial injustice lens. Moreover, I argue Foster simultaneously criticizes effects of racial capitalism on the urban population of Los Angeles. As geographer Laura Pulido and others argue, these spatial processes both create and reflect material differences in urban space and between populations as part of a valuation system in which pollution and poverty can be allocated into the paths of least resistance: devalued, racialized populations. By providing a distorted alternate reality so similar to ours, Foster represents social justice issues stemming from racial capitalism and its resulting projects of environmental racism.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Nicholas E. Machuca

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
University of South Florida, Tampa

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Arts, English, 2018, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Arts, English, Professional Writing, Rhetoric, & Technology, 2016,
University of South Florida
Bachelor of Arts, International Studies, 2016, University of South Florida

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Environmental Justice Ecocriticism
Multiethnic American Literature
Environmental Humanities

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Teaching Fellow, Department of English, University of Oregon,
Eugene, 2016-2018

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Graduate Teaching Fellowship, English, 2016-2018
Promising Scholars Fellowship, 2016-2018
Sherwood Travel Award, 2017
Summa cum Laude, University of South Florida, 2016
Dean Edwin and Mary Martin Undergraduate English Award, 2015
Director's Award, University of South Florida, 2012-2016
Florida Bright Futures Award, 2012-2016

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. “THE EVER EXPANDING-OMNIVERSE”: ALTERNATE HISTORY AS CRITICAL OBSERVATION	4
III. “THE BOTTOM’S BLOWN OUT”: PRECARIOUS MOBILITY IN ATOMIK L.A	11
IV. “FAILING TO GAIN ACCESS”: ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD.....	18
V. “THE HEART AS ENGINE OF URBAN RENEWAL”: THE FLIPSIDE OF RACIAL CAPITALISM.....	25
VI. CONCLUSION	35
VII. END NOTE.....	37
REFERENCES CITED.....	39

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Geographers Edward Soja and Laura Pulido have theorized that built environments can have extremely disparate effects on the bodies inhabiting them, a consequence made clear in Sesshu Foster's *Atomik Aztex* (2005), which compares an alternate history of an Aztec metropolitan empire to the reality of Los Angeles' racialized urban sprawl. Environmental racism—the disproportionately negative effects of environmental issues on people of color and the poor—is an important theme in this narrative. Foster's speculative narrative features characters whose health, wellbeing, and social statuses are dramatically impacted by their built environments. Foster portrays pasts, presents, and futures marred by unequal access to services, transportation, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities resulting from racial and class segregation in urban spaces. I examine *Atomik Aztex* using Soja's concept of "spatial (in)justice" as an analytical lens, arguing Foster focuses on mobility and its links to transportation justice that emerge through a spatial injustice lens. Moreover, I argue Foster simultaneously criticizes effects of racial capitalism on the urban population of Los Angeles. As Pulido and others argue, these spatial processes both create and reflect material differences in urban space and between populations as part of a valuation system in which pollution and poverty can be allocated into the paths of least resistance: devalued, racialized populations (Pulido 524).

My reading of environmental racism and transportation injustice in *Atomik Aztex* contributes an environmental justice analysis to previous interpretations of Foster's work, while providing a framework for studying mobility as an environmental justice issue

represented in literature. While some scholars have examined this narrative in terms of its treatment of history, time, form, racialization, and indigeneity, Foster's representations of urban space, mobility, and their material effects on marginalized groups require greater attention¹. In general, transportation justice has merited consideration by social scientists but has gone largely unobserved by literary criticism. With a few exceptions, ecocritics have not taken up mobility as an environmental issue represented in texts. I argue that analyses of mobility and spatial justice offer important analytical lenses for environmental justice literary studies, particularly by connecting mobility with racialization. Environmental injustice is a form of racialization. By bringing the theories of human geographers into a literary analysis of this text, I intend to broaden environmental justice ecocriticism to include mobility and racialization of space. As Foster represents in *Atomik Aztex*, impediments to accessing life-improving resources like employment opportunities and greenspace can substantially reduce health while racializing certain populations.

Thus, one way of exposing Foster's representations of environmental racism in *Atomik Aztex* is to examine how characters experience movement throughout urban settings, particularly how these representations relate to racial capitalism in Los Angeles. While Foster devises two contrasting worlds—with opposing histories, economics, dominant phenotypes, and urban designs—the injustices of racial segregation, confinement, and sacrifice persists throughout both settings. In an alternate society where members of the dominant group have universal access to mobility, bodies that are denied the right of free movement are systematically placed into inferior subcategories of being and subsequently marked for extermination in pursuit of continued economic dominance.

The Aztex (Foster's pluralization of "Aztek") are so mobile as to give the impression of omnipresence, while other racial groups are restricted to their designated places. The Aztek *altermundo* is at once a racial utopia for the mobile Aztek dominant group and a racial dystopia for everyone else (Merla-Watson & Olguín). The denial of free movement to minoritized groups in *Atomik Aztex* criticizes the real politics of racial capitalism that segregate and restrain non-dominant groups, thereby allocating their bodies and spaces for sacrifice.

This essay does not seek to produce a universal reading of the narrative, which would require far more to adequately study the complexities of the work. Rather, this essay focuses primarily on the racialization of space, globalization of capital, mobility of marginalized subjects, and environmental effects of racial capitalism in the narrative. The world of *Atomik Aztex* is uncannily familiar to ours, but by overlaying U.S. social problems onto an alternate universe, Foster shows how global powers and empires operate, how they devalue bodies and space, and how they ultimately facilitate the sacrifice of racialized bodies and their spaces. By providing a distorted alternate reality so similar to ours, Foster represents social justice issues stemming from racial capitalism and its resulting projects of environmental racism.

CHAPTER II

“THE EVER EXPANDING-OMNIVERSE”: ALTERNATE HISTORY AS CRITICAL OBSERVATION

Atomik Aztex is an alternate history speculative fiction. The narrative presents a “what if” scenario of an unconquered Aztec Empire that has conquered Europe, an alternate history that creates a distorted critical observation of our own reality. The narrative features twentieth-century Los Angeles as one of its two major settings, the other being the futuristic Aztec capital city Tenochtitlan/Teknotitlán. Throughout the narrative, Foster represents the myriad problems of Los Angeles’ urban landscape and transportation options, highlighting the dangers of its freeway system and limits to access placed on people of color and the poor by the city’s car-dependent, sprawling urban landscape. Foster contrasts his criticism of mobility in Los Angeles with a vision of an alternate reality, an Aztec-dominated world that favors transit-oriented development and condescendingly looks upon automobile-dependent civilizations as inferior. The narrator of the Aztec timeline, Zenzontli, almost never interacts with automobiles but is aware of car-dependence in alternate timelines, such as ours. He takes pride in his society’s preference for extensive public transit, and he often compares Aztec transportation to that of other civilizations: “Why did they plan and execute this massive system of freeways on such an immense scale when the safest, cleanest and most efficient system would have been **mass transit**, pedestrian walkways and canals like ours?” (109, bold text original). Privileged with “safe,” “clean,” and “efficient” mobility in Teknotitlán, Zenzontli cannot understand why Los Angeles would develop its freeway system.

