



The Gores (Whittier Blvd + Ave), 1974, from the Asco era

# When the Messiah Speaks to the Mainstream

Harry Gamboa Jr.

In August of 2018, I was riding the Metro Red Line underground train in Los Angeles while moving quickly from N. Hollywood to Downtown Los Angeles as I was reading the last few pages of a paperback copy of the novel *Messiah* by Gore Vidal (originally published in 1954). The train pulled into the busy 7th Street/Metro Center station as I placed the book into my backpack. I stood as the doors opened and was about to exit with many other riders onto the platform. Armed ICE agents immediately selected a handful of riders (who they identified as undocumented immigrants) and accosted the young women and men along with their children in a rough manner. Some of the remaining riders looked on with approval while others immediately dissociated themselves from the social injustice and walked away as though nothing unusual had just taken place. I looked on, confident that the small children would most likely be U.S. citizens and hoped that one day they would grow up to become involved in prosecuting the agents who are engaged in violating International Law under the pretext of the current presidential administration's hate-filled actions that are intent on violating human rights. I walked towards the station

exit but was confronted by Metropolitan Transportation Authority police agents. They were pointing a *Thru Vision* body scanning device that collects images of concealed objects formed by the reception of low energy terahertz waves.

"What's that bulky object in your backpack?"

"It is a novel written by a brilliant author."

"Put your backpack on the table and stand back while we examine its contents."

"Gore Vidal would have been horrified by this moment."

"What?"

"It's a good book."

"Messiah? Here take your book back, we're not interested in religious fanatics. You'd be better off not reading anything at all."

I retrieved my book and backpack and walked up the many concrete steps to emerge at the street level of Downtown Los Angeles where the intense heat and smog added to the urban shock of being free to become an anonymous pedestrian. I continued forward for several city blocks and stepped into a stylized coffee shop near a strip of active gentrification construction and

development. I ordered an espresso and sat down to finish reading the novel. The comfortable, air-conditioned setting served as a curative location to read Gore Vidal's prophetic words that had, in 1969 at 17 years of age, inspired me to pursue a lifelong relationship with the written, spoken, and lived word.

Here is an unlikely story:

In 2008, Jean Stein (acclaimed author, editor, and socialite par excellence) and I held many weekly conversations at the Garden Commons of the UCLA Research Library. There, during the period of her preliminary research for a book project that would attempt to take in multiple streams of American culture, we often discussed ideas. In regards to her literary project, she had expressed some interest in examining the dynamics and interactions of contemporary Chicana/o artists of Los Angeles that could provide a few clues as to how social inclusion/exclusion in mainstream American society plays a role in determining popular success and/or historical obscurity. During the several months of meeting with Jean, her ability to precisely dislodge small fragments of nearly forgotten memories contributed to the building of a bridge that would span the vast chasm between the telling of personal stories and the words that are used to deny or affirm their authenticity.

She asked me how I had come to include writing as part of my artistic practice.

I explained to her that in the late 1960's, I had been a young Chicano Movement activist in East L.A. who was one day cornered and reprimanded by an astute high school teacher who understood that I needed some special motivation in order to avoid being swept up by the monstrous social meat grinder of 20th century angst.

He urged me to listen to his sage advice:

"Shut the fuck up and go read a good book."

I had always read magazines, newspapers, comic books, and the English dictionary (while avoiding all assigned textbooks) but had not yet read any works of fiction. The kaleidoscope of my 1960's teenage lifestyle was like being in a cultural war zone intermixed with psychedelia minus the space or time or interest for extended reading materials. Bypassing locked gates and high fences was one of my fortes as I exited the Garfield High School campus through the unsecured main entrance. I walked down Whittier Boulevard for a couple of hours while I attempted to straighten out my adolescent thoughts. I eventually found myself in downtown Los Angeles at the book counter of the historic May Company Building on Broadway and 8th Street. I plucked a paperback book off the shelf, paid for it with a handful of coins, then went off to sit down with a cup of coffee at the classic Clifton's Cafeteria and read the novel throughout the day until I reached the last page. I was absolutely impressed by the complete control of the narrative and language used to convey ideas.

I informed Jean (she had been an editor for The Paris Review and the editor of Grand Street) that the novel *Messiah* by Gore Vidal resonated with my experiences of political machinations and upheaval of the 1968 East L.A. Walkouts. *Messiah* chronicles the rise of an obscure man, John Cave, into a politicized leader of a worldwide death cult. The details surrounding this elite crew of capitalists, who built a successful propaganda campaign on

the fantasy of their musings to manufacture a belief system that was followed by billions of converts to forego their lives for "Cavesword", were manipulated into a false narrative that would be revered by a worldwide network of true believers. The novel evokes an astute rational tone while describing a global descent into self-annihilating madness.

