Hemisphere is an annual publication produced by graduate students affiliated with the Department of Art and Art History at the University of New Mexico (UNM). Hemisphere provides a forum for graduate students to present scholarship and studio practice pertaining to all aspects and time periods of the visual and material cultures of North, Central, and South America, and related world contexts. Through the production of Hemisphere students promote their educational and professional interests as they gain first-hand experience in academic publishing. Although the inaugural issue highlighted essays, reviews, and artwork by graduate students from the Department of Art and Art History at UNM, the second edition consists of work submitted by graduate students at other universities in the United States. The journal welcomes and will continue to accept submissions from authors at other institutions in and outside of the United States. A call will be sent out each year to invite submissions for the next issue.

Subscriptions are not available; however, we welcome donations to support the production of Hemisphere.
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ROCKY HISTORY:  
DEBORAH BRIGHT’S PLYMOUTH ROCK  
AND NEW ENGLAND STONE WALLS

Holly Markovitz Goldstein, Ph.D. Candidate

When most visitors arrive at Pilgrim Memorial State Park to view Plymouth Rock, they walk down to the water’s edge, into the neoclassical pavilion that protects the monument, and peer over a railing at a small rock sitting in a sandy hole. According to the artist, Deborah Bright, the typical reaction is, “Is that it?”  
A small, cracked, granite boulder resting deep in a sunken pit, Plymouth Rock is indeed a disappointing site, especially in comparison to its inflated status marking America’s mythical foundation. As one of the nation's most significant and popular landmarks, the rock wields tremendous power to perpetuate a narrow, elitist interpretation of American history. Deborah Bright’s series of nine photographs, Glacial Erratic, depicts the undignified rock behind bars, ironically suggesting that this American icon is also held captive by our collective need to authenticate a false national origination myth (Plate 1). Bright’s contemporary photographs of significant American frontier landscapes, including those of Plymouth Rock, balance the artist’s political convictions with aesthetic rigor and serve to re-image, and therefore re-write, American history.

Photographer and critic, Deborah Bright questions how the encoded and explicit meanings of the American landscape have been shaped by ideology in the past and present. Bright’s photographs explore the ways in which our understanding of the American frontier has been molded by underlying patriarchal and nationalistic biases. Using two of Bright’s portfolios as case studies, I explore how the artist’s repeated photographing of historic American places exposes each site’s conflicting meanings and histories for different populations over time.

The Glacial Erratic series (2000-2004), named after Plymouth Rock’s geologic classification, reveals how the Rock, a site of imagined patriotic memory, is heavily inscribed with histories of violence and oppression. Depicting a small, cracked rock situated behind metal bars, Bright transforms Plymouth Rock from a mythical monument of freedom into a lonely captive. By presenting a sequence of nine photographs of Plymouth Rock in varying shades of light and at different times of the year, Bright suggests that symbolic meanings
can change in addition to appearance. Another body of work, the *Manifest* series (2000-2002), depicts stone walls from northern New England as sites of power and resistance. Stone walls call to mind human control over nature, private property, and white male privilege over Native Americans. Formerly signifiers of the triumph of civilization over wilderness, the walls are now crumbling and covered by the encroaching forest. Bright’s photographs bring to light a past that is literally buried by the present. Bright revisits sites from these early American frontiers that have accumulated layers of contradictory political, economic, and social meanings over time in order to reframe traditional historical narratives.

Investing her projects with overt political content, Bright’s personal agenda is inextricable from her artwork. Bright believes that art should hold aesthetic merit to create complexity while also delivering a strong political message. During a recent interview, Bright mentioned that all of her work is informed by her personal experiences and deeply-held beliefs. Although her, “sensibility is formed by political feelings,” her photographs attempt to be more contemplative than preachy. The *Glacial Erratic* and *Manifest* photographs are problematic, however, because their political message is both intentionally overt and potentially obscure. This paper highlights this problematic tension between the unstable balance of aesthetic appeal and political content that is central to Bright’s work.

While Bright strives to create images that convey her political convictions, she also hopes to make compelling, marketable art. Problematically, her photographs potentially privilege formal beauty and conceptual complexity at the cost of their political agenda. As discussed below, the *Glacial Erratic* photographs effectively convey the idea that the Rock is a ridiculous, ignoble monument unworthy of its inflated stature. However, because the images are exhibited as a simple grid unaccompanied by textual interpretation, the Rock’s multifarious, complex history is partially obscured by the understated formal presentation. No visual or textual clues inform viewers that the *Glacial Erratic* photographs depict Plymouth Rock; the small stone behind bars could be any anonymous rock. Bright’s photographs formally recall Sol LeWitt’s grids or Bernd and Hilla Becher’s typological studies of water towers; in all these cases, repetitive composition takes precedence over subject matter. Furthermore, although the *Manifest* images successfully depict stone walls as past and present cultural signifiers, the lush, beautiful
representation of the landscape arguably distracts from a more politicized reading. Bright’s photographs navigate the delicate balance between discourse and presentation by combining visual appeal and controversial meaning. Ultimately, Bright’s work emerges as both troublingly beautiful and politically provocative.

In addition to her artistic output, Bright’s writing—informed by an extensive inquiry into the connections between photography, gender, and power—offers an aggressively critical investigation of traditional landscape photography. By applying feminist and queer theory to an analysis of American landscape photography, Bright seeks to uncover the underlying power struggles and biases that shape our relationship to nature. Most importantly, Bright brings the social awareness of the documentary tradition to the subject matter of landscape. Bright reminds us that all photographs, including her own, bear prejudices, and she seeks to dismantle the biases present in every photograph, regardless of artistic or documentary intent. Bright asserts that her artwork is not neutral or transparent but rather reflects the choices of its maker, the implications of its presenting agency, and the personal experiences of its audience.

Bright’s photographs and writing participate in a larger discourse of new historicism; the artist, examining how myths are shaped by a narrow and elitist telling of history, seeks to include underrepresented narratives. In Glacial Erratic, Plymouth Rock is not an icon but is personified as a meek prisoner cowering behind bars, subject to unpredictable, harsh weather and water. Viewers are thus prompted to reconsider the ideology framing its status as a monument. Additionally, Bright’s richly detailed and lushly printed photographs of rocky ruins in Manifest suggest that New England’s ubiquitous, forgotten stone walls carry significant histories worth preserving.

**Personal History: Deborah Bright**

An artist’s personal history can provide an integral layer of meaning to his or her artwork, and Deborah Bright’s own biography resonates especially profoundly with her politically motivated photography. Born in 1950, Bright grew up in Bethesda, Maryland, in a somewhat conservative and homogenous environment. She cites family vacations during childhood as the most influential formative moments contributing to her contemporary
artistic outlook. Bright’s yearly car trips from Maryland to southern Pennsylvania and West Virginia exposed her to poor rural villages, dying factory towns, small farms, and industrial cities. During these trips in the 1950s and 1960s, Bright recalls pressing her nose up against the window while she noticed subtle changes in the landscape from place to place and from year to year. Fascinated by the rich world around her, Bright fantasized about what it would be like to live in a dingy steel town or a rural farm, finding beauty in each different place.

After attending Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, Bright earned her M.F.A. in painting from the University of Chicago in 1975. Before choosing photography as her medium of communication, Bright practiced painting, drawing, and graphic representation. Her “breakthrough moment” as a photographer occurred after seeing Walker Evans’s work, which she describes as, “photographs that referenced the real world yet were highly constructed to frame significant detail.” Bright currently chairs the Art and Architectural History Department at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she teaches art history and photography, and is the Interim Dean of Fine Arts.