The metropolis of this alternate timeline serves to critique aspects of life in Los Angeles by giving a refracted, but familiar, alternative to L.A. Like Los Angeles' infamous issues with transportation racism and spatial injustice, the narrative's Aztek Empire only affords ease of movement to certain groups. It excludes European-Americans and all other non-Aztek from citizenship, access to services, and freedom of movement—thereby creating an underclass of immobile, racialized bodies ripe for ritual sacrifice to feed a globalized economy. The Aztek maintain their global dominance by endlessly sacrificing European and Euro-American bodies, just as Western nations maintain global economic reign via devaluation of nonwhite bodies. By dramatically comparing access to mobility between U.S. urban society and his idea of a colonizing indigenous civilization, Foster criticizes processes of racialization caused by development that favors the mobility of certain bodies over others. Foster constructs two metropolises whose privileging of spatial justice for some bodies but not others produces dramatically different results and lifestyles for characters.

Foster imagines alternatives to Los Angeles urban development in the capital city of an unconquered Aztec Empire. In this timeline, Foster devises a fantastic alternate history as a comparison to the spatially-unjust reality lived by many racialized populations in the U.S. The perpetrators of environmental racism in this timeline are brown Aztek bodies whose fairer-complexioned victims descend from Europe. The Aztek have colonized much of the planet and assert their dominance through ideological and economic hegemony. In his narrative, Foster reverses the colonizer-colonized tradition of our reality, substituting historically oppressed people into the roles of the oppressors,

with material consequences to the bodies of the newly racialized, monolithic category of European-Americans.

Foster invokes the actual history of the Aztec Empire's spatial imaginations to construct this alternate history. The center of his Aztec Empire lies in Teknotitlán, the capital of the Aztec state where much of the plot takes place. Foster's spelling alludes to the historic capital of Tenochtitlan, which served as the center of Aztec life prior to Spanish conquest of the Americas. Foster's choice to imagine the unimpeded development of Tenochtitlan into a highly advanced metropolis with unmatched "efficient and affordable public transportation" and a healthy level of mobility for Aztec bodies is not without reason (18). Historians frequently consider Tenochtitlan among the most advanced city-states in Mesoamerica for its meticulous urban design (de Rojas et al xii). The Aztecs built their city on an island in Lake Texcoco, which is now drained and occupied by Mexico City (40). Due to the city's isolated location and geography, the Aztecs constructed several raised causeways through the lake to connect Tenochtitlan with the mainland, and they focused heavily on designing the city for the effective movement of people and goods (49). Therefore, Foster imagines the compact, efficient Aztec capital as a counterpart to the state-sanctioned urban sprawl of Los Angeles.

Foster often uses shifts in the text itself to signal issues of spatial injustice in both timelines of the narrative. The author signifies the transitions between alternate and "real" timelines by using a different writing style for each. The "real" timeline, set in twentieth-century Los Angeles, appears as most English-language stories would. English words are spelled accurately, the grammar is mostly correct, and ideas typically flow together according to Western logical standards. However, Foster's use of language to

tell the story of the “Aztex” differs greatly from Standard American English. Pluralized words appear with X’s at the ends, K’s often substitute for hard C’s, and ideas do not always flow in a format Western readers would find logical. For example: “Luckily we Aztex believe in circular concepts of time, cyklikal konceptions of the universe where reality infinitely kurves back upon itself endlessly...” (Foster 3). Though legible, the spellings create a sense of unfamiliarity. Based on the Aztec Nahuatl language, these spellings help construct a world dominated by the Aztex and their knowledge systems. Meant to mirror the global spread of European languages, Foster imagines Aztec linguistics to have flourished worldwide as a result of their own colonial projects. His purpose in using such distinct language to deliver the Aztex story is likely to reveal the inability to convey ideas and information outside of cultural frameworks, but also to critically demonstrate the dominance of Western linguistics and traditions in current world affairs.

Foster’s Aztek language is not so confusing readers cannot understand it; in fact, the text often appears clearest when discussing matters related to transportation and urban design. Ramón Saldívar classifies *Atomik Aztex* as a “muckraking novel” for its criticism of real places and events, most notably the plight of factory workers in L.A. (161). Building on Saldívar’s claim, I argue part of the muck Foster rakes is the designation of racialized labor as expendable even beyond the workplace. Foster criticizes the means by which his narrator accesses work opportunities: L.A.’s dangerous, inefficient, and unjust transportation system designed to best serve middle and upper class whites. He also depicts instances of environmental racism endured by expendable bodies, both in the workplace and neighborhood. Foster’s representations of these struggles, paired

alongside his racially-exclusive vision of an Aztek utopia, reveal an understanding of racial capitalism's facilitation of spatial injustice and racialized populations.

Foster's depiction of Teknotitlán's urban spatial landscape differs from his portrayal of L.A. by featuring dense urban planning, ubiquitous availability of transit options, and a lack of automobiles. In the sections set in L.A., Chicano protagonist Zenzón is a meat factory worker whose precarious access to mobility declines throughout the plot. Zenzón either drives his dilapidated van or carools to work on freeways, yet he begins to lose this ability to travel almost immediately in the narrative. He laments having to spend so much money on his van, but he knows automobiles are his only feasible form of transportation to work (Foster 43). Zenzón's livelihood fully depends on his ability to afford an operable automobile, and he interacts with automobiles or industrial trucks nearly every time the narrative switches to his perspective. In contrast, Zenzontli, almost never interacts with personal vehicles. He takes pride in Aztek preference for extensive public transit, and he often compares Aztek transportation to that of other civilizations: "Actually, the Germans, more so than other European [sic] tribes, had developed a crude subway and rail transit system, canals and waterways (not on the scale of Teknotitlán, but still remarkable for their level of primitive civilization at the time); they even had rudimentary bike paths and a surprisingly good system of hiking trails" (109). Gesturing toward the high level of mobility Germans enjoy through large investments in public transport projects, Zenzontli still considers the German transport network inferior to that of his highly-mobile Aztek society. This comparison between the fictional Aztek and a historically colonial power implies a reality that could have been for a region often considered underdeveloped.

