

Introduction

THE FIRE AND FLAMES OF FUNKAHUATL

Josh Kun and George Lipsitz

HENRY DAVID THOREAU CONTENDED THAT the great majority of people live lives of quiet desperation. Rubén Funkahuatl Guevara has known despair in his life, but he has never been quiet about it, or complicit with it. In *Confessions of a Radical Chicano Doo-Wop Singer* he looks back on more than seventy years of a life filled with struggle to act joyfully, to create boldly, to love freely, and to live fully. The colorful and chaotic sprawling succession of experiences, identities, and achievements that appear on these pages might seem to exceed what a single life can contain. If *Confessions of a Radical Chicano Doo-Wop Singer* appeared as a work of fiction, it might seem improbable, even implausible. But history is not bound by the logic or reason of fiction. It creates unpredictable people who do unexpected things. Rubén Funkahuatl Guevara is one of them.

How you see the history of popular music in post-WWII Los Angeles has always depended on where you're standing. Viewed from Sunset Boulevard, you might be blinded by star-dusted names like the Doors and Buffalo Springfield. From the beaches, you might be staring into the sun of the Beach Boys. But if, like Rubén Funkahuatl Guevara, your favorite view is from the Sixth Street bridge, the one that straddles the L.A. River and connects downtown to East Los Angeles, then the city you hear sounds a little different: Chicano doo-wop, blues, and funk, rock *en español* soaked in ska blasting from backyard parties, Japanese *taiko* drums pounding in parking lots down the street from a mariachi plaza and a Jewish synagogue. If the beach and the

Sunset Strip are your centers, then Guevara is a marginal figure. But if the bridge is your center, if your west is east, if your north is south, if the river that fed the founding plaza of this global pueblo is your point of reference, then Guevara is a rainmaker, one of L.A.'s greatest musical heroes, who has never stopped believing in the redemption and deliverance that thrive in the city's underground networks of community, culture, and change.

Guevara is best known to the general public as a musician—as the “Ruben” of the 1970s popular music group Ruben And The Jets, as an influential architect of Chicano R & B, as the producer of landmark compilations of Chicano music, as a key spokesman for Latin American rock *en español* in L.A., and as of this writing, still a working solo artist honing his craft in the bars of Boyle Heights. As he delineates on these pages, however, he has had many other musical identities and personas, performing at different times as one of the Apollo Brothers, as Jay P. Mobey, as Aztec Watts, and as Lord Funkahuatl.

Moreover, music has only been one facet of his creative life. *Confessions of a Radical Chicano Doo-Wop Singer* reveals Guevara's restless and relentless creativity across different art forms as a playwright, poet, performance artist, activist, author, music critic, actor, and arts institution programmer. For Guevara, to be an artist is not to “make art” in any conventional aesthetic or market-driven sense, but to live life as art, to approach life as an experiment with—and a struggle over—the politics of form, style, and imagination. His creations resonate within the spaces of political and cultural activism where music is community glue, within the classrooms and community centers where he works with disadvantaged youth, all informed by his experiences as a working-class Chicano who has witnessed firsthand the hardships of labor and cultural exploitation in his own life and in the lives of those around him.

In this memoir, Guevara recalls his youthful experiences in the La Veinte barrio of Santa Monica in the 1940s, with subsequent moves by his family to a variety of neighborhoods throughout California and Nevada. These prepared him for early success in music as a teenage member of the Apollo Brothers rhythm and blues group. He explains how a career in music led to the exhilaration of performing side by side with Frank Zappa, Tina Turner, and Celia Cruz; appearing in films with Cheech and Chong; opening for Deodato in New York's Central Park and for the Doobie Brothers at the San Diego Sports Arena; performing in chic nightclubs like Max's Kansas City one week after Bob Marley and one week before Bruce Springsteen; and leading his band on a stadium tour with Marc Bolan and T-Rex, Mitch Ryder, and Three Dog Night. The life of a touring musician made it easy for him to

indulge in the pleasures of alcohol, marijuana, and LSD. He relates how the rowdy behavior of Ruben And The Jets once got them banned from every Holiday Inn in the nation.