When asked about the formation of her political views and the reasons behind creating art with a political message, Bright responds that she became radicalized in college during the Vietnam War era. Growing up in a middle-class apolitical family, Bright recalls no political discussion during her childhood. While a graduate student, Bright worked as a cartoonist and graphic designer for the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and served as their art director for three years. Working for this leftist, liberal magazine, Bright became entrenched in anti-war issues and sought to convey her anti-militarist radicalization through her artwork. Bright’s Glacial Erratic and Manifest portfolios contribute to her ongoing project to document and examine sites of patriotic memory. Bright holds a longstanding fascination with the way places change or remain the same over time. She views land as a palimpsest of history—layers of history are encoded into places just as trees record their lives through the rings that slowly develop.

American History: Glacial Erratic and the Myth of the Monument
The aura of Plymouth Rock supersedes and overshadows the actual object; to most viewers, the Rock itself is neither beautiful nor picturesque nor
sublime. It is, however, one of the nation's most significant historical sites, and over the past two centuries, conservators have physically and intellectually constructed the Rock as a, “symbol of the courage and faith of the men and women who founded the first New England colony.” Since the seventeenth century, the Rock has come to symbolize divergent meanings for diverse populations; it can represent regional pride for New Englanders, oppression and racism for Native Americans, a justification for exclusionist immigration policies, or national patriotism. When gazing down at the Rock from the elevated viewing platform under a temple-like portico, viewers today are struck by the Rock's small size, cracked surface, and humble, sandy location. Yet the Rock is a powerful symbol of the nation's mythical birth precisely because it is a tactile, tangible, physical object. Although it is small in stature, the Rock satisfies the public’s desperation to connect history to a specific place. Bright's photographs, discussed below, depict the Rock as both powerful and incapacitated, both iconic and ludicrous.

Mythically canonized as America's first frontier, Plymouth Rock represents a tangible contact zone between conflicting elements. Perched on the shore where waves caress the land, the Rock represents a meeting of monumental forces, including "Old World" and "New World," repression and freedom, cultivation and wildness, and European-American and Native American. Frederick Jackson Turner defined the frontier as, “the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” and Plymouth Rock represents a forceful, although counterfeit, physical reminder of the original frontier.

The story of the Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock is largely a fabrication. William Bradford, leader of the colonists now called the Pilgrims, stated upon his arrival, “On Munday, they sounded ye harbor and found it fitt for shipping, and marched into ye land and found diverse cornfields and little running brooks, a place fit for situation.” This account—the only written description of the moment when Bradford's ship reached land on December 11, 1620—contains no mention of a rock. The symbol of a rock marking the site of this landing evolved more than a century later during America's Revolutionary War, when civic leaders sought a new national foundation story to unite a divided population. The Rock became an icon symbolizing America as a freedom-seeking nation, linking the revolutionary struggle to the earlier colonial era.
Throughout the nineteenth century, paintings, prints, sculptures, and Plymouth Rock itself sold a false national foundation story to an eager American audience. Images, such as Enrico Caicci’s *Landing of the Pilgrims, 1620* (1825), have helped to establish the Rock as an enduring emblem of national pride. Caicci’s relief sculpture for the Rotunda in the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. depicts Plymouth Rock as a ceremonious meeting point, a literal stepping stone between old and new (Plate 2).

A stable triumvirate of man, woman, and child, blessed by divine providence above, assuredly moves from boat to shore, and the Rock represents a sturdy foundation on which to build a new civilization. A subservient Native American offers the newcomers corn and gestures downward toward the Rock, indicating the abundance and security that comes from the land. This initial assembly of Pilgrims and Native Americans is imagined, not historical—the colonists did not encounter Native Americans until several months after their arrival—just as the Rock should be regarded as a symbolic, not literal, reminder of the 1620 landing. Despite the fact that most viewers recognize that the Pilgrims did not actually land on Plymouth Rock in 1620, the Rock remains a powerful physical symbol of the legendary first European settlers in America.

The rock that visitors see today has not always had its present appearance or location. Writer, John McPhee calls today’s rock a, “simulacrum of the landmark that [may have been] there in 1620.” What we now call “Plymouth Rock” did not occupy its current position when the Pilgrims landed, and over the years, it has been moved from place to place across Plymouth. The first mention of a rock as the site of the Pilgrims’ landing dates back to the 1740s. In 1741, amidst plans to build a wharf at Plymouth harbor, ninety-five year old Plymouth resident, Elder Thomas Faunce objected to removing a large boulder on the shore; Faunce proclaimed that this rock had received the footsteps of his forefathers. Faunce’s authority derived from his age and ancestry—his father had reached Plymouth in 1623 on the sailing vessel *Ann*, and Faunce had known several *Mayflower* passengers. The proposed wharf was relocated, the rock was preserved, and the legend of “Plymouth Rock” was born.

Plymouth Rock has been moved and accidentally broken many times over the centuries; in 1774, the Rock was split in two, and it broke vertically
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several years later. This second split was repaired with mortar, so that today’s Rock bears a surgical scar through its center. During the Revolutionary Era, the misshapen, cracked Rock symbolized the division between the “Old” and “New World” and between freedom and oppression; Plymouth Rock personified the endangered nation and consequently became a powerful symbol of unity and perseverance. In 1834, 1867, and 1880, the Rock was again moved, trimmed, and modified, and throughout the nineteenth century, souvenir-hunters routinely broke chips off of the Rock. The temple-like portico currently covering the Rock was commissioned by the Colonial Dames of America and designed in 1920 by the architects, McKim, Mead, and White. This neoclassical facade reflects Greco-Roman democratic ideals far from the intolerant Puritan ideology of the founding fathers.

As a response to the query, “Is that it?,” a carving reading “1620” has been chiseled into the stone to signify the Rock’s authenticity. A larger armature of commemorative landmarks at Pilgrim Memorial State Park helps to bolster the Rock’s importance and legitimacy; a full-scale model of the sailing vessel Mayflower (named the Mayflower II) is anchored in Plymouth harbor, and the nearby Plimoth Plantation promises to reveal Plymouth as it was in the seventeenth century. This network of reconstructions, populated by employees who dress and speak in the colonial manner, offers visitors a convincing, multi-sensory vision of America’s European colonization. Bright’s photography reminds viewers that this history is selective, largely imagined, and biased. In her images, she edits out the reconstructions to concentrate on the “falseness” of the “original.”

One monument on Cole’s Hill overlooking Plymouth Harbor commemorates America’s inhabitants before the Pilgrims’ arrival (Plate 3). A bronze figure representing Massasoit, the Wampanoag leader who negotiated a treaty with the Pilgrims in 1621, was commissioned for the landing’s tercentennial in 1920. Credited with saving the Plymouth Colony from collapse during its first years, Massasoit is considered a protector of the American people, but he is depicted as an exotic, non-threatening “savage.” The partial nudity and relaxed contrapposto stance link this figure to classical statuary, yet his attributes—the loincloth, peace pipe, moccasins, leather sling, and head feather—signal his Wampanoag identity. In her essay, Queer Plymouth, co-authored with gender studies scholar, Erica Rand, Bright compares the bronze Massasoit to a nearby statue of William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth
Colony, both by the sculptor Cyrus Dallin. Bright contrasts a “colonizing, white-supremacist admiration and primitivizing nostalgia” in the depiction of Massasoit with the austere, Puritanical authority of Bradford. Protected by his heavy cloak, sturdy hat, stable stance, and dour expression, Bradford projects authority and dependability. While the inclusion of Massasoit in the Plymouth pantheon secures his place in history, he is not part of the same American history as Bradford or Plymouth Rock.