Additionally, the Aztex fill the hegemonic role the U.S. has played in our history, including its military involvement in World War II. Foster's comparison between Aztek mobility and German mobility mimics the ideology of American exceptionalism, particularly supremacy over wartime opponents. Foster represents this logic of colonialism as a means of critiquing U.S. empire building and revealing the ideologies of supremacy that facilitate it. The real Aztec Empire was not an isolated civilization; the Aztecs, too, pursued robust colonial projects in neighboring territories and over their established human populations. Foster signifies this history by depicting the Mayans and other Mesoamerican peoples as displaced ethnic groups within Teknotitlán: "Fucking Mayans, I thought, they're everywhere...we civilize the world and then get the decadent [sic] dregs of failed civilizations like the Mayans" (26). Zenzontli accepts the "civilizing" logic of conquest without questioning how colonization itself likely causes Mayan civilization to fail in this alternate history. The real Aztec Empire engaged in conquests of its own around the Valley of Mexico, extending its administrative reign throughout the region. By substituting the Aztex for the U.S., Foster creates a distorted reflection of U.S. empire-building processes whose roots lie in the European colonial logic of "civilizing" through conquest—making other civilizations as "good" as Western ones. Therefore, Zenzontli's comparison between Aztek and German transit contains narratives of condescension and improvement. Foster's focus on the advancements in Aztek urban design and mobility continue throughout the narrative, though only Aztek people fully enjoy these privileges. Foster highlights the control over movement of subjugated peoples within and throughout the territory and the disciplining of oppressed labor power as defining features of empire-building.

Access to mobility was always a focal point during Foster's development of the full narrative. In the short story that would evolve into *Atomik Aztex*, Foster carefully details a mythological Los Angeles as a car-centric society, whereas his image of a developed Aztec city-state has invested heavily in mass transit and healthier urban design, complete with "steel metro train[s]" and a seamless integration of greenspace into urban space (145). This depiction of Aztec urban design seems utopic for free Aztec citizens, while slaves and conquered peoples experience poorer livelihoods alongside them. Foster describes U.S. urbanism as creating similar effects of privileging certain groups while disenfranchising and endangering "Others." Of his criticisms of contemporary American society, Foster's disdain for its privileging of automobiles appears among the clearest. Zenzón fears for his safety as he walks along roads near his workplace: "I was roused from queasy misgivings & squinting dimly at the prospect of a pickup truck bouncing across the tracks fishtailing in my direction with a sudden clatter" (169). Zenzón finds that this area is not designed for pedestrians, and that the automobile is a requisite for both safety and mobility. Additionally, Foster dedicates the narrative to "designated drivers" after the "Acknowledgments" section, indicating a substantial consideration of mobility in this story. Through the narrators' frustrations/privileges with urban spaces and mobility within them, both of Foster's iterations of *Atomik Aztex* represent urban landscapes as exclusive to racialized bodies, prohibiting them from a right to the city.

CHAPTER III

“THE BOTTOM’S BLOWN OUT”: PRECARIOUS MOBILITY IN ATOMIK L.A.

Early in the text, Foster establishes the correlation between one’s relative mobility within urban spaces and one’s access to greater economic prospects. In representing his view of twentieth-century Los Angeles, Foster depicts the extraordinary investments in physical mobility people must make in order to expand their life opportunities—upward mobility requires physical mobility. To “move up” in a landscape designed around the rapid movement of automobiles rather than human bodies, one’s extraordinary investment in mobility is often a personal vehicle, a commodity that began as a luxury item rather than a necessity. Although Zenzón originally appears to move between his home and job with few barriers, his mobility only comes from his temporary ability to own and operate a personal automobile: “In the early morning hours, the week before the rear end in my van went out, I was driving home after pulling two straight shifts” (27). By driving himself, Zenzón’s movement does not depend on bus schedules or transit availability. However, after “the bottom’s blown out of [his] engine,” Zenzón’s mobility fully depends on his coworker’s ownership of a functional automobile (43). He carools with 3Turkey, whose ongoing employment at the meat processing plant is also not guaranteed.

Leading up to this situation, Foster never shows Zenzón using public transportation because those options are not presently available to him; the narrator often remarks on the lack of pedestrians around his workplace. When he does eventually encounter pedestrians, he offers them a ride to a train station nearby: “I told them they could get a ride in front of the train station and pointed out the taxi stand on Alameda”

(29). The two sex workers offer him a reduced rate in exchange for this ride, though Zenzón does not accept their offer. Foster's criticism of L.A. public transportation here is clear: the streets are places for higher-risk occupations and mobility has high material value. Additionally, that Zenzón instructs his passengers to call for a taxi after driving them to a transit hub indicates the unreliability of public transport in the city, particularly around his workplace. Zenzón has few options connecting his inner-city home to his industrial workplace, a spatial condition Foster details at length several times in the short work.

Foster repeatedly portrays a confining spatial condition as one that affects the livelihoods of his characters, dramatically reducing the quality and length of their lives and limiting their prospects beyond their neighborhoods. In a research study on the current state of transportation justice in the U.S., Inwood, Alderman, and Williams cite Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s proclamation that access to public transportation is a civil right (417). They assert "public transportation continues to have a direct bearing on economic opportunities of poor people of color as well as their general right to the city and its many spaces and place-based resources" (417). Without a local balance between jobs and housing, residents need dependable means of transportation to live well. Indeed, in a hyper-globalized economy and sprawled urban landscape, access to quick and easy movement throughout and beyond a city is often a necessary requirement for substantive socioeconomic gain. Zenzón's reducing mobility illustrates the connection between transportation and upward mobility, but in reverse. Unable to drive himself to work, and without even the option of using alternative modes of travel, Zenzón finds himself trapped in a downward spiral; he fears the loss of both his income and his life. Foster

captures the struggle of people whose lack of mobility—or access only to inefficient transit—reduces their socioeconomic options and systematically devalues their lives.

Zenzón constantly struggles to access higher levels of mobility because his urban environment is not designed to facilitate the economic success of his demographic. Zenzón experiences what Soja calls “spatial injustice,” and what Pulido further defines as a necessary geographic effect of racial capitalism, that capital *requires* certain populations to remain in place. Soja contends the foundations of all public planning rely on several facets of discrimination, including the valuing of certain spaces over others and the greater value of bodies designated to occupy higher-valued spaces (xiii). U.S. society’s historic privileging of certain bodies over others results in a continual effort to segregate and confine certain bodies into pockets of the urban landscape. This valuation scheme across urban space also ensures built environments strengthen extant inequalities; urban landscapes themselves often sustain and reproduce social issues rather than alleviating them. Zenzón’s racialized workplace, which Foster describes as predominantly staffed by speakers of “Spanish, Chiu Chow, and Vietnamese,” is not served by transit services that would connect transit-dependent Angelenos with a site of industrial employment (6). The only method of accessing the meatpacking plant is via the same transport method designed to sustain its industrial output—private vehicles on public roads. When Zenzón loses his ability to drive himself, he cannot rely on an underfunded, sparse public transportation network to carry him to work and home. The systemic valuation of “white” spaces—downtown employment and suburban homes—has created a spatial condition in which Zenzón and his coworkers are denied economic security and a right to the city.

Foster's criticism of widespread transportation insecurity in a city that has focused extensively on personal automobiles highlights a clear case of environmental racism and spatial injustice in Los Angeles. It is no coincidence that the single most sprawled urban landscape in the U.S., the region that has catered so exclusively to the personal automobile, has left behind huge populations with lower socioeconomic privileges. By creating a built environment that requires the purchase of automobiles to gain mobility, Los Angeles has ensured that those who cannot afford this initial investment remain in a state of transportation and economic insecurity. Foster represents this insecurity through Zenzón's steady decline. In the case study of L.A. transportation injustice that opens *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Soja states "a critical spatial imagination entered the world of political practice earlier and more deeply in Los Angeles than in almost any other major metropolis in the country" (25). This critical spatial imagination is intrinsically tied to L.A.'s twentieth-century institutionalized obsession with the automobile.