Part of this saga also includes that other part of the “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” cliché, but here sex—and love, and lust—take on a charge that produces particular results with Guevara. He relates how his onstage charisma and seemingly insatiable erotic drives and desires opened the door to a long, lover-man chain of sexual and romantic adventures (often with Tantric and shamanistic inflections). His narrative reveals an oft-remarked truism of music’s relationship with desire, that performing music in public can be a sexually charged activity: a way to be noticed, admired, and coveted, a path toward interpersonal passion and pleasure. At moments in this book, Guevara’s openness about intimacy resembles the seemingly endless, and mythic, romantic and sexual encounters and assignations that jazz musician Charles Mingus deployed in his book *Beneath the Underdog* to demonstrate the centrality of erotic desire to his personal and artistic life, and its complicated and often violent and destructive role in the shaping of his racial and gender identity.¹ Yet as other parts of the book show, a plenitude of sexual partners is not sufficient to fend off loneliness and isolation; these sections parallel the discussions in *Divided Soul* by David Ritz that contrast Marvin Gaye’s popularity as a sex symbol and the singer’s inability to establish reciprocal, mutually respectful relationships with actual women.² As for so many other straight male entertainers of his era, the chronic attempt to conquer female fans had become part of the power dynamics of the male-dominated music industry, where misogyny and male sexual power were (and continue to be) common features of touring life. Frank Sinatra boasted that all men were animals, and so as a man “I’m just looking to make it with as many women as I can.”³ Sam Cooke’s widow recalled that her husband had an “insatiable” need for attention from women.⁴ Johnny Otis noted in his memoir that life as a working musician in the 1940s and 1950s was like “swimming

1. Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

2. David Ritz, *Divided Soul: The Life of Martin Gaye* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, [1985] 1991).

3. Quoted in Anthony Summer and Robbyn Swan, *Sinatra: The Life* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 52.

4. Edward J. Boyer, “The Soulful Legacy of Sam Cooke,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 1994 (http://articles.latimes.com/1994-12-23/news/mn-12372_1_sam-cooke/2; accessed February 4, 2017).

in a sea of beautiful women.”⁵ For Guevara, erotic desire fueled creativity and served as motivation and reparation for the hardships of life on the road and the economic uncertainty of work in the music industry, where more performers lose money than make money.

To be sure, there are moments in *Confessions* when Guevara—like Mingus before him—may be a little too frank about his macho womanizing, and overly indulges his sexual and romantic appetite on the pages of this written memoir. He delineates in fine detail the exact physical features of the many women who entranced him and describes carefully his own approaches and techniques of making love to them. Yet for all their focus on visual stimuli, these accounts are concerned with more than the purely physical. His *desire for desire* fuels expectations of mystical connections and romantic fulfillments so intense that very few real relationships could fulfill them. Time and time again, when reality fails to conform to the intensity of the dream, when ordinary and everyday worries, tensions, and frustrations reemerge, the relationships dissolve, sometimes amicably and sometimes angrily, but always awkwardly.

The artistic and erotic aspects of Guevara’s life story emanate from the same place. He sees the flaws in the “what is” and desires the “what can be.” Creative artistry and erotic adventures promise connection to others; they require cooperation, trust, reciprocity, attention, affection, and intimacy. Both artistry and eroticism channel bodily hunger and pain, nervous energy, and alienation into moments of triumphant passion and pleasure. Yet Guevara also recognizes the costs of his sexual fixations, which he continually reassesses, critiques, and attempts to conquer. At a crucial moment in the memoir, Guevara, realizing that he has attached too much of his self-worth to his sexuality, creates the “Tao of Funkahuatl,” a philosophy designed to move sex from the center of his psyche in the hopes of helping himself and other men to become “less dogs and better lovers. Better husbands. Better fathers. Better men.”