Throughout the past two centuries Plymouth Rock has become an icon promoting various patriotic, nationalistic, and religious causes. Bright’s photographs perhaps provoke viewers to consider the many meanings the Rock has carried over time. There are numerous silent histories and untold stories that form America’s fabric that are not traditionally represented at Plymouth Rock. Bright attempts to reclaim these neglected narratives as an integral part of American history. Although the Rock customarily symbolizes the Anglo inhabitation of North America, the monument itself has also been re-appropriated by Native American protest groups to draw attention to their oppression. On Thanksgiving Day, 1970, for example, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) staged an occupation of Plymouth, painting the Rock red and forcefully seizing the Mayflower II. Bright’s artwork can be characterized as an artistic counterpart to the AIM’s more physical acts of dissent; the photographs exclude all references to the fabled “Pilgrim Landing,” and in her images, neither the “1620” carving nor the grandiose neoclassical portico are visible. Therefore, Glacial Erratic effectively silences Plymouth Rock and divorces it from its mythological meanings, returning the stone to its original condition as an ordinary, unremarkable rock.

Nine Iris prints, Sunrise, Sunset, Overcast, Snowfall, Storm Surge, Nor’easter, Lucky Pennies, Spring Rains, and Nightfall compose Bright’s Glacial Erratic series. While Bright prefers the works to be exhibited in a grid containing all nine images, occasionally, the photographs are shown in pairs or as triptychs. Each image depicts an identical viewpoint of Plymouth Rock, which is positioned in the center of the frame, behind the bars that protect it from weather and damage. Bright stood on the shore, feet in the water or on a sandy beach, to capture a particular view of the Rock from a close vantage point not available to most visitors. The matching compositions call attention to the subtle differences in light, atmosphere, and weather.
conditions from print to print. At first glance, *Glacial Erratic* appears to be a rigorously arranged, long-term study of a single location—the vertical bars compositionally organize the individual prints while the gridded formation further emphasizes formal control. Over days, months, and years, the Rock’s appearance ebbs and flows like the tide, signifying the various meanings it has carried for diverse populations throughout history. Depicted as a metaphor for change, the Rock appears golden and glowing, radiating warm energy in one photograph, and cold, grey, and lifeless in the next.

Without knowing that the images depict Plymouth Rock, however, the political content emphasizing the ridiculousness of a national monument confined behind bars is potentially lost on the viewer. No evidence in the photographs identifies the specific location of Plymouth. Furthermore, the minimalist simplicity and painterly beauty of the presentation somewhat distract from the project’s critical intent.

Bright created *Glacial Erratic* in order to investigate the “mysterious aura” of what she calls a “ridiculous” monument; she sought to convey both “visual pleasure” and “irony.” The composition of the lonely, inert, scarred rock kept behind bars reveals the irony that this wounded, unremarkable rock has become an icon of American freedom and independence. Bright’s photographs, however, convey not only the pathetic quality, but also the beauty, of the Rock. Restoring its aura (by depicting it as a beautiful artwork) and yet heightening its absurdity as a monument, the photographs suggest that Plymouth Rock can be an important symbol or a meaningless farce, depending on its audience.

Similar to Andy Warhol’s repeated images of Campbell’s Soup cans or the Becher’s photographic typologies, Bright’s repetition of the Rock makes it both more familiar (solidifying its status as an icon) and more meaningless (it loses its importance as a singular monument). Bright highlights the mechanical reproducibility associated with photography by repeating the same, exact vantage point in her images. This exactitude allows viewers to notice the most subtle changes between images, such as the square light fixtures that were re-installed inside the shelter. While the lighting and atmosphere change from print to print, the Rock itself remains constant, implying that while human history is layered, complex, and changing, geologic time is slow and steady. *Glacial Erratic* enacts the multiplication of an icon,
transforming the Rock into art. Multiplying, confining, and aestheticizing the Rock, Bright’s project removes the monument from history and from daily life, and transports it into the gallery. The artist therefore takes control over the Rock, re-telling its story and re-fashioning its meaning.

Although she calls attention to her chosen medium of photography, Bright also engages a painterly aesthetic to foreground the objects’ status as art. An early inspiration for Bright’s method of rephotographing simple objects in changing light and seasons was Claude Monet’s *Haystacks* series from the early 1890s. Bright was inspired by Monet’s ability to make the most mundane objects appear beautiful. Producing her images as high-quality Iris prints on textured paper while avoiding a slick photographic surface, Bright wanted her photographs to teeter on the edge of visual painterly language while remaining visibly tied to photography. The images capitalize on both the camera’s power of mechanical reproduction and the fine art beauty of a painterly surface.14

Bright views Plymouth Rock as a reflector; it reflects the play of light on the water, the shadows of visitors viewing it from above, and it reflects America’s conflicting histories over time. The scar joining its two, once separate halves is a poignant reminder of the nation’s various struggles, including the fight for independence, the clash between Native and European Americans, the abolition of slavery, and conflicts regarding race, gender, and sexuality. Depicted as an animal at the zoo, Plymouth Rock falls short of representing an accurate, inclusive American history. Similarly, Bright’s photographs potentially fall short of conveying their political message; it might be difficult for a museumgoer who has never been to Plymouth to understand how the project critiques the monument.

Although in her writing, she has criticized other photographers for exhibiting beautiful images of contested landscapes without explanatory text, Bright potentially commits the same offense with *Glacial Erratic*. Bright’s photographs of a ridiculous, complex, and ironic monument are intentionally beautiful, but does her emphasis on visual pleasure potentially undermine the project’s criticality? The *Glacial Erratic* photographs are not accompanied by didactic labeling when exhibited, and the titles refer to seasonal and atmospheric conditions, not to the site’s history. Furthermore, the portfolio’s simple title, *Glacial Erratic*, is geological, not
political. Bright omitted text from the installation because she found that in the early twenty-first century, the art world had no patience with text. She relished the creative challenge to create beautiful objects that retained a political viewpoint. Bright carefully considers the way viewers experience her work in a gallery setting, and her gridded installation and geological titles deliberately construct layers of meaning and intrigue. She imagines that viewers will wonder why an artist would photograph the same rock again and again, that they will question the meaning of the ambiguous title and then consult the artist’s statement, available in the gallery or on Bright’s website, for more information. By refusing to name or identify the monument in her photographs, Bright effectively erases its history.

The simple, stark composition of a cracked rock behind bars, coupled with the power of repetition, focuses attention on the monument’s absurdity. By omitting images of Pilgrims, the Mayflower, or Native Americans, Bright avoids the nostalgic ideology found in most representations of the Rock. She reduces Plymouth Rock to its most basic geologic state, stripping it of inflated mythological significance. Yet, Bright’s process of directly photographing Plymouth Rock from the beach at eye level, can be interpreted as a demonstration of respect for the Rock and its history. Therefore Bright depicts the Rock as both a pathetic captive and a strong survivor, signifying its conflicting meanings throughout history.

Bright navigates the tension between ridiculing and respecting the Rock in order to achieve her goal of making landscape art that is contemplative, not heavy-handed. On one hand, Bright’s photographs employ traditional painterly aesthetics; the image production presents a rich surface and the golden light recalls American Luminist painting. On the other hand, the flat, stark, graphic compositions contrast more conventional grand, sweeping romantic vistas. Additionally, the grid-like compositions and exhibition format recall conceptual art and minimalism. Bright’s intention to employ, “traditional landscape aesthetics only when and if they are useful to her message, but not so they take over the work,” helps the project find a balance between politics and beauty.