Los Angeles, although a historic settlement, was among the many U.S. cities that experienced a quick urban development alongside the automobile's initial mass production. Like other "new" American cities, Los Angeles' urban landscape redeveloped in the twentieth century to accommodate the spread of individualized transportation, thereby reducing the mobility of those who could not afford automobiles or could not operate them. The long-standing connection between a critical spatial imagination and Southern California is one reason why literary depictions of L.A. are principally important to studies of spatial justice. Although Zenzón is a fictional character, his condition is experienced by millions of underprivileged urban residents

throughout the U.S. In depicting Zenzón's difficult navigation of his urban space, interspersed with a fictional institution of racialized sacrificial slavery, Foster reveals the material effects of immobility and environmental racism: from health issues to job insecurity. These effects are felt by those who live under intricate webs of racist, classist city planning designed to keep people like Zenzón and his community in place physically and socioeconomically, maintaining their expendability under racial capitalism.

Foster's depiction of car ownership in a racist built environment does not encourage driving as a form of spatial freedom for racialized bodies. Zenzón eventually acquires a car, though the narration does not specify whether he does so before or after he loses his wife, becomes estranged from his children, and begins working at the meatpacking plant. Foster does not indicate whether Zenzón initially needed the car to travel to work or if the car fills a gap left by declining transit services. Regardless, the commute and the car itself cause several problems for Zenzón. The narrator notes that he works in "an industrial area where you never see pedestrians day or nite," indicating a lack of transit options and low walkability in the area (Foster 27). With no other reasonable way of getting to and from work, Zenzón completely relies on the personal automobile. Foster first acquaints the reader to Zenzón's commute as he is "driving home after pulling two straight shifts," or working for "16 hours straight" (27). Zenzón states that he is "totally exhausted after a week of pulling back-to-back shifts," but he still must drive himself home and recuperate in the eight hours of rest time between his double shifts (27). "I worried about my reaction time," he says as he experiences fatigued hallucinations while operating a two-ton rolling machine on populated streets (27). Zenzón is fully responsible for transporting his exhausted body home despite being in

poor physical capacity to drive a vehicle. Finally, Zenzón has mistakenly driven to his old home. He enters the apartment and realizes he has made an error, yet continues to hallucinate that this space is still his current home.

Rather than providing a sense of freedom for Zenzón, the automobile creates an additional stress and a financial burden. His declining mental health is made worse by his having to operate more heavy machinery after leaving work—this time for his own movement home. Zenzón’s mode of transportation itself is a result of a spatial injustice of having a great distance between his home and workplace that is not serviced by alternate modes of transportation. The opportunity for upward mobility Zenzón was able to secure, his job at the meatpacking plant, lies in an industrial zone well beyond his neighborhood. As previously noted, economic wellbeing in today’s urban landscape relies upon continual access to on-demand transportation throughout the city; Zenzón’s life prospects depend upon the road worthiness of his ailing van. Accordingly, the precarious condition of his “free” movement takes its toll on his bodily wellbeing, as evidenced by his obligation to drive home at night after laboring for sixteen hours and his subsequent hallucinations behind the wheel. Foster does not glorify car ownership, but rather denigrates it as an obligatory financial commitment on which one’s socioeconomic wellbeing depends. He depicts driving as additional labor necessary to sustain Zenzón’s job rather than a liberating act, exemplifying a common relationship between poorer populations and the automobile.

While Foster uses Zenzón’s moment of confusion to launch the narration into the flashback described previously, he also draws attention to some of the inherent dangers of car-dependent transportation: fatigued driving and the instability of car ownership for

some. Zenzón eventually is forced to carpool with a coworker, not because he drives irresponsibly, but because “the bottom’s blown out of [his] engine, the rings, rods & bearings are all shot...my van’s burning two quarts of oil anytime I drive it anywhere, and I’m two grand in the hole to my former mother-in-law...and there’s no end in sight” (43). Already in debt, Zenzón does not have the means of paying for the expensive repairs to his van, and so he depends on the personal automobile of someone else in an equally uncertain economic situation. With no realistic alternatives for transportation, Zenzón is left effectively immobile without a working automobile of his own. This condition is not uncommon; rather, it is the condition of millions of residents in urban areas throughout the U.S. Car ownership is only feasible with the income to maintain the working condition of the vehicle through repairs and service. Foster shows personal car ownership is often just as unreliable for some minorities and the urban poor as the public transportation systems they have traditionally replaced. The precarious nature of mobility for some ensures a range of detrimental effects: access to fewer opportunities, continued racialization and segregation, and targeting by polluters looking to site their harmful facilities.

CHAPTER IV

“FAILING TO GAIN ACCESS”: ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Racialized characters of *Atomik Aztex* are denied healthy, livable environments as well. In a brief flashback, presumably from before he acquires an automobile, Zenzón recounts his family’s troubles brought on by their experience of spatial injustice. He recalls when his family lived in a “rickety clapboard apartment...in sight of the bridge for the 110 freeway” (32). On the next page, Foster’s reference to the activism of Dolores Huerta and anti-Apartheid rhetoric of Chris Hani situates the flashback in the tumultuous 1960s, firmly within an era of U.S. urban geographic history defined by white flight, urban renewal, suburbanization, and urban highway construction (33). The spatial injustice described in this passage has echoed across the U.S. since the proliferation of the personal automobile and the redesigning of U.S. cities to cater almost exclusively to their predominantly white users. Although Foster describes Zenzón and his family as transit-dependent, the new freeway’s proximity to their home ensures the family’s exposure to toxic air pollutants emitted by freight trucks and the endless vehicular traffic of those who can afford to travel independently of transit. The family’s environmental burden is particularly heavy given that Interstate 110 is also a busy freight connection between the Port of Los Angeles and many inland distributors; commercial trucking emits enormous amounts of diesel exhaust containing nitrogen oxides and particulate matter into neighborhoods near shipping routes.

Moreover, the urban Chicano family’s access to various other spaces of the city declines despite their nearness to this vital transportation and shipping infrastructure.

Robert Bullard writes in *Highway Robbery* that “Having a seven-lane freeway next door...is not a benefit to someone who does not even own a car” (3). As a family whose movement apparently depends upon the availability of bus services, they do not benefit from having this freeway next door. The freeway does not represent rapid mobility for the family, but rather the encroachment of toxic infrastructure not designed for their benefit. In relation to car and truck drivers, the transit-dependent family steadily loses access while taking on the environmental burdens of pollution and neighborhood disruption. Unable or unwilling to relocate, the family remains rooted in their toxic environment and with few mobility options. Meanwhile, the urban landscape reconfigures for the rapid movement of white bodies from the suburbs to the central business district and for the seamless movement of freight from the port to inland distribution networks. These transport schemes indicate the bodies and items whose free movement is deemed essential to U.S. society and globalized economic growth, excluding most others.