Part of the motive behind Guevara’s extended discussions of sexuality in this book is to diagnose his struggles with what Audre Lorde famously called—in an influential 1978 essay about the historically denigrated power of the erotic within women—the inherent link between eros and chaos. “The erotic,” she writes, “is a measure between our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings.” Guevara’s early fascination with the erotic power of

5. Johnny Otis, *Upside Your Head! Rhythm and Blues on Central Avenue* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan/University Press of New England, 1991), 89.

women shows up in these pages, as does his fear of the chaos that his own eros brings. He is likewise frank about the consequences of making erotic desire a primary motivation for his work: emptiness, solitude, depression, and the destruction of some of his most important personal relationships. Writing from a queer-of-color standpoint very different from Guevara's cis-gendered heteronormative masculinity, Lorde explains that women like her have been taught to distrust the erotic, while heterosexual men have been taught to embrace and manipulate it, at women's expense. Because the erotic is a source of power, she explains, every form of oppression has a stake in corrupting or distorting it. While women learn to fear the erotic, men are socialized to demean and trivialize it, to reduce it to sensation, to use the feelings of others rather than share their own. "Use without the consent of the used," she writes, "is abuse." If used properly, however, the erotic can be a source of liberation. When in touch with the erotic, Lorde maintains, "I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial."⁶ For Guevara, male desire can be like a knife: a productive tool if grabbed by the handle but a source of self-destruction if grasped by the blade. In these pages, Guevara crafts a unique meditation on Chicano heteromascularity, writing about the cage of his masculinity and opening up about a decade of sexual abstinence.

Toward the end of his narrative Guevara presents a rare glimpse into the sex life of an older adult. Now in his seventies, he recognizes that he still longs for sexual pleasure and personal connection, but also that what he refers to as "the dog" in him needs to be contained and controlled. Motivated in part by the long period of abstinence, and marked as well by the sad recognition that the personal attractiveness he could always count on in his youth to smooth the path toward sexual and romantic connections works differently in his senior years, he is forced to concede that the younger women he still desires no longer view him in the ways to which he had become accustomed. Yet this realization also frees him in a certain way. The unasked-for celibacy motivates him "to sculpt my spirit, sex, funk, and soul onto the path of the Beloved while living my life as a work of art." He writes lyric verses and songs

6. Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sexualities and Communication in Everyday Life: A Reader*, edited by Karen E. Lovaas and Mercilee M. Jenkins (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2007); available at https://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/11881_Chapter_5.pdf.

expressing his new beliefs, and forges them into a song cycle that he records as *The Tao of Funkahuatl*.

These are not the only struggles he shares. The numerous sexual escapades recounted in this narrative—often with a sense of joy, often with clear desperation—take place in the context of a long and repeatedly frustrated search for romantic fulfillment, lasting relationships, spiritual connection, and an ever-elusive knowledge of self. They also reverberate with the arduous tasks of making a living. The same person who stayed in luxury hotels while on tour was also the man who found himself at times functionally homeless, living out of his car and plugging away at low-wage jobs in order to survive. Guevara's seductive brushes with stardom were accompanied by crushing disappointments caused by unpaid fees and royalties, by recordings that were insufficiently promoted or not even released, and by disastrous live performances undermined by the egos of other musicians or the incompetence and bad faith of promoters.

Guevara punctures the sensational myths that many fans have about the music business. This is not an ode to celebrity stardom and financial success. He gives us the music industry as work, as a grind, as a constant battle to create in the face of the demands and limits of commerce. To be sure, there are many triumphant moments on stage, stories about magnificent recording sessions, and the pride of accomplishment that comes from favorable reviews and adulation from fans. Yet Guevara also demonstrates in excruciating detail that a career in music requires attention to many different kinds of nettling, petty, and onerous tasks: putting bands together, supervising practice sessions, writing arrangements, designing sets, creating choreography, choosing costumes, setting up equipment, arranging travel, and generating publicity. In this book, "show business" is as much about the inner workings of the business as it is about the spectacle of the show. "Playing" music turns out to be a lot more work than play.