Changing History: Manifest, A Meditation on New England’s Stone Walls

Bright’s Manifest series similarly grapples with the burden of traditional landscape aesthetics. The twenty-four Manifest images—large twenty-by-
twenty-four inch Chromogenic prints each cold-mounted on archival conservation board printed with a title in engraver’s script—display exquisite craftsmanship and evoke Victorian fine art photographic conventions. The images depict sections of northern New England stone walls, and titles printed below the photographs designate a land transaction between two men. Selecting antiquated aesthetics, script, and language, Bright evokes nineteenth-century albums and albumen prints. She also invokes an earlier form of contract making, that of witnessing, so that the photographs stand as evidence in addition to fine art objects. Unlike Glacial Erratic, text is a crucial component of Manifest; here, the language used in the title of the series and images constructs, archives, and ostensibly authenticates human and natural history. Bright created the series to, “renew our vision of New England’s stone walls as the living evidence of particular historical, economic, and geological processes rather than as fixed nostalgic artifacts of a vanished golden age.” By literally bringing to light old, crumbling walls previously covered by weeds in dark forests, Manifest uncovers the forgotten histories and conflicting meanings these structures have had over time.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when most of the walls were built, “the farmer, the cultivator, became the truly heroic figure” in America and the New England farm helped to maintain the, “mythic correlation of agricultural work and national virtue.” Sturdy, dependable walls symbolized the legal control of land as private property. Deeds that read, “Conveyed to x by deed of y” established a record of land-ownership and patriarchal authority as old and as robust as the walls themselves. Bright’s titles adopt the language of the deeds, reading, for example, Conveyed to Henry Bowbrick by deed of Almon Woodbury, 1804 (Figure 1a). According to Bright, “the very existence of the walls, like the board fences and stockades that preceded them, made manifest the imposition of fundamental capitalist principles of private ownership and entitlement to profit.” Such traditions of land ownership were incomprehensible to the indigenous inhabitants of the region, who practiced cooperative land use and conservation. Like Plymouth Rock, the walls symbolize white Euro-American control of Native Americans and of nature.

As Bright notes, “New England’s stone walls tell other stories besides those of property enclosure, economic exploitation, and racism.” Embedded in the piles of stones are the histories of the rocks themselves, from their
geologic formation, to their selection as building material, to their eventual entropic erosion. The granite cobblestones that compose the walls were deposited in New England during the Ice Age approximately twenty thousand years ago. Blemishes, nicks, and scars indicate the rocks’ ancient history and long journey before reaching their current manmade formation. New England farmers built walls not only to demarcate property lines but also to deposit the numerous stones that littered newly cleared farmland. As Bright states, “Rather than Yankee ingenuity, the stone walls are more accurately understood as linear dumps.” Structures built out of necessity, the walls mark coveted property and also represent the unwanted, as the rocks themselves were considered a nuisance for farming.

Wall building declined as settlers moved west and industrialism lured workers out of fields and into cities. Since the late 1800s, most walls have been reclaimed by the surrounding forest. Bright notes, “Over a century and a half, they have melded with landscape and become inseparable from it, man-made geological formations as much a part of New England’s woodland ecosystem as are its ancient kettle ponds and bogs.” Today’s walls signify both the rise and the fall of New England’s landscape as a site of American prosperity and national pride. More recent histories include the walls’ attraction for hikers as picturesque ruins, and their ability to thwart the efforts of industrial logging operations. Repeatedly visiting the snaking stone structures near her cabin in New Hampshire, Bright has had a long relationship with the walls she has come to know like old friends. Manifest allows viewers to see layers of time and history within single images. Although the photographs depict the walls’ appearance in the twenty-first century, they are presented in an antiquated format. This contrast enables a multileveled reading where the past and the present are displayed simultaneously.

While the walls themselves are ostensibly the primary subject of Manifest, the photographs depict the stones as hidden, covered, and controlled by nature. In Conveyed to Henry Bowbrick by deed of Almon Woodbury, 1804, for example, tentative stones peek out from under strong, lush ferns. A natural wall of ferns has grown up alongside and now covers the manmade line of boulders—the sinuous, curling organic fingers of the plants caress, shield, and engulf the immobile stones. Here, the stone wall appears old and inert in comparison to the fecund greenery.
Bright agrees that her photographs can be considered lush, appealing depictions of nature, yet she sought to undercut their majesty by creating flat, inert compositions similar to her flat, direct views of Plymouth Rock. The artist found it difficult to challenge traditional landscape aesthetics because the walls—simple ruins reclaimed by nature—are ideal romantic subjects. Her solution was to circumvent long perspective views of sturdy walls receding into the distance and instead, to use her lens to render the forms as more flattened than our eyes would see them. Although *Conveyed to Henry Bowbrick by deed of Almon Woodbury, 1804* depicts a classically beautiful landscape, many *Manifest* photographs present a more banal view. *Conveyed to Justus Lakin by deed of Luther Page, 1821*, for example, depicts a wall that has become a trash dump (Figure 1b). A squat glass bottle rests squarely on a thick, flat rock, as if it was placed there like a stone to begin a new layer of the wall. The unsightly and unnatural bottle recalls the wall’s first function as a trash dump for unwanted rocks.

**FIGURE 1.** Deborah Bright, (a) *Conveyed to Henry Bowbrick by deed of Almon Woodbury, 1804*; (b) *Conveyed to Justus Lakin by deed of Luther Page, 1821*; (c) *Conveyed to John Claflin by deed of Hosea Whipple, 1787*; and (d) *Conveyed to Roswell Perry by deed of Thomas Baldwin, 1806* (2000-2002), Chromogenic photographs, 20x24 in. Copyright Deborah Bright.
Several *Manifest* photographs allude to a struggle between organic nature and static stone. For example, *Conveyed to John Claflin by deed of Hosea Whipple, 1787* confronts the wall straight on, and tree-trunks, not a wall, recede diagonally into the distance (Figure 1c). Leafless, thorny brambles and dead limbs encroach upon the stones, providing a haphazard disarray to contrast the wall’s more regular geometry. In this instance, trees provide a larger obstacle and more daunting barrier than the wall itself. Similarly, in *Conveyed to Roswell Perry by deed of Thomas Baldwin, 1806*, the organic form of a massive tree dominates the composition and overpowers the wall (Figure 1d). Sunlight warms the lithe tree trunk, which appears more alive and important than the wall. In both images, walls are pushed into the margins and confined to the shadows, yet they endure. This tension between woods and walls mirrors the larger conflicts written throughout the stones’ history.

The titles adorning the images theoretically anchor each stone wall to two of its owners and to a specific year in its life. Yet the images contrast the titles—the text describes land-ownership and control of nature, whereas the photographs depict the structures long after their functional properties are depleted. Furthermore, the shadowy, cropped, almost abstract compositions present the rocks as anonymous, archetypal objects. *Manifest* presents a tension between specificity and universality.

The stones are ironic, tragic, elegiac, and nostalgic. Just as the *Glacial Erratic* photographs satirize Plymouth Rock by depicting it inside a cage, the *Manifest* images ironically depict rock walls that were intended to control and confine nature as impotent, buried, defeated ruins. There is also a solemn, mournful element to the series. The dark prints illuminated by dappled light project a somber, melancholic mood. By closely examining the photographs, we tread deep into the woods to uncover hidden traces of history. Unearthing remnants of the past lingering in the present, we detect a musty trace of nostalgia for what once was.

Stone walls represent a frontier. When first built, they signified boundaries between known and unknown, chaos and control, and, in Frederick Jackson Turner’s words, savagery and civilization. Today, the walls recall a moment in early American history when the woods of New England represented a penetrable, controllable, inhabitable frontier. In the *Manifest* photographs,
the walls also represent a frontier between past and present; they are vestiges of the past that accumulate new meanings in the present.

Just as the chinks and cracks between stones offer a breeding ground for weeds, bugs, and other creatures, simple stone walls hide complex and contradictory histories. Bright’s photographs examine the landscape as an arena of social and political action; clearly, landscape history is inextricable from human history. Far from an isolated refuge, the New England landscape is a site of conflict, as demonstrated by Bright’s images of stone walls and Plymouth Rock.