Despite their wanting situation, Zenzón’s wife Xiuh, occupied with housework and community activism, enthusiastically cares for her family’s plot in the community garden and takes her family on frequent outings. As part of the flashback to an earlier L.A., Zenzón remembers that “on weekends” Xiuh would make “picnic lunches so we could all take the bus to the beach or hike in Elysian and Griffith parks” (32). Foster shows a poor family of Chicanos reliant upon buses for both work and leisure, yet who eagerly utilize their remaining transit option. He even describes the family’s socioeconomic movement in terms of the “thousands of miles” it took for the family to “get here,” indicating a connection between their physical movement and economic

upward mobility (33). The family's spatial imagination is broadened and their relative happiness is heightened by their seemingly unhindered access to several areas of urban space via public transport, though the family steadily loses their ease of access.

Foster makes his depictions of spatial injustice more poignant by featuring the family's resistance to their isolation. Further in the passage, Zenzón notes his family's access to the community garden has been suspended "becuz of a bureaucratic rule," forcing them to garden out of "windowbox planters" (33). Zenzón does not elaborate on what "bureaucratic rule" pushed his family out of the community garden, but he continues to explain that Xiuh's interest in social activities and community engagements decline from there (33). The need to substitute the action of gardening beyond the home for gardening literally right outside of the home's windows suggests a limit to the family's access to the urban landscape. Xiuh's aversion to traveling in the city supports this observation. When Zenzón suggests "an outing to the pier," Xiuh sneers and answers, "*Ride the bus all day* to come back tired, sunburned and sandy?" (33, italics mine). Xiuh's main concern in partaking in an outing she had previously enjoyed is the inconvenience of spending so much time traveling there. Xiuh also declines Zenzón's proposal to hike in Elysian Park, where she had previously enjoyed visiting. The "bureaucratic rule" that restricts their access to the community garden seemingly blocks their access to unconstrained movement as well. Foster does not specify if this rule pertains explicitly to the garden, or if the family is "failing to gain access" to more urban spaces than just the community plot (33). Furthermore, the reader is left wondering why Xiuh loathes riding the bus "all day" when she once happily rode the bus to various centers of leisurely activity. Some aspect of Xiuh's travel experience has clearly changed,

whether it is her actual level of mobility or her perceived ease of access in an urban landscape becoming dominated by the personal automobile's transportation on demand.

Xiuh's lack of interest in using the buses represents a historical marker of social changes induced by freeway development. Foster represents the family's experience of transportation injustice by depicting Xiuh's growing aversion to using transit services alongside the development of the freeway in their neighborhood. Xiuh appears to lose mobility as car drivers gain more. Using Xiuh's growing reluctance to travel, Foster criticizes the comparative loss of mobility felt by those left behind by expensive, individualized transportation projects. In an urban landscape being redesigned almost exclusively for fast travel via automobile, Xiuh feels a comparative reduction in mobility without access to the fast-moving automobile transportation infrastructure beginning to dominate her city. Part of the poor family's struggle with "gaining access" to urban centers of leisure relates to problems with planning authorities defunding and deemphasizing their only transportation option during the age of the personal automobile. In his chapter on transportation racism in L.A., Eric Mann attends to issues that arise when cities reduce funding for bus systems and place greater emphasis on freeways and light rail transit—a typically white, affluent form of public transport. Mann notes that in preparing for its light rail system in the 1990s, Los Angeles raised bus fares while significantly reducing funding for buses; L.A. bus riders, who are predominantly Latino, Black, Asian, and Pacific Islander, paid more money for fewer services (Bullard 36). They were, in effect, subsidizing the costs of transit and highway projects that would never service their neighborhoods or connect them to better employment opportunities.

Foster's depiction of Xiuh and her inner-city family, however, highlights the long-standing tensions between Los Angeles transit riders and their transportation providers. L.A. bus riders are so responsive to changes in fares and services that they formed their own union modeled after the Freedom Riders of the 1960s, an anti-racist collective of bus riders that protested transportation racism (Bullard 33). Foster's placement of Zenzón's flashback in the 1960s situates the family's struggle for mobility at the tail-end of an industry-led transportation campaign that Jack D. Forbes considers an "organized crime" against U.S. transit systems and the mobility of the urban residents reliant on them (157). During the latter half of the twentieth century, industrial companies gradually ensured the supremacy of the automobiles they were producing, using state power to create a domestic market dependent on their own products. Through the organized destruction of streetcar and other rail transit at the hands of industrial alliances comprised of oil companies and tire manufacturers, public transportat across the U.S. transitioned to use buses first, and then declined overall in favor of individualized mobility (157). Xiuh's contempt for "riding the bus all day" in a period of reducing transit services and increasing automobile traffic captures both the material loss of urban access and the emotional loss of feeling free to travel. Moreover, if fare hikes and service reductions can turn leisure into a chore, they clearly have a greater negative effect on the necessary economic commitments of transit-dependent populations. In exchange for her mobility, the freeway grants Xiuh exhaust fumes and noise pollution.

The environmental racism in this flashback is not simply a coincidental toxic burden or even a result of only systemic racism; rather, the plight of Zenzón's racialized community is a required element of racial capitalism. As Pulido and others have argued,

racial capitalism requires sinks for its toxic wastes and pollution. Market logic determines that these sinks be located in least-valued locations, which are commonly neighborhoods housing large numbers of minorities. To route emissions-heavy freeways through predominantly people-of-color neighborhoods is to adhere to this logic of racial capitalism. Much social science research has explored the racially-disproportionate effects of automobile-oriented projects that maintain and enhance the car-dependent connections between predominantly white, affluent communities and their work opportunities. Yet with few exceptions, U.S. city planners continually choose to impose greater and harsher projects of spatial injustice onto marginalized populations. Planners continuously demolish the homes and businesses of mostly transit-dependent, predominantly-nonwhite people along freeway corridors while simultaneously increasing the distances between the spaces those people need to go. Although new urbanism projects seek to rectify local imbalances between housing and job opportunities, these projects often result in gentrification of neighborhoods and typically do not serve lower-income residents.

While transportation injustice is an issue in itself, a lack of access to movement keeps certain bodies in place and enhances racial segregation. As a result, taxpayers of all backgrounds collectively fund urban segregation under the guise of road construction and other development projects. This produces profound spatial injustices throughout cityscapes that are indicative of racial capitalism's need for a valuation scheme across spaces. This variety of environmental racism can no longer be disguised by appeals to "the market" and cheap lands. Instead, Pulido argues for us to examine these processes as a way to racialize space, assigning greater value to "white" spaces and reduced value to

“nonwhite” spaces—a means of creating the necessary spaces and populations for capital to cheaply discard its wastes.