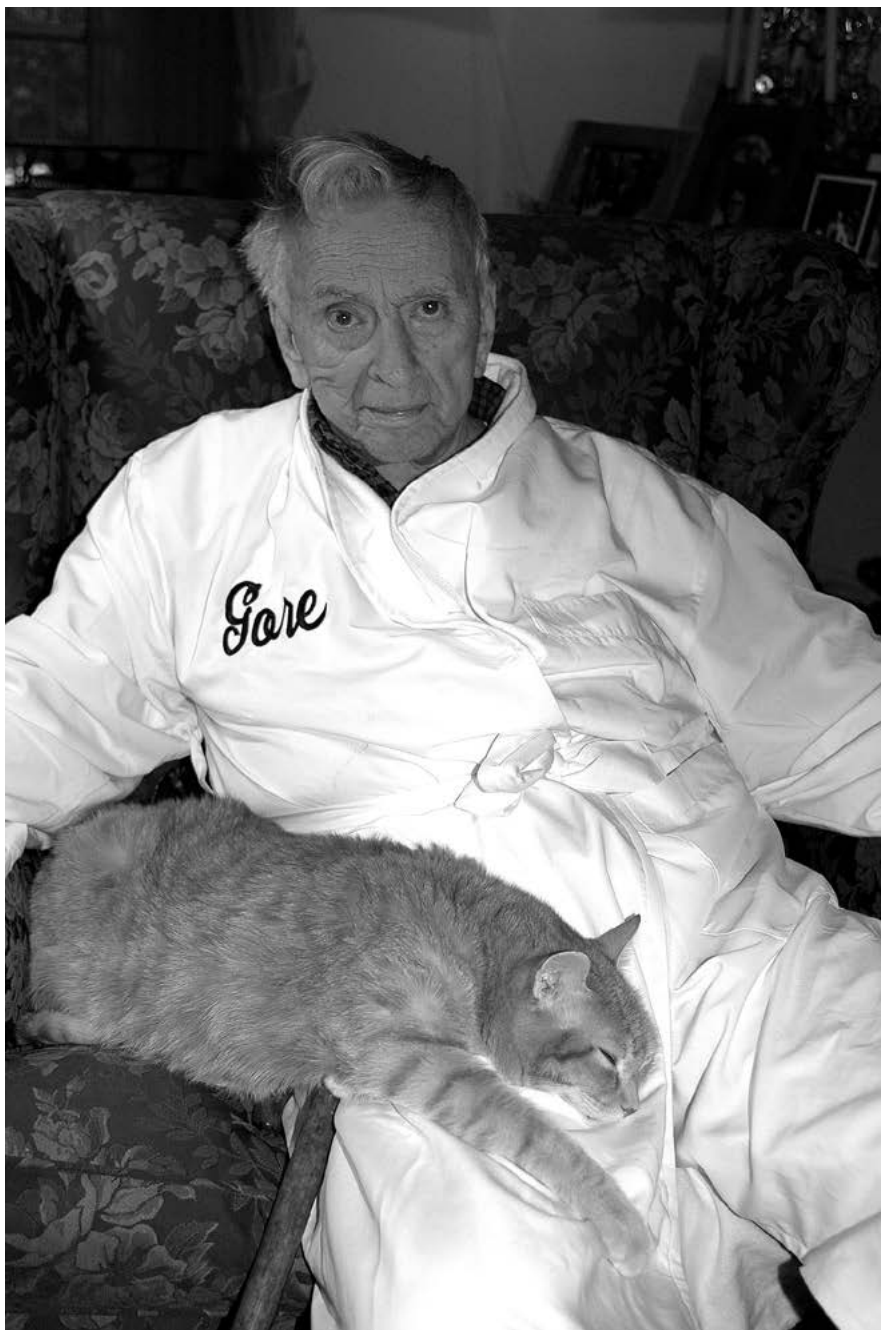
I had read the novel during the height of the Vietnam War while the daily war kill score was broadcast on TV each evening. It occurred to me during that volatile period that I would definitely read many more novels with the hope to one day be able to share a few stories via the written word. I told Jean that I had often reflected on how the novel, *Messiah*, written with a sophisticated, complete command of the English language, made such a major impact on my personal trajectory at that critical age in a dangerous period and how I felt that it inspired me to continue reading so many classic and new works by international authors.