Contested History: Re-Imaging the American Landscape
The choices Bright makes while crafting and presenting her photographs of significant American landscapes influence and underscore their political message. For Bright, the landscape is a document or text to be examined and deconstructed rather than an isolated object to be adored and venerated. Exhibited in museums and sold at galleries, Bright’s photographs are marketed to a fine art audience, yet the artist defies the modernist, formalist canon of conventional American landscape photography, such as that established by Ansel Adams, for example, by asserting her revisionist perspective. In other words, Bright challenges the tradition of landscape photography while working within it. Bright does not disparage beauty in landscape photography; in fact, she acknowledges that images, such as Conveyed to Henry Bowbrick by deed of Almon Woodbury, 1804 and Sunrise, which depicts Plymouth Rock basking in golden sunlight, are classically beautiful. Furthermore, Bright’s presentation methods—including Glacial Erratic’s rich painterly surfaces and Manifest’s luxurious, antique framing and script—heighten the photographs’ visual splendor.

Foregrounding her identity as an activist, Bright espouses a politicized approach to landscape photography, working against the grain of the modernist canon. Bright intentionally defies modernist traditions of American landscape photography, such as those exemplified by the work of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, that treat nature as a separate, pristine arena of natural beauty. Choosing symbols of America’s elite white Euro-Christian patriarchy as her subject, Bright works to demystify and deflate dominant master narratives. In her photographs, Plymouth Rock and the stone walls are alternately weak and strong, immobilized and full of life,
powerless and commanding. Depicting these monuments as problematic icons of a biased American history, Bright removes their mystique. Yet, the stones endure. Although they have been broken, beaten, and imprisoned, Plymouth Rock and the stone walls have lasted for centuries and will continue to do so. The rocks mark moments in history as the landscape changes around them. Accordingly, the myth of the American frontier landscape as Manifest Destiny is formidable, influential, and not easily dislodged. Bright’s essential message is that all history is a construction, just as all photographs are constructions. Using photography to visualize and access layers of history, Bright emphasizes that history and photography always harbor personal viewpoints and agendas.

HOLLY MARKOVITZ GOLDSTEIN is a Ph.D. candidate in Art History at Boston University, working under the guidance of Professor Kim Sichel. Her areas of specialization include the history of photography, modern and contemporary art, and American landscape history. Goldstein's dissertation is titled, Re-Imaging the American Frontier: Landscape Photography as Revisionist History and examines the ways in which contemporary artists use photography to rethink historical meanings and mythologies of the American frontier.

NOTES:
2 Deborah Bright, interview with author, 3 October 2008, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
4 Deborah Bright, interview with author, 3 October 2008, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
5 Plymouth Rock is managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as part of Pilgrim Memorial State Park. See http://www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/southeast/plgm.htm (accessed April 28, 2009).
6 Literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt influentially uses the term “contact zone” to refer to the real and imagined space of colonial encounters. See Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation (New York: Routledge, 1992).
8 William Bradford, quoted in John Seelye, Memory's Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock
(Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1. Prior to their landing at Plymouth, the Pilgrims explored land at Provincetown, MA and along the shore of Cape Cod.


10 In 1880, “1620” was carved into the Rock, replacing painted numerals.

11 The statue was commissioned by the Improved Order of Red Men. In 1920 the mission of the Order was to “preserve some of the customs of the aborigines, and to pay tribute to their many manly virtues, which we, as the dominant race, have been too strongly inclined to overlook or ignore.” Alvin G. Weeks, quoted in Bright and Rand, 262.

12 Ibid., 265.


16 Ibid.

17 According to Bright, although “women’s names occasionally appear in these registers [of deeds in Cheshire County, New Hampshire], presumably because they were widows or unmarried survivors of deceased male kin, property customarily passed from male to male. In the early years of the nation, only white male property owners could exercise the right to vote.” See Deborah Bright, The Manifest Project: A Meditation on New England’s Stone Walls (Cambridge, MA: Deborah Bright, 2005), 10. This self-published catalogue was funded through a RISD grant and includes title information for each of the images and an essay by Bright.

18 Ibid.


20 Bright (2005), 3.

21 Ibid., 4.


23 Bright (2005), 6.

24 Ibid., 8.

25 Bright first became interested in stone walls during hiking trips near her weekend cabin in southwestern New Hampshire. According to the artist, “It was the walls’ surreal visual paradox that struck me; the relentless labor of their human geometry dividing and organizing seemingly undifferentiated plots.” Ibid., 2.

26 I borrow the term “master narrative” from Jean-Francois Lyotard. See Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) for the definition of postmodernism as a departure from master narratives.
BUILDING THE TROPICAL WORLD OF TOMORROW: THE CONSTRUCTION OF *Brasilidade* AT THE 1939 NEW YORK WORLD’S FAIR

Aleca LeBlanc, Ph.D. Candidate

On April 30, 1939, New York City opened the World’s Fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens. Boasting the celebratory theme, “Building the World of Tomorrow,” the fair attempted to provide a glimpse of a prosperous and efficient future. The Trylon and Perisphere, two eye-catching structures, served as the symbols of the fair and were reproduced on myriad souvenir items. The 700-foot Trylon, a contraction of the words “triangular pylon,” was a pyramidal-shaped building and the tallest structure on the grounds. It housed what was then the world’s tallest escalator and visitors waited in line for hours to ride it. At the top of the escalator, visitors crossed a bridge and entered the 200-foot-wide Perisphere, a globe-shaped structure that contained “Democracity,” a diorama of a planned urban complex of the future. Stepping onto two moving circular platforms, a six-minute narrated presentation provided visitors with a glimpse of a flourishing city, inspired by the principles of American democracy and made possible through the inventiveness of American engineering. “Democracity” was an urban fantasyland and far from an accurate depiction of the state of American life, present or future. At the time of the fair, the U.S. was still emerging from the Great Depression and would enter World War II two years later. This utopian city was essentially a fantastic construction on the part of the fair’s organizers and promoters.

The impetus behind the fair was, in large part, a response to the current political and economic climate, both domestically and internationally. The U.S. was still emerging from a devastating economic depression and would go to war on December 8, 1941. Although the initiation of President Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration in 1935 helped alleviate some economic hardships, fifteen percent of the population was still unemployed at the end of the decade. Conceived as an economic stimulant to the New York area, the building and organization of such a large-scale event would create thousands of jobs. The fair grounds, a tract of 1,216 acres, were formerly a marshy area that had been used as a garbage dump. Its reclamation was the largest ever in the eastern U.S. Government agencies at the city, state, and
federal levels all contributed to the costs of reclaiming the land and assisted with the costs of building the grounds and structures.

World Fairs were often organized with the intention of fostering an international brotherhood among nations, and New York’s fair was no exception. As was customary, countries from all over the world sponsored pavilions where they displayed their greatest national achievements from agricultural, industrial, and cultural sectors. More than sixty foreign governments and international organizations participated in 1939 and, according to official fair literature, this was the largest gathering in history at such an event. Although this interest in brotherly kinship is admirable, it was another false construction on the part of fair organizers and far from a reality. Exactly four months after the inauguration of the fair, on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, initiating World War II on the European continent. The false sense of unity at the fair was consistent with a long-established tradition of World’s Fairs. In his book, All the World’s a Fair, Robert Rydell refers to the construction of world fairs as the creation of, “symbolic universes,” confirming and extending the authority of the country’s corporate, political, and scientific leadership, with little regard for accuracy. Although Rydell discusses this in terms of the host country, it also applies to the careful construction of national identity by those foreign nations that built pavilions.