Zenzón, Xiuh, and their family occupy a racialized urban space systematically designated for the disposal of toxic pollutants associated with petroleum-based transportation. This transportation scheme is itself designed primarily around the travel requirements of whites and their commercial/industrial products. The Chicano family, despite living within view of the new freeway, does not benefit from the transport connections made through it. The freeway simply is not designed for the benefit of their demographic. But an enormous construction project such as a freeway must be placed *somewhere*, and so it is by no coincidence that the 110 freeway is routed through Zenzón and Xiuh’s neighborhood. In reality, this same freeway does pass through predominantly low-income communities of color, exposing black and brown bodies to multiple sources of toxic pollutants every day. Despite extensive research on this particular environmental injustice, little improvement has been made due to the necessity of this spatial condition for the purposes of ongoing capital accumulation. As Bullard proves in *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty*, racialized communities are actively scouted as future sacrifice zones, whether intentionally or not (155). By and large, people of color do not *choose* to populate known toxic sites; rather, polluters and polluting development projects come to them (155). And by dramatically reducing the promise of free movement to these communities, their opportunities for upward mobility and homeownership elsewhere are limited, thereby maintaining the neighborhood demographics and ensuring their continual use as pollutant dumps.

CHAPTER V

“THE HEART AS ENGINE OF URBAN RENEWAL”: THE FLIPSIDE OF RACIAL CAPITALISM

Foster’s Aztek Empire functions as a tool to critically examine the racialization of space and sacrifice of certain communities in U.S. urban landscapes. Zenzón’s struggles to move throughout Los Angeles differ in many aspects from Zenzontli’s freedom in navigating Teknotitlán. Whereas Zenzón describes L.A. as a “vast urban sprawl” of gridlocked traffic, “jackknifed big rigs,” and endless freeways, Zenzontli describes Teknotitán as “a living organism integrated with the heart of the world, this city that is the heart of the world” (44, 45, 117). Zenzón’s experience of L.A. feels claustrophobic and dangerous, at once an expansive landscape of freeways and a stifling tangle of traffic. In contrast, Zenzontli’s experience of Teknotitlán unabashedly characterizes the city as both “living” and livable, while also indicating its seat as the metropole of a vast global empire. Though L.A. does serve as a sort of centrifuge for U.S. influence throughout the world, Zenzón cannot enjoy the same right to the city due to his marginalized status. Unlike Zenzontli, Zenzón is not part of the dominant group in this reality (whites), and his urban experience is not elevated by the same ease of access Zenzontli has.

Foster’s depiction of Los Angeles, like most U.S. cities, is one of racial segregation and an extreme lack of mobility for certain bodies. This layout ensures that mobility—both physical and socioeconomic—remains out of reach for most of those who do not drive. While one might not need a car to survive, one certainly needs a car to *thrive* in the urban sprawl of Foster’s twentieth-century Los Angeles and in many U.S. urban spaces. In contrast, Zenzontli’s alternate reality in the Aztek capital city provides

its racially-exclusive citizenry with rapid transportation and pedestrian-oriented urban development. However, even in the highly-mobile Aztek capital of Teknotitlán, Foster still does not envision a metropolis where people of all identities and means have the same freedom to move within and throughout. Rather, the alternate world of *Atomik Aztex* serves to critique this one by producing a society that seems to administer a high degree of spatial privilege to Aztek bodies yet leaves behind large populations of fair-skinned European-Americans to become immobile sacrificial slaves.

The dual worlds of *Atomik Aztex* work to criticize the reality of U.S. empire-building on many fronts, but a clear distinction between the two settings is Foster's representation of space and how characters negotiate their spaces. Foster clearly intends for readers to find parallels between Zenzón's butchering job and Zenzontli's responsibility of processing and sacrificing Euro-American human slaves who are treated like cattle for slaughter. While there is room to read this as a discussion of animal rights, my argument on racial capitalism flags this as a criticism of the racializing effect of spatial injustice. Members of the dominant Aztex move throughout Teknotitlán essentially free of burdens. They use diverse transport options including "kanals, causeways, subways, and avenues," and some Aztex even freely move throughout the world beyond their Empire (10). On the contrary, the sacrificial slaves are not afforded any freedom of movement and are kept in filthy cages until their ritualistic execution. Despite being within the world city with the highest level of urban mobility, the European and American slaves are denied even the most basic movement beyond their cages.

This confinement and sacrifice is essential for the continued functionality of the Aztek world order; within the first few pages of the narrative, Zenzontli establishes that human sacrifice drives the perpetual motion of the Aztek-dominated globalized economy. He describes ritual sacrifice as a commonsense piece of Aztek lifeways: “If we got to cut out all the hearts to keep the world turning, we’ll cut out all the hearts, that’s the way it always has been, that’s the way it always will be” (4-5). To “keep the world turning” is a transportation metaphor; Foster at once connects the momentum of hegemony with actual movement and the sacrifice of human lives. Racialized lives thus represent a metaphorical fuel for empire: human sacrifice is understood as a basic requirement of Aztek power rather than an unfortunate side effect of their economic maintenance and growth. Zenzontli’s narration explains that Aztek economic stability requires the import of “untold masses of slaves” from conquered regions in Europe and North America to Teknotitlán, where their diverse bodies become collapsed into the monolithic, devalued racial category of “Euro-American” (39). This conflation of individual difference and its attendant systematic valuation scheme of human life represent a direct criticism of U.S. treatment of so-called sacrifice zones and the diverse bodies inhabiting them.

Like the exposures to life-ending toxic wastes experienced by countless racialized bodies necessary for the continuation of U.S. capitalist economic growth, the Aztek Empire needs an unending sacrifice of racialized bodies to sustain its own economy. Their “Socialist Imperium” serves as the ideological basis for Aztek socioeconomics and represents a critical mirroring of neoliberal capitalism’s implicit consumption of lives (18). Without the ongoing, increasing ritual sacrifice of Euro-American bodies in the Aztek metropole, the hegemony of the Aztek “Socialist Imperium” economy would

collapse. This layered vision of utopia *requires* a massive surplus of racialized, exterminable bodies in order to continue providing for the Aztek way of life.

The Aztek craving for ever greater consumption can be likened to racial capitalism's relentless search for new means of creating wealth and depositing wastes. In the Aztek alternate reality, Foster creates a distorted reflection of U.S.-dominated globalized capitalism—a system that requires expendable labor and sacrifice zones. Human lives are sacrificed to maintain hegemonies in both realities, though Foster's imagined Aztek world makes their deaths faster and more spectacular. Thus, the spectacular display of violence in sacrificing slaves is paired alongside the slow violence of toxic trespass and immobility (Nixon). Readers would quickly ascertain the injustice of ripping out the still-beating heart of a racialized, enslaved human body, and Foster connects this violent sacrifice to the slow violence distilled by racial capitalism.