Confessions of a Radical Chicano Doo-Wop Singer is not a conventional musician's biography: it concerns itself with more than a linear musical career. Guevara recounts how his seeking spirit, unquenchable curiosity, and irrepressible artistic imagination led him to studies in the World Arts and Cultures Department at UCLA. His senior thesis advisors there were the renowned opera and theater director Peter Sellars and founder of the American Indian Dance Theater Hanay Geiogamah (Kiowa). For his senior project Guevara created the kind of cross-cultural mixed media work that has characterized his oeuvre ever since, fusing East L.A. rhythm and blues with

Native American ritual shamanism and Japanese butoh dance theater to tell an unconventional history of Los Angeles. A stand-alone performance piece, *Funkahuatl Speaks*, emerged from that project. In it, Guevara poured water over his head as he emerged from a large plastic bag, mimicking the experience of birth. After reciting the spoken-word prose poem and song “C/S,” his powerful counterhistory of Los Angeles, he and his young son, Rubén III, threw pieces of candy from around the world to audience members, who spontaneously jumped up and danced to the sounds of Al Green’s “Love and Happiness.”

It should not be a surprise that Guevara found his way to theatrical writing, performing, directing, and producing. The entire narrative he presents here is replete with a ferocious theatricality where appearance and drama matter. He dresses himself for one performance by donning Tibetan quilt pants, a vintage Chaz Bojórquez Graff t-shirt, a coat from Bali, Brazilian canvas leopard-skin shoes, a rust-colored Panama straw hat, a faux leopard floor-length bathrobe, and shades. “Superman and Funkahuatl never looked so good!” he exclaims. On another occasion, an effort to go backstage with his then love interest without an appropriate pass is magically facilitated by her attire in a midnight blue chiffon miniskirt and electric blue suede heels, while Guevara accompanies her in a brown suede flat-brimmed hat à la Clint Eastwood in *A Fistful of Dollars*, a brown leather coat, black shirt with a mariachi bow tie, custom-made leather pants, and custom-made green suede knee boots. The security guards do not even ask to see a pass; they take one look at the couple and open the doors. “I guess we looked like movie stars,” Guevara recalls.

The plays, mixed-media productions, and performances that Guevara has crafted over the years, blending speech, song, dance, and visual imagery, have posed bold challenges to the conventions of spectatorship. These endeavors entailed collaborations with visual artists John Valadez, Patssi Valdez, Chaz Bojórquez, Leo Limón, Gilbert “Magu” Luján, and multimedia artist Harry Gamboa Jr.; with actors and performance artists Marisela Norte, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, John Trudell, and Kristina Wong; with writers Rubén Martínez, Dave Marsh, and Luis Rodríguez; and with Guevara’s fellow art activists (*artistas*) Quetzal Flores, Martha Gonzalez, and Nobuko Miyamoto. In addition to creating his own works, Guevara has also been involved in arts administration and programming. He served as director of Latino and Asian Pacific Islander audience development for Hollywood’s Ford Amphitheatre, creating events that greatly expanded the cultural

diversity of that institution's offerings. Guevara has also labored to incorporate music into the exhibits and activities of art museums. Drawing on his work in both music and theater, he staged *Surcos Alternativos/Alternative Grooves from Mexamérica*, a site-specific performance concert, for the inauguration of the Getty Museum's 2002 summer concert series. He created music-listening stations for the Japanese American National Museum's 2002 exhibit on the history of Boyle Heights, as well as for the 2011 landmark exhibition at the Museum of Latin American Art *MEX/LA: "Mexican" Modernism(s) in Los Angeles, 1930–1985*.

Although the arts have been at the core of Guevara's life, they have rarely provided him with an adequate livelihood. In this memoir he relates stories about wage labor, cooking and delivering chicken dinners for a franchise chain restaurant, moving heavy barrels of sulfuric acid in a warehouse, and stacking other artists' albums (and sometimes his own) in a record wholesale distributorship. Yet he has also carried his art into new realms of instruction and apprenticeship through employment as a teacher, tutor, and mentor to disadvantaged youths. Through over two decades of work with Arts 4 City Youth, which he founded in 1993, he has supervised instruction of more than nine thousand young people in schools, housing projects, and parks as they learned to write, paint, film, dance, and make photographs. He taught poetry to fifth-grade students in Trinity Elementary School in South Central Los Angeles, to older students in Metropolitan State Hospital (a facility for the mentally and emotionally challenged), and to young people in detention centers and other carceral institutions. He has also worked as a substitute teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District. In each of these settings, he felt compelled to devise new pedagogical techniques geared to the particular needs and experiences of his students. This work takes place without the public visibility and (sometimes) acclaim that characterizes his professional performing life, but it has planted seeds of inspiration and hope in the lives of students who might otherwise not have encountered the arts.

Guevara's memoir is as unusual in the realm of race as it is on the subject of sex. *Confessions of a Radical Chicano Doo-Wop Singer* presents a unique cartography of the U.S. racial order as seen through Guevara's life experiences, identifications, and affiliations. He delineates with care and precision how a Mexican American with both Iberian and indigenous ancestry became immersed in Black music, how he forged lifelong connections to Japanese American culture, and how this history led him to see Frank Zappa as a kindred soul and to collaborate productively with him. Zappa, who described

himself as Sicilian, Greek, Arab, and French, shared many of Guevara's eclectic interests and tastes. The two forged a close and deep connection in the course of a conversation in which they discovered their mutual admiration for the Western art music of Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók. Guevara approached Ruben And The Jets (which started as a novelty conception of Zappa's and later became an actual group headed by Guevara) as a vehicle for incorporating the "ethnic folk music" of East L.A. into new musical and theatrical forms, just as Stravinsky and Bartók had done with the folk arts of their nations.

In his life and his art, Guevara came to view racial identity as composite, contested, and complex, as something that could neither be fully embraced nor completely evaded. His first girlfriend was a Filipina. He lived near and played music with Asian Americans and Blacks. In college, he studied under the supervision of a Kiowa mentor. Late in life he discovered that he has three half-brothers from the Okanagan reserve in British Columbia, Canada. Yet for all of these multicultural meetings, mixtures, encounters, and engagements, discovering the significance of being Chicano remained at the center of his consciousness.

Growing up in a family headed by a Mexican immigrant father and a Chicana mother, Guevara learned early in life about the complicated contradictions of Mexican American identity. His father boasted about his family's distant relation to ninth-century Spanish royalty but said less about the ancestry they inherited from Rubén's indigenous grandmother. Rubén's mother's side of the family claimed indigenous Tecuexe ancestors from Jalisco on one side, and on the other, a prominent Spanish-Mexican family that included the architect who designed the Guadalajara Cathedral, built in 1618. Hearing his father's stories at home and being surrounded by members of his mother's extended family in Santa Monica's La Veinte barrio instilled in Guevara a strong sense of his identity as a Mexican American. At the same time, this identity seemed always under assault. The anti-Mexican racism that he experienced from white classmates in school and that he discerned in many forms of popular culture alienated him from the U.S. part of his identity. Yet he could not feel completely at home in Mexico either, as he realized on a trip to Guadalajara in 1974. Asking directions from a man on the street in his rudimentary Spanish provoked a torrent of contemptuous abuse from the stranger, who proclaimed that *pochos* (a common slur by Mexican nationals about Mexicans living in the United States) were mongrels who had no culture of their own.

Later on that trip, Guevara experienced what he describes as “a soft epiphany.” The feeling of being betwixt and between, at home neither *aquí* nor *allá* (here nor there), that is so common to the Chicano experience filled Guevara with determination to create an art that expressed the vitality, dynamism, and knowledge of the intersections he inhabited. He embraced a Chicano identity of his own design, one that was neither separatist nor assimilationist but instead a collaged stance made possible because of—rather than despite—its contradictions. He began to call himself a Chicano Culture Sculptor, an artist working in many different media to transform the aspirations, alienations, indignities, and impulses of an aggrieved people into aesthetic experiences that could point the way toward liberation. In music, plays, performance art, theater, and fiction he worked to turn the poison of negative ascription into the medicine of positive affirmation, to embrace, exaggerate, and invert demeaning stereotypes, to uncrown power with laughter, to challenge the humiliating and subordinating signs and symbols of the dominant culture by staging counterspectacles that called new communities into being through performance. He reports that he could not sleep the night that this soft epiphany came to him, because his head was filled with “millions of ideas, dreams, songs, and poetry.”

In fashioning himself as a Chicano Culture Sculptor, Guevara both conformed to tradition and broke with it. Both sides of his family had long histories of migration, adaptation, and transformation. The family of his mother moved to Santa Monica in the midst of the turmoil that eventually came to a climax in the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Some of his earliest lessons about how culture could be sculpted came from the irrepressible theatricality and joyful festivity of his mother and her relatives. He savored listening to family stories of the strolling musicians playing traditional Mexican music in *Fiestas Patrias* Day (September 16) parades. He learned to play the maracas and sing *boleros* at family gatherings. Yet his uncles also introduced him to radio broadcasts of Black big band swing orchestras and taught him to dance the boogie-woogie. One of his uncles later became a singer and conga player in a Latin jazz band. In this memoir, Guevara relates the exhilaration he felt one night as a child when his mother took him to a neighborhood dance. He was entranced: the sweet smoky smell of *carne asada* on the grill, his mother’s beautiful bright red lipstick and flowing black hair as she displayed her prize-winning abilities as a dancer, and the steady rhythms and beautiful harmonies of the music.

Guevara’s paternal grandfather was a classical violinist from a prominent family. After he married an indigenous woman, he was disinherited and

reduced to an impoverished existence. When his wife died, he drank himself to death, leaving Rubén's father—Rubén Ladrón de Guevara Sr.—an orphan who was forced to fend for himself at the age of eleven. The youth played music on the banjo, guitar, and drums on the streets for tips, sang for customers in houses of prostitution, and served as an army bugler during the Mexican Revolution. He became a bullfighter, a boxer, and a jockey before re-forming Trio Los Porteños (they became Los Porteños) when Miguel Aceves Mejía left the group in the early 1940s. Rubén Sr. settled in Los Angeles, where his group enjoyed success as a Spanish-language recording and stage act. He met Sara Gutiérrez at a show and decided to stay in the United States to marry her and start a family. Finding work as a musician in Hollywood film studios, he befriended the Mexican American actor Anthony Quinn. Later he moved the family to Las Vegas, where he performed in most of the major lounges; Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner liked the music he made.

Eleven-year-old Rubén Jr. liked to go the lounges where his father performed, standing outside rooms that he was too young to enter, listening to the sounds of forbidden worlds. The music he heard was in the middle of a large cultural transition and transformation. It was an era when big band jazz was giving way to rhythm and blues and rock 'n' roll, and when segregated venues in Las Vegas were just beginning to allow Black artists to perform. One special night, he recalls seeing Louis Prima and Keely Smith put on an unforgettable show accompanied by Sam Butera and the Witnesses. Prima had Italian ancestry and Smith was of Irish and Cherokee descent, but because of the way they played and sang, some listeners thought both of them were Black. On other nights in Las Vegas, young Rubén savored the sounds of Black acts like the Treniers and white acts like Freddy Bell and the Bellhops and Vido Musso.

Guevara's first public appearance as a musician came when he was in the fifth grade, playing the trumpet in the school band as they paraded through the downtown streets of Palm Springs. A few years later, he played first trumpet, second chair, with the California All-Youth Symphony Orchestra, appearing with them in a televised broadcast on Easter Sunday in 1957. He received another kind of musical education, however, in middle school from the school janitor Henry Williams. An accomplished pianist steeped in African American performance styles, Williams tutored Guevara and another student who played drums to perform popular hits like Louis Jordan's "Caldonia" and the Johnny Otis Orchestra's rendition of "Harlem Nocturne." Within a year Rubén was playing those songs and others he had

learned from his father in a band that played school dances and performed at a graduation concert.

After moving back to Los Angeles, Guevara joined the Apollos car club. One night he and his fellow club members were walking in Hollywood and they stumbled on Perry's Rehearsal Studios. Drawn to the music inside, they entered timidly, then watched as the Vibrations, the Olympics, and the Carlos Brothers rehearsed their hit songs for an upcoming concert. The musicians were friendly and invited them to attend the show, which inspired the car club members to imagine themselves as a musical act. Guevara quickly became as interested in the way band members moved on the stage and the costumes they wore as he was in the music. When later in life he turned to writing and performing theatrical pieces that included music, he was not so much moving away from rock 'n' roll as bringing its performance techniques and visual vocabularies to new venues. He never forgot the impression that stage performers made on him when he was young, and he continued to embrace their sense of theater as he aged.

Guevara's lifelong quest to create art with social influence resonates with the aspirations that author, filmmaker, and social activist Toni Cade Bambara once described as the desire "to walk upright and see clearly, breathe easily, think better than was taught, be better than one was programmed to believe."⁷ Yet these lofty ideals emerged from social conditions that were far from ideal. Guevara has been a participant in, and a product of, the politics and passions of the era in which he has lived. His artistic expressions and appeals for a kind of politicized love have been crafted as instruments of self-defense against what he sees as clear political evil. Guevara was an eyewitness to the emergence of the youth counterculture in Los Angeles, and he joined the protests against police repression when officers rounded up young people loitering harmlessly along the Sunset Strip in 1966. Guevara created and staged the gospel rock cantata *Who Are the People?* as a protest against the Vietnam War. From the fires that consumed large swaths of Watts in the 1965 riots to the killing of journalist Rubén Salazar by a sheriff's deputy at the Chicano Moratorium in 1970, he has been close to the flashpoints of racial, class, and state violence. He recounts in this memoir a perpetual effort to use his art to respond responsibly and honorably to systemic subordination and violence. In his sixties, he worked tirelessly to stage numerous interfaith

7. Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 107.

and interracial cultural collaborations as counters to the Iraq war and its promotion of a climate of hate directed against followers of Islam.

Throughout this memoir Guevara portrays his life “as a steady series of burnings,” with both literal and figurative references to fire appearing throughout the text. He suffered second-degree burns as a five-day-old infant left out in the sun too long by a well-meaning relative who worried that the baby looked too pale. As an adult, a sulfuric acid drum exploded and scarred his face in an industrial accident. The Peppermint Lounge West nightclub caught fire and burned to the ground the week before the Apollo Brothers were slated to perform there. A fire in Nayarit, Mexico, incinerated his father’s birth certificate. During his performance of a piece protesting the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas, Guevara lit an incense burner and accidentally set fire to the *piñata* headdress that he was wearing.

Other burnings held symbolic significance and more figurative implications for him. As a soon-to-be lover entered his apartment, he discerned an ominous portent when all the bulbs in a lamp burned out at the same time. In crafting a performance piece about the Spanish conquest of Mexico, he returned again and again to the punitive burnings of Mexico City and of indigenous libraries by the conquering Spaniards, leading him to title the production *La Quemada*—The Burning. When he encountered a group of young immigrant Algerian graffiti writers in a city in France, it seemed fitting to him that the meeting took place in a burned-out building. Moreover, throughout the text Guevara punctuates his narrative with wordplay that evokes fire, referring to burning questions, feelings of burnout, accounts of being burned in business deals, images burned into his brain, and confessions of firing up more than a few joints and contending with what he describes as the two fires that he felt burning constantly throughout his life, one in his heart and the other in his pants.

The burnings that Guevara describes as the recurrent symbols of his life have been accompanied by similarly perilous flights, falls, crashes, and cuts. As a young boy he joined his cousins in Tijuana as they stuffed themselves into large truck tires and rolled down hills, flying along the steep mountain canyons in tires that they pretended were space ships. Another kind of flight and fall took place on the Santa Monica Pier at the age of four or five, when a group of aunts and cousins tossed him into the ocean in the belief that this would teach him to swim. He remembers having no fear of the water, just as he had no fear of the steep hillsides in Tijuana, surmising that he must have seen himself as invincible. When walking home from kindergarten one day, he was thrown to the pavement when a car hit him, the tires screeching to a

halt right beside his head. An ambulance arrived and drove him home, where the medics who attended to him assured his mother and grandmother that the boy was well. The two women were greatly shaken by the experience, but Rubén merely decided that he *was* invincible. He grabbed a towel, wrapped it around his neck, and ran down a brick walkway with his arms stretched out straight before him, pretending to be Superman. He crashed headfirst through the glass front door and landed in the living room with cuts all over his arms. Twenty-six stitches were needed to repair his arm, leaving a seven-inch scar that he carries today as reminder of what he describes as “my life-long quest and desire to go beyond this world.”

Follow the flames long enough and *Confessions of a Radical Chicano Doo-Wop Singer* leads you right into the heart of the Los Angeles that has been Guevara’s quaking spiritual center, his tumultuous artistic stage, and his vibrant social laboratory. More than four decades ago he wrote “C/S,” a magisterial spoken-word prose poem put to a rock ’n’ roll world beat accompaniment that stands as a great distillation of the historical violence perpetrated against indigenous and Mexican people in Los Angeles. He concludes this memoir with a similar lyrical and poetic rumination, “Take Me Higher, *Mi Reina*.” Drawing on decades of experience with the city, especially its most desperate precincts, Guevara reads the built environment of Los Angeles as an archive of histories of exploitation, suppression, and repression. Seen through his eyes, the lake in Westlake Park is a site of “penny wishes and drowning tears,” and Union Station is a “grand cathedral of trapped ghosts of ripped hearts and laughter, where the *pinche* Manifest Destiny Railroad connected east and west over the blistered, busted backs of human beasts of burden.” The corner of 8th and Alameda appears to him as the place where “Tongva and other Indigenous men, women, and children were corralled like cattle, left to howl and pray to the moon in honor and in shame.” Everywhere Guevara looks in the glamor capital of the world, he sees evidence of oppression and exploitation, ruin and decay. The San Fernando Valley’s orchards have been transformed into “a spiritual wasteland by toxic film studios,” and “the smoldering embers from the 1965 Watts riots still threaten to ignite as Brown and Black people continue to experience police brutality.”

He describes the concrete banks of the Los Angeles River that divides downtown from East L.A. as “cemented with Angelino apartheid.” Even though murals on Eastside streets still sing “*corrido*–doo-wop–hip hop epiphanies,” the tacos sold by vendors filled with “tongues, ears, brains, and intestines” only fuel “a better dream for a better death” among the people

whose tongues, ears, brains, and intestines are wasted every day in jobs that pay too little to support lives of decency and dignity. Guevara takes aim at the mythmakers of Los Angeles, even the hard-boiled noir writers like John Fante, who professed to be truth tellers but who in Rubén's eyes colluded to occlude the racism in the city that oppresses dreams and kills hopes.

Declaring, "I know you, L.A., and I know you know me," Guevara seeks refuge in the "satin wings of fallen angels, broken promises, unanswered prayers, songs never heard, and the tortured hearts of poets, priests, pimps, and prostitutes." Merging his own identity with that of the city, he closes with a plea that encapsulates his life and art. "Sculpt me," he commands, "into a lusty funk of fire, rhythm, and blues." The sculptor has become the sculpted, the Chicano Culture Sculptor now a living sculpture who asks that his "perfect tears and songs of dust caress, and cover, your, our, sinful sacred streets." He invites his beloved and brutal city to "watch me burn, *mi reina de los ángeles*. . . . Watch me burn. Stoke the fire. Kiss the flames." This is a remarkable conclusion to a remarkable book, an expression of poetry and prophecy from an artist who refuses to succumb to despair quietly and who invites us to follow him into the flames, to transform our lives into creative works of living sculpture.