Like the Perisphere’s “Democracy,” the Brazilian government’s pavilion and exhibits were also fantastic constructions (Figure 2). Using a combination of what were presumed to be universal forms with specific national imagery, the Brazilian government exploited this international event as an opportunity to manipulate its image on a tumultuous world stage. The conditions surrounding the commission of the pavilion design, as well as the exhibits staged inside, provide an access point to investigate the way the government forged brasilidade, or Brazilian-ness, for its own ends. Seeking to overcome U.S. misconceptions that Brazil was another impoverished exotic republic, the selection of goods displayed, as well as the pavilion’s overall design, had more to do with presumptions about U.S. audiences than with a faithful representation of the state of things in Brazil. A close look at the reception of the pavilion in the U.S. will provide a conclusion and partial answer as to whether or not Brazil achieved its goals with the pavilion.
“Tropical Modernism”

The rubric “tropical modernism” was widely adopted for the purposes of the fair and was intended to describe the architecture of the Brazilian Pavilion, in addition to the objects and goods displayed, as belonging to an industrially modern country located in the tropics. Designed by Brazilians, Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, the pavilion epitomized this tropical version of modernism. Drawing on the tenets of modern architecture, the small L-shaped, two-story structure was painted white and constructed of reinforced concrete and plate glass walls (Figure 3). The upper floor of the rectangular façade (one arm of the L) was covered with brises-soleil louvers that help regulate heat and light in hot climates. A long curved ramp extending from the façade gave visitors access to the second floor and echoed the gentle curves of the back half of the building (the other arm of the L). Although constructed on a small lot, the building’s glass walls made use of the ample summer light to enhance the appearance of its size. The ground floor housed recreational spaces, including a restaurant, dance floor,
and coffee bar, all of which opened onto an exotic garden (Figure 4). The landscape design was fully integrated into the pavilion’s overall program and would have been more readily recognizable as tropical than the architectural style would have been. The lush grounds included many of the exotic flora and fauna indigenous to Brazil. A lily-pond with storks, a snake pit, an


aquarium, an orchid house, and an aviary all tempered the austerity of the modern architecture to convey a sense of its tropical modernism.

Costa and Niemeyer’s plan drew largely on the visual and formal language of International Style architecture. The International Style was developed by European architects in the 1920s and became known primarily in the U.S. thanks to a landmark exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932, which gave the movement its title. As defined in the catalogue, the style was visually characterized by undecorated, rectilinear, white structures, and adhered to three, “distinguishing aesthetic principles: emphasis upon volume–space enclosed by thin planes or surfaces as opposed to the suggestion of mass and solidity; regularity as opposed to symmetry or other kinds of obvious balance; and lastly, dependence upon the intrinsic elegance of materials, technical perfection, and fine proportions, as opposed to applied ornament.”

In 1928, the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) was founded in Switzerland by a group of twenty-eight European architects, where it served as an organizing body for architects and sponsors of international conferences. Swiss born architect, Le Corbusier is commonly considered the principal architect associated with the style, due to his prolific writing, as well as his leadership role in CIAM. Costa and Niemeyer were familiar with the architectural language of the International Style because of CIAM’s publications and Le Corbusier’s previous visits to Brazil. The integration of a flat roof, pilotis (support columns), non load-bearing walls, brises-soleil, and a garden into the design of the Brazilian pavilion could all be directly linked to Le Corbusian principles of architecture and were immediately recognized as such. What culture was this building representing if it was making use of International Style idioms? Instead of utilizing colonial architectural styles, which would have been more readily recognized as Brazilian, or at least as Latin American, a style was used that belonged to a more common international language. Could this even be considered Brazilian architecture? According to Costa and Niemeyer, their repeated use of subtle curvilinear forms instead of the right angles typical of Le Corbusier marked the building as Brazilian not international. Niemeyer wrote, “I am not attracted to straight angles or to the straight line, hard and inflexible, created by man. I am attracted to free-flowing, sensual curves. The curves that I find in the mountains of my country, in the sinuosity of its rivers, in
the waves of the ocean, and on the body of the beloved women." Costa and Niemeyer argued that curvilinear forms related to the topography of Brazil and therefore served as evidence of their "tropical modernism." However, I contend that it was primarily a deployment of rhetoric–more than these subtle formal devices–that marked the building as Brazilian.

Extending from the façade, a large curved ramp led visitors upstairs to an auditorium and the exhibition galleries that displayed a wide range of objects. Indigenous agricultural products, such as manioc and caroá fiber were displayed alongside nickel, chrome, and iron ore samples produced by the mining industry. There was also a large display dedicated to the medical profession in Brazil. In addition, the pavilion included a trio of mural-sized paintings commissioned by famous national modern artist Cândido Portinari. The interior ground floor of the pavilion housed one of the most popular attractions at the fair, a coffee bar decorated in lush tropical motifs. Here, one could be served a number of specialty drinks from Brazil, such as coffee, mate, the soft drink Guaraná, and hot chocolate. Nearby, gemstones were available for purchase. Adjacent to this area was a restaurant and dance floor where patrons could listen and dance to Brazilian sambas, popular marches, choros, and classical music. This recreational space would have reminded visitors of the Copacabana, one of the most celebrated nightclubs in New York City at the time. The club was named after the famous beach in Rio de Janeiro and evoked the fantasy of warm, sultry nights drinking and dancing to Latin rhythms in a carefree exotic location. The pavilion designers played off the popularity of the Copa by creating a mini-version within the pavilion. This enabled visitors to vicariously travel to the nightclub in mid-town Manhattan, or to the nightlife of Rio de Janeiro.

This self-exoticization relates directly to the racial stereotyping of Brazilians, and more broadly, of Latin Americans. This phenomenon is a complex issue in any national culture; however, Brazil is a particularly interesting case since it functioned differently than in many other colonial contexts. The Portuguese began colonizing Brazil in 1500 and instituting the African slave trade, which was the largest in the Americas and lasted through 1850, although slavery was not abolished in Brazil until 1888. Five centuries of miscegenation between Europeans, Africans, and indigenous peoples resulted in a vastly multi-racial and pluralistic ethnic population. On the topic of miscegenation, film theorist, Robert Stam states that it was, “less a
sign of tolerance than a technique for domination,” and proceeds to explain that, “European male colonizers...impregnated Indian women in order to populate and assert control over the land.”\textsuperscript{14} In this context, miscegenation surfaces in relation to the exoticization of the Brazilian body, which is necessarily a multi-racial body. Ironically, the number of Brazilian bodies that even animated the space was limited since one of the principal purposes of the fair was to generate jobs for unemployed Americans.

The careful knitting together of such cultural markers as austere modern architecture, tropical flowers, scientific studies, and aromatic coffee, was intended to portray Brazil as another industrialized nation without forsaking its distinct exotic flavor. A question remains, however: whose cultural markers were they deploying? These markers were as much about American ideas of Brazil, as they were accurate depictions drawn from Brazilian life. Cultural exports like music and dance, as experienced at the Copacabana, generated stereotypical images of Brazilians in the American imagination. Robert Stam discusses these twentieth-century stereotypes and contends:

Misconceptions about Brazil, and about Latin America generally, have become intertwined with sedimented prejudices that are at once religious (Christian condescension toward African and indigenous religions); social (poverty as a sign of degradation); sexual (the view of Latin American women as sultry temptresses); and racial (reproducing Eurocentric hierarchies of white Europeans over African ‘black’ and indigenous ‘red.’)\textsuperscript{15}

It would seem that Brazil wanted to resuscitate its image at the same time it utilized the stereotypes produced by the “sedimented prejudices” referenced above. This pavilion and its contents were a strategically orchestrated combination of what were presumed to be universal forms and national images in an attempt to represent Brazil as both tropical and modern, proving that these terms were not mutually exclusive. Like “Democracity,” this pavilion was not so much a reflection of the status quo, but a constructed fantasy of the future, and yet another articulation of the fair’s theme, “Building the World of Tomorrow.”
A few days after the fair’s official inauguration, Brazil’s commissioner general, Armando Vidal delivered a speech at the opening ceremony for his country’s pavilion. In it he exclaimed:

The heroic effort made by Man in Brazil is still unknown to many. Isolated, and struggling against the jungle and the Indian, which he was trying to civilize, in two centuries the Brazilian man has conquered and defined the huge territory, which is Brazil. He consolidated this property, constituted the unity of the Nation, and, at the time of Independence of the Americas, when the Spanish domination was broken into several republics, Brazil, thanks to the prevailing spirit of national unity, which had already been formed, became the greatest country in America.\textsuperscript{16}

Although propagandistic language of this nature would have likely been typical at the World’s Fair, Vidal’s remarks also conformed precisely to the political rhetoric coming out of Brazil at that time. The 1930s and 1940s belong to a specific political period in Brazil that saw considerable social and cultural upheaval. This period, referred to as the first Vargas regime, began with a military coup in 1930 that installed the young politician, Getúlio Vargas as the country’s leader. The coup was in large part a response to the perilous economic state of the nation, a result of the Stock Market crash of 1929, and subsequent worldwide depression. Vargas used the nation’s dependence on foreign markets as a pretext for his insistence that the country must create a self-sufficient economy. He subsequently rewrote the constitution in 1934 and seized dictatorial power in 1937, referring to the period of 1937-45 as the \textit{Estado Novo} (New State).\textsuperscript{17} After the initiation of the \textit{Estado Novo}, the government took an extreme anti-regionalist stance on many matters and, on November 27, 1937, manifested this by publicly burning all of the individual state flags in what became known as, the \textit{Queima das bandeiras} (The Flag Burning).\textsuperscript{18}

Playing the role of the “Good Neighbor,” Vargas’s Brazil was one of the first countries to agree to participate in the New York World’s Fair in the fall of 1937. The Good Neighbor Policy was a result of the Pan-American conference in 1933. Outlined by President Roosevelt, it assured that no
nation would interfere in the affairs of any other nation within the Americas. With the wars taking place in Europe, many American nations wanted to forge alliances with countries closer to their own borders. Many cultural, political, and economic exchanges took place under the auspices of the Good Neighbor Policy. Brazil had taken part in World Fairs since 1862 but had generally relied on foreign architects to design their pavilions. However, in 1937, Vargas’ nationalist enterprise required that a Brazilian architect design the pavilion. Moreover, he was anxious to promote his country as an industrialized nation and felt that there was too much at stake politically and economically to entrust Brazil’s image to a foreigner. In light of his extreme nationalism, it is somewhat contradictory that the New York World’s Fair was so important to the Vargas regime. Brazil’s participation can be explained because the fair provided the nation with a venue to display the range of agricultural products that were already being exported, as well as new industrial and scientific advances. By presenting a vast range of goods and services, Vargas hoped to diversify Brazil’s export market so as not to rely solely on agricultural products.

One of the initiatives of Vargas’ authoritarian state was the introduction of the concept “brasilidade,” an evasive but highly sought-after sense of Brazilian-ness. The largest country in South America, Brazil’s topography ranges from tropical rain forests, to dry plains, to fertile farmlands, and sandy beaches. In these vastly different regions lives a diverse multi-racial populace that has produced disparate cultural traditions and economic structures. Brasilidade was an attempt to synthesize all of these strands into one, cohesive, harmonious culture. In order to solidify this new idea of Brazilian-ness, the government began sponsoring competitions for new buildings in an effort to imprint the capital with the dogma of the Vargas regime. The availability of so much state sponsorship triggered the development of an extremely competitive environment between different camps in the cultural sphere. The culturally conservative faction advocated for what was then the more popular architectural style, drawing on the colonial architecture built by the Portuguese and the Beaux-Arts tradition of the nineteenth-century academies. Modernists, on the other hand, looked to international sources from the contemporary world, such as those espoused by CIAM and Le Corbusier. Amazingly, no single style was ever granted full governmental endorsement; the Vargas regime commissioned buildings from different styles at the same time. For example, in 1939, the Ministry of Finance
building was awarded to the Conservatives, while during the years of 1936-45, the Ministry of Education and Health building was designed and built by the modernist group. The former utilized a Neo-Classical vocabulary and incorporated marble, fluted columns, and a portico into its massive volume. The latter was a rectangular modernist skyscraper with Le Corbusian *pilotis* and *brisés-soleil*. Somewhat surprisingly, these buildings were located across the street from each other. In 1936, Costa was selected to oversee this project. He invited a team of young architects, including Niemeyer, to assist him, as well as Le Corbusier to consult on the project. Le Corbusier visited Rio de Janeiro that year and redesigned the Health and Education building. Although Costa’s team ultimately modified Le Corbusier’s design, they kept many of his key elements. The building is often attributed first to him, and secondly to the Brazilians.

A crucial aspect of *brasilidade* referred to a desire for cultural self-sufficiency. The government insisted on a rigorous nationalism, strongly discouraging Brazilians from emulating foreign models. Severely enforced after 1937 with the establishment of the *Estado Novo*, it greatly curtailed international exchange among intellectual and cultural practitioners. This explains why it was so important to President Vargas to have Brazilian architects, such as Costa and Niemeyer, design the pavilion; Vargas even attended the competition ceremonies. However, this points to a fundamental paradox in the pavilion’s program: why were the Brazilian architects allowed to draw on the readily recognizable foreign source of the International Style in its design? Ultimately, the biggest challenge that the Brazilian fair commissioners encountered in curating this project was locating cultural markers that not only fit within the narrow range acceptable to Vargas, but would also be well received and understood by U.S. audiences as distinctly Brazilian. I suggest that through the power of rhetoric, such as the creation of the term “tropical modernism,” the commissioners and the architects were able to convince necessary parties that this modern architecture embodied *brasilidade*.

At the time that Costa and Niemeyer were selected to design and build the structure, neither had actually completed many buildings. Costa had studied and taught at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1931, he opened an office with modern architect, Gregori Warchavchik, the Brazilian member of CIAM, and became increasingly influenced by publications circulated by the Congrès
HEMISPHERE

and Le Corbusier. However, because of the popularity of Neo-Colonial architecture, Costa and Niemeyer rarely received commissions. Niemeyer, five years Costa’s junior, studied with Costa at the Escola before working in his firm. Their other collaborative project, the Ministry of Education and Health building, was still in progress when they began the Brazilian Pavilion, but it would not be officially completed until 1945. The debate between modernism and academicism, as represented by Neo-Colonial architecture, made it difficult for architects like Costa and Niemeyer to win commissions, particularly within the private sector. Thus, modern architecture was still rarely seen in Brazil when it was put on display in the 1939 World’s Fair.

The newly formed Ministry of Labor, Industry, and Commerce oversaw the selection of the designers of the pavilion and the exhibitions sent to the New York Fair. A competition for the pavilion design was announced in late 1937, shortly after the government agreed to participate. The criteria by which they would judge the projects were described as follows:

The question should not imply a search for traditional or indigenous architectural details, but for an architectural form, which would translate the expression of the Brazilian environment; and furthermore, that this architectural form be preferably contemporary, in view that the New York World’s Fair has, as a principle, established a vision of “The World of Tomorrow.”