In a conversation between Zenzontli and his commanding officer, Zenzontli is ordered to deploy to Europe and work toward destabilizing the existing civil societies. When asked why, Clan Elder Ixquintli declares, "*cuz it's god damned important to me and my personal well-being, my stock portfolios, my investments, my umbrella of business enterprises sheltered by statute, legislators & a phalanx of high-paid attorneys*" (18-19, italics original). This statement at once implicates government, policymakers, and the white collar crowd in the devaluation of human life around the world. It also represents a position of critical environmental justice studies that characterizes the state as complicit in administering environmental racism (Pellow). Rather than improving the conditions of devalued peoples, the Aztek state structure literally depends upon the

ongoing suppression and annihilation of the “other,” which in this case are Europeans and Americans within and beyond Mesoamerica.

Zenzontli’s commanding officer also refers to him by the wrong name throughout this entire passage; he is called “Zenzón” here at least nine times—an artistic choice that cannot be presumed accidental. To refer to the protagonist of the Aztek timeline by the “real” protagonist’s name begs readers to compare Zenzontli’s situation as a militant oppressor of the “other” to the reality of U.S. geopolitics. Zenzontli’s job traveling to Europe and collecting racialized bodies for economy-growing slaughter is thus likened to Zenzón’s job butchering livestock brought in from elsewhere. Foster thereby compares Zenzón’s labor of cutting apart pigs for the production of corporate profits to Zenzontli’s profession of capturing human lives and preparing them for sacrifice in pursuit of Aztek wealth and power.

Foster further represents the racializing power of space and, more specifically, restrictive built environments in a passage in which Zenzontli collapses a diverse set of people into a single racial category—that of the “European savages” (35). Passing through rows of caged bodies, Zenzontli sees just a singular, devalued identity for all of them, a category that makes them appropriate for sacrifice. The passage is quoted here at length:

As usual, they locked their eyes on me as I appeared before them in the carefully tended gloom, thinking (this I knew from interview and experience) that I was at once Angel of Death, Olmek were-Jaguar, barbarian lord of the underworld in the service of Satan, vicious slayer of thousands or—for all they knew—millions of their men, women and

children, Executioner (“verdugo”) sitting in judgment on their entire doomed civilization, etc. The European savages simply had no concept of how much thought we put into their careful selection and processing as centerpieces for State Ceremonials...I knelt by each cage, scanned the upkast faces perfunctorily, making an approximate headcount to make sure the pathetic creatures hadn’t begun consuming each other or done anything contrary to the Municipal Code for the Preservation of Kaptives. I never liked to get tickets for speeding or slavery. The eyes of the slaves were uniformly light-colored for the most part, gray when the light caught their upturned faces, the vision of their eyes glazed with something like illness, which I took for ignorance in its purest form.

(34-35)

This description of confined bodies speaks volumes to Foster’s perspective on the racialization of space. By confining these bodies and denying them freedom of movement and interaction with bodies and spaces beyond their prison, the Aztek Socialist Imperium creates and reinforces the racial designator of “European,” a necessary bodily marker for ongoing Aztek economic hegemony. While Zenzontli freely walks between the caged humans, he imagines the slaves view him as several different identities at once: “Angel of Death, Olmek were-Jaguar, barbarian lord...vicious slayer...Executioner” (34). In his position as a preparer of sacrificial slaves, Zenzontli could simultaneously appear as all of these identities or assume singular ones. Zenzontli also claims to know of the complexity of his own identity “from interview and experience,” meaning he is intimately aware of the various belief systems and social archetypes through which the diverse slaves identify

him (35). His complex identity lies in opposition to the singular category available to those in the cages: “European savages” (35). Although Zenzontli knows these enslaved people have diverse beliefs, he makes no distinction between the individual cultures from which these bodies have arrived. Rather, by virtue of their shared misery in the slave pens, Zenzontli collapses their cultural differences in exchange for the devalued racial marker of “European.” As a member of the dominant social group, Zenzontli imagines he has limitless identities available to him, whereas his spatially-restricted victims can never gain the complexity of personhood that might make them unfit for destruction.

Foster represents in this passage the ability for segregation and distinct material conditions to solidify racial categories. In *Represent and Destroy*, Jodi Melamed writes that racialization is “a process that constitutes differential relations of human value and valuelessness according to specific material circumstances and geopolitical conditions while appearing to be (and being) a rationally inevitable normative system that merely sorts human beings into categories of difference” (2). Racialization is a complex process that depends upon material and spatial conditions to assign relational values to human bodies while masquerading as an unavoidable, natural structure of the U.S. social formation. In *Atomik Aztex*, the European and American lives captured and processed into slave pens in the Aztek capital are placed into specific spatial conditions that reinforce the commonsense logic of their devalued status and inevitable destruction. In this sense, incarceration and segregation work to continually racialize and make expendable the human bodies placed into these conditions. As a distortion of U.S. racial and environmental injustice then, Aztek sacrificial slavery represents the compounding hazards served to marginalized groups as a result of capital’s pursuit of ever greater

wealth accumulation. The slaves' placement in spaces specifically for bodily destruction in exchange for economic prosperity continuously reinforces Aztek acceptance of the slaves' expendability.

The slave pens are where Zenzontli, a free member of the dominant group, visits and handles bodies allocated for extermination. The physical and cultural differences of these uniformly devalued human lives are thus rendered unnecessary to the purpose they will serve in upholding the Aztek economy. Seen collectively in a place of filth, dehumanization, and annihilation, their individuality is erased entirely. Zenzontli can observe the bodies' "uniformly light-colored" and "gray" eyes, despondent in their hopeless conditions, and register their emotional expressions for "ignorance in its purest form" because all of the caged bodies are experiencing the same cruel injustice and share the same future of destruction (35). This is the same racial logic by which U.S. society imagines prisons as "black" spaces, agricultural areas as "brown" spaces, and even suburbs as "white" spaces. These places are assigned racial signifiers based upon the groups systematically drawn to or segregated into them, whether through public policy, market trends, or overt discrimination. The racialized bodies in *Atomik Aztex* hail from diverse backgrounds prior to their enslavement; yet upon their placement in a literal sacrifice zone, they become the monolithic category of "Euro-American," a direct criticism of the hegemonic racialization of groups and the places they convene in our reality.

However, the slaves' bodies do possess a certain value in that the grotesque consumption of their bodies is required for the ongoing expansion of the Aztek economy. The Aztek Socialist Imperium actually depends upon the ongoing racialization of non-

Aztek people in order to secure greater surpluses of expendable bodies—biological fuel for economic expansion. The phenotypic, social, and cultural differences of enslaved bodies are diminished by their unified conditions. Seen in the same degraded state, in the same low light, they are dehumanized by Zenzontli and others. Seeing these people as a single category makes them expendable, allocated for sacrifice, and unchanging in nature. Foster’s narrative exemplifies the racializing effect of segregation George Lipsitz explores in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, in which he argues the twentieth-century white flight to the suburbs helped solidify the U.S. racial category of “white” by means of its physical separation from “people of color” (7). Lipsitz thus argues race is a relational designation based on various other conditions, such as a greater access to resources and freedom of movement.