Jean was soft spoken and had a delicate but determined flair about her. She used her mobile phone to call a limousine service to pick us up near the campus flagpole. She told me that I would most likely be very interested in meeting someone who one week earlier had enjoyed the iconoclastic implications of my photographs of the Asco era (*Asshole Mural*, *Decoy Gang War Victim*, and *The Gores*) while viewing the works at the Phantom Sightings: *Art After the Chicano Movement* exhibition at the Los



Jean Stein, photographed by Harry Gamboa Jr., 2011





Gore Vidal, photographed by Harry Gamboa Jr., 2011

Angeles County Museum of Art. She stated that she would soon be giving him a copy of my book, *Urban Exile* (1998, University of Minnesota Press).

As we were being driven along Sunset Boulevard, Jean received various calls from celebrities (Peter Bogdanovich, Diane Keaton, Harry Belafonte) and other people who she would be interviewing for her project. We arrived at a Hollywood Villa and the door was opened by a house guest who was wrapped in layers of ostrich feather boas and scarves.

"Please enter and make yourselves comfortable, he'll be down in a moment."

A bottle of Macallan 15 year old single-malt scotch was placed on a tray in front of a cushioned armchair. I was curious but still not quite clear who Jean Stein would be introducing me to in this inner sanctum. We waited in silence for more than thirty minutes. Then, a man wearing a new white terrycloth robe was led in by the house guest. It was Gore Vidal.

He was gracious in receiving me and explained that he and Jean were lifelong friends. Jean had read an interview revealing my earliest impressions of *Messiah* and had shared it with Gore earlier that week. I thanked him for reaching through to me with his work at a time of my youth when I was being unjustly reviled by powerful forces that had been set up to eliminate Chicano activists and intellectuals. It was his novel that lifted the veil

enough for me to see a much brighter set of possibilities.

Gore Vidal had been a dear friend of the recently departed Academy Award Winning actor Paul Newman, whose large, framed portrait dominated the room from atop the grand piano in its center. He glanced over at the image and his sadness over such a loss was evident. His houseguest poured us each a glass of scotch and we dedicated our toast to the freedom of expression and told each other a few stories. Gore explained how he found monogamy to be adverse against the human spirit (an idea expressed in *Messiah*) and how he felt that Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* series was "vacuous to the nth degree". I told him about how I once witnessed Richard and Pat Nixon get hit by several tomatoes during the Mexican Independence Day parade on First Street in East L.A. while the future criminal president continued to wave insincerely at everyone during an election year in the mid 1960's. We all laughed and Gore suggested that something more significant should have been tossed into his lap. The friendly visit lasted about two hours before Gore showed signs of becoming tired. Jean cried quietly while we sat in the backseat during the ride back to Westwood. She intimated that it was difficult to see Gore in declining health. There would be a few more meetings with Jean before she moved on to interview other individuals.

On the day of the opening for the Asco: Elite of the Obscure exhibition in 2011, a luncheon was held on behalf of the donors, supporters, funders, co-sponsors, and artists in an apparent LACMA launching of Asco into mainstream consciousness. I saw Jean Stein sitting at a front row table while the actual elite were enjoying a bloodied slab of steak tartare. I first ran up to the Bank of America executives who had placed my photographic image, "Instant Mural", on many of their banking institution's ATM screens (I was never able to withdraw a single \$20.00 note from any of the B of A machines). They were sitting at a rear row table. I explained to the bankers that the steaks were made out of one Asco artist

who was not counted in attendance at the luncheon. I then approached Jean and handed her a gift wrapped package containing the photographic portrait I had taken of Gore Vidal during the amazing day that put so many puzzle pieces into place.

Sadly, Gore Vidal died the following year.

*West of Eden: An American Place*, by Jean Stein, was published in 2016. Apparently, the Chicano Art experience did not fit into her narrative. Tragically, Jean Stein is reported to have committed suicide by leaping from her Manhattan apartment in 2017. That same year, Sotheby's conducted a major auction, The World of Jean Stein, in which many of her personal objects were included in offerings to the highest bidders.

In early 2018, I was approached online by a friend with a question regarding authorship of a photograph that he acquired at the auction.

"No, that isn't one of my images."

But I do wonder whatever happened to Gore's portrait.

The current era of the fanatical Trump Cult threatens the world in ways that are foretold in the exemplary cautionary tale that is the novel *Messiah*. It is a must-read for aspiring authors.

Notes: Gore Vidal, *Messiah*, Penguin Classics; 1st edition, 1998 / Eugene Louis, *Obituary (Gore Vidal)*, in: The Economist, August 11, 2012 (<https://www.economist.com/obituary/2012/08/11/gore-vidal>) / John Heilpern, *The Many, Many, Many Friendships of Jean Stein*, in: Vanity Fair, May 4, 2017 / Andrea K. Scott, *The Glam Politics of a Chicano Collective from East L.A.*, in: The New Yorker, September 16, 2017 (<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-glam-politics-of-a-chicano-collective-from-east-la>)