Therefore, the jury consciously searched for something that could be understood as a national architecture yet was free of historical references and within a contemporary framework. They awarded first place to Costa’s design because it displayed an, “espírito de brasiliade” (spirit of brasilidade), and second place to Niemeyer for the technical aspects of his plan. In the end, Costa invited Niemeyer to collaborate with him on a new design, which they developed in New York City in the spring of 1938. As their original plans have never been made public, it is impossible to speculate how far they digressed from Costa’s award-winning design. What is even more surprising is Niemeyer’s statement, given in a personal interview, that the architects were given the freedom to design a new building without having to consult with Brazilian officials.
“The World of Tomorrow” on Display at the Fair

The fair theme, “Building the World of Tomorrow,” was embodied in the design and layout of the entire grounds, resulting in a strong visual cohesion among architectural styles. Deriving from stylistic concepts originating in Bauhaus and Art Deco tendencies, industrial designers, such as Norman Bel Geddes, Raymond Loewy, Henry Dreyfuss, and Walter Dorwin Teague had seduced corporate America with their “streamlined” aesthetic, which dictated the design of everything from toothbrushes to automobiles. This streamlined aesthetic, typified by clean uncluttered lines and surfaces, had a big impact on the fair’s Board of Design and therefore, the industrial designers were influential in the ultimate design of the grounds. “Unity without uniformity” was the Board of Design’s maxim; consequently, many of the three hundred and seventy-five structures built for the fair strongly resembled one another.

The Board mandated that pavilions could only be two or three stories tall, with a few exceptions like the Trylon. The purpose was to keep a low silhouette for the fairgrounds so that the New York skyline could be seen in the distance. The Board developed some buildings right away to set examples for other contributors; those structures were characterized by steel frames and curtain walls of gypsum board, wire lath, and stucco, ultimately contributing one-third of the buildings on the grounds.

Signage, lighting, and building color were also highly controlled. Native materials or products, such as marble and tile, were only allowed on foreign pavilions, although, “replicas of historical buildings and extremely traditional structures were outlawed.” At past fairs, countries traditionally designed pavilions to reflect domestic styles specific to their cultural heritage. However, in New York, many national architectural characteristics were streamlined to favor a horizontal, aerodynamic style evocative of speed and technology. Consequently, the visual continuity between each national pavilion was rather surprising at times. For example, the pavilions representing France and Venezuela had less a degree of difference than one might expect. Not only do each of the participating countries have discrete architectural traditions, but they are located on four different continents with vastly different climates, making their formal similarity even more astonishing. In addition to the customary national pavilions, the triumphs of U.S. industrialization were placed center stage in Flushing Meadows. The “shape of things to come,” as described in a fair brochure, would be made possible by American engineering. Some of the most successful U.S.
corporations, such as IBM, RCA, Kodak, General Motors, Firestone, and Ford built their own pavilions to advertise their advancements.

Costa and Niemeyer’s task in designing a pavilion was therefore threefold: in addition to using International Style idioms celebrated by the Vargas regime, they had to accommodate the strict guidelines set forth by the Board of Design, while attempting to distinguish their project from others. Reconciling these competing agendas, Costa described his objectives for the pavilion this way:

[The pavilion] could not be reasonably thought to stand out through lavishness, monumentality or expertise. We tried to call interest in another way: by making a simple pavilion, unceremonious, attractive and cozy, which would impose itself, not by its scale—the site is not big—nor by luxury—the country is still poor—but through its qualities of harmony and equilibrium and as an expression, as much as purely possible, of contemporary art.\(^{30}\)

This statement serves as another example of the architects’ reliance on rhetoric to justify their design.

Recognizing the incredible public relations role that the pavilion would play, the selection of the exhibition objects was exceptionally competitive. More than a hundred private exhibitors were invited to compete for exhibition space at the pavilion. They consisted mostly of members of commercial and professional associations, primarily from the agricultural and mining industries with ties to the export market. Towing the party line, Commissioner General Vidal espoused, “national unity without internal differences,” and so, ironically, exhibitors were instructed to avoid corporate branding.\(^{31}\) According to Vidal, “our overriding preoccupation is to show the world a Brazil which is economically united, homogenous and indivisible in all of its productive capacities.”\(^{32}\) The Vargas regime wanted to stage Brazil as a nation of industrialists and so the displays of natural products, such as Brazil wood, caroá fiber, and rubber, were placed in proximity to examples of their industrial applications. Vidal and his team realized the didactic potential of these installations and favored simple straightforward displays, in an effort to counteract the common presumption that tropical nations were carefree,
chaotic, or underdeveloped. Aware that the majority of fairgoers would not be industrialists but consumers of mass-market products, coffee received more floor space than any other exhibit in the pavilion. The Brazilian medical profession was also given a large display, which included information about the treatment of poisonous snakes, spiders, and scorpions, yellow fever vaccination programs, how syphilis differs in hot climates, and, “the study of the negro race in Brazil.”³³ By pointing to the scientific study of tropical conditions particular to Brazil, the organizers were evoking the premise of “tropical modernism” in yet another way, proving that these terms—tropical and modern—were not mutually exclusive but comfortably co-existed.³⁴

This same lesson was also embedded in the display of visual art in the pavilion. The Brazilian artist, Portinari became involved with the project at Costa’s suggestion. Educated at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes, Portinari was highly respected in Brazil. In 1928, he was the recipient of a coveted travel award, which allowed him to spend two years in Europe. Before his travels, he dutifully worked within the academic visual language in which he was trained. Upon his return to Brazil, however, he rejected that language for modernist forms and devoted himself exclusively to Brazilian imagery. By 1939, he had achieved a degree of fame and success in the U.S. with an honorable mention award at the 1935 Carnegie International for his painting, Café, which depicted the proletariat of the coffee plantations in the state of São Paulo. His 1933 work, Morro, was included in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition, Art in our Time, which inaugurated the museum’s new headquarters on 53rd Street while the construction of World’s Fair was in progress.³⁵ Since pavilion organizers were open to non-academic styles and subjects, Portinari was able to gain the commission, and he agreed to create a trio of mural-sized paintings of three regional types: northern jangadeiros (fishermen), northeastern bahianas (women from the state of Bahia), and southern gauchos (cattlemen). The figures, which were painted in a larger-than-life scale with oversized extremities, combining rough textures, expressive brushstrokes, and bright colors, were a deliberate departure from the formal conventions that still dominated art academies in Brazil.

The inclusion of his works points to another ambiguity in the construction of brasilidade and the Estado Novo’s message within the program of this pavilion. Although the government maintained an anti-regional stance,
Portinari’s portrayal of Brazil was based on the celebration of regional types and differences. Not only did his figures display a range of economic types but they put the multi-racial nature of Brazil’s population on display as well, which undermined the politically popular idea of a homogenous white society. Brazilian Conservatives, who advocated for academic styles, also wanted modern Brazil to be portrayed as white, domesticated, and civilized; Portinari’s paintings destabilized this falsity. His paintings also denied U.S. audiences of a “heroicized proletariat living in a romanticized poverty... beaten down by blackness and work.” Instead, audiences were presented with portraits of active Brazilians, working and contributing to their country in all their diversity. Portinari’s emphasis on labor earned him support from the Vargas regime, despite his celebration of regional types, especially since the Ministry of Labor, Industry, and Commerce was sponsoring the pavilion. His status as a modern artist would have played an even larger role in his selection. Interestingly, the wall adjacent to Portinari’s paintings displayed thirty-one of Brazil’s historic flags, including some that dated back to the sixteenth century with a collection of carved reproductions of the Baroque churches found throughout Brazil located nearby. This gallery installation epitomized the careful balance achieved between international and autochthonous forms and subjects.

Remarkably, the pavilion that Costa and Niemeyer built, although seemingly incongruous with then current architectural trends in Brazil, was later recognized internationally as an exemplification of a Brazilian style. The literature concerning Brazilian modern architecture commonly points to a trio of building projects, including the Ministry of Education and Health Building, the Brazilian Pavilion, and the recreation center in the suburb of Pampulha, all built during the Estado Novo, as the foundation for the movement that fully emerged in the 1950s. The pavilion, therefore, truly did