Foster’s narrative represents Lipsitz’s theory of the racializing effect of segregation. Confinement versus freedom and mobility versus immobility define the difference between the Euro-American slave population and the Aztek dominant population. The preservation of dramatic material and spatial disparities between the Aztek and their subordinate populations continuously reinforce the commonsense acceptance of the latter’s expendability. When Zenzontli rubs shoulders with non-Aztek people outside of the slave holding cells, he identifies them by their various nationalities: “Now everywhere you go you find Kakchikels, Tzotzils, Mams, Pokomams, Kiche, and Kekchi” (26). Regardless of his prejudices toward these different groups, who he considers inferior to Aztek, Zenzontli recognizes their distinct identities in the milieu of urban society. But he does not make these distinctions for the bodies inside the slave pens; they are all the same in this segregated sacrifice zone.

The segregation and subsequent destruction of the Euro-American slave body in pursuit of economic gain also reflects Pulido's conception of the racialized biological sink. Pulido argues "Industry and manufacturing require sinks – places where pollution can be deposited. Sinks typically are land, air, or water, but racially devalued bodies can also function as 'sinks'" (529). In this case, slow-killing pollutants are exchanged for the quick death of ritual sacrifice. Both deaths, however, serve to sustain economies. Although the Aztek timeline uses a non-capitalist economic system, this universe serves as a critical mirror to our own. Thus, while the racial capitalist economic order of our reality requires racialized bodies to unwillingly act as sinks for wastes created by industry and manufacturing, the "Socialist Imperium" of the Aztex requires the actual and immediate obliteration of racialized bodies to sustain itself. This is why Zenzontli takes "an approximate headcount to make sure the pathetic creatures hadn't begun consuming each other" even though he intends to destroy them anyway (35). Racialized bodies, although devalued as subjects, possess high value as fuel for the Aztek economy. Moreover, Zenzontli's trite comparison of speeding to slavery—while highlighting Foster's attention to transportation by making a contradiction between rapid movement and motionless incarceration—criticizes widespread social ignorance toward the plight of many vulnerable populations. If Zenzontli compares traffic(k) ticketing to punishment for mistreating enslaved bodies, then we must assume the penalties for mishandling the lives of these people is miniscule. This comment gains greater significance when we realize that real polluting industries tend to pay pennies in fines for exposing vulnerable groups to their toxic wastes when compared to penalties levied for exposing white communities (Pulido, Kohl, & Cotton 16).

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

It is easy to evaluate Teknotitlán as definitive of good urbanism, and in many respects, the Aztek built environment produces a spatial reality many times healthier—and perhaps happier—than the car-centric sprawl of Los Angeles. However, a closer observation of the inner workings of Foster’s bizarre Aztek Empire yields an alternate reality that is not only unjust, but unsettlingly familiar to U.S. society. Like our reality, minoritized people in Teknotitlán are relegated to sacrifice zones and denied many of the privileges and benefits accorded to dominant groups of people in U.S. society. As in our reality, people whose lives and biologies are devalued face eventual and unnatural death in the name of economic progress. Foster simply depicts this process happening much quicker and without pretense.

Our built environment functions as a physical means of maintaining this harmful effect of racial capitalism, a phenomenon Foster captures well. Soja asserts built environments can continuously and autonomously reinforce our culture’s discriminatory practices (4). Our urban spaces are “actively involved in generating and sustaining inequality, injustice, economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression and discrimination,” a theory represented throughout *Atomik Aztex* (4). Unless thoughtfully designed with social and environmental justice principles in mind, construction projects will only maintain and heighten extant inequalities. Thus, when a city builds freeways on top of poor communities and minoritized groups, dividing streets and neighborhoods that once connected people, it creates a spatial condition that rewards freeway-drivers while constantly harming and devaluing the people they drive over.

When city planners provide resources to certain groups but not others, they ensure socioeconomic inequalities worsen over time. This idea of “urban spatial causality” Soja brings into discussion is apparent in my analysis of *Atomik Aztex*—how Foster’s built environments influence the beliefs, behaviors, and outcomes of his diverse characters.

Viewing the Aztek reality as a critical reflection of our own, we find the same environmental injustices perpetrated against an “othered” group. Skin colors and cultural origins aside, though, a major difference between oppressions in each universe is the visibility of devalued individuals and their resistance to suffering; overall, slaves allocated for sacrifice are removed from social spaces and from view of Aztek society. Their suffering and sacrifice occurs without description and beyond sight of the Aztek populace. This hidden process is somewhat unlike many real examples of environmental racism. The industrial sacrifice of certain communities and spaces throughout the U.S. are almost wholly available for viewing, though we are thoroughly conditioned to look away from the most damaging aspects of racial capitalism.

As Rob Nixon writes in *Slow Violence*, the slowly-compounding health effects of environmental racism are difficult to detect for those expecting to see blatant examples of wrongful death and industrial wrongdoing. Moreover, processes of residential segregation and spatial injustice continually make vulnerable communities less visible to the whole of U.S. society. For many privileged Americans, transportation and movement throughout urban landscapes are their only opportunities to witness communities offered for economic sacrifice. But with developments like walled freeways and the return of segregated transit, it is becoming easier to look away completely. Devalued communities are disappearing from view entirely.

CHAPTER VII

END NOTE

1. In particular, Kristy Ulibarri examines Foster's mediation of the premodern indigenous figure and his answer to Latinx/Chicanx literature's problematic habit of placing precolonial indigeneity outside of capitalism and impervious to its processes. She argues that "*Atomik Aztex* disrupts the impulse to make premodern indigeneity into precapitalist and precolonial figures," offering instead a parody of artistic desires to cast the pre-Columbian indigenous figure as also a premodern figure (221). Though within a Socialist Imperium, Foster's *Aztex* behave like ideal capitalist subjects.

Ramon Saldívar explores the form of *Atomik Aztex* as a means of understanding the changing nature of race and racialization in the twenty-first century United States, raising Foster's work as an ethnic American example of speculative realism and historical fantasy. Saldívar argues, "The two central concerns of *Atomik Aztex* are a reconceptualization of the way that race affects the formations of history and the reshaping of the form of the novel in order to represent that reconceptualization" (160). Thus, Saldívar offers several formal readings of the narrative that help illuminate its racial discourses.

Additionally, Sascha Pöhlmann implies that *Atomik Aztex* features only one narrator—Zenzontli, of the Aztex—whose consciousness travels between realities, and that the narrator's racial experience differs given that he inhabits the body and social status of a Chicano minority in *his* alternate reality. This paper follows the example of Stephen Hong Sohn's analysis of the narrative, in which Sohn argues that Zenzón's Chicano identity exists independently from Zenzontli's Aztek identity, though they may

influence each other (74). Moreover, Sohn points to Foster's personal identity as an Asian American author writing about characters of other ethnic backgrounds, arguing that his narrative represents an overcoming of racial difference in order to achieve class solidarity, particularly in terms of worker's rights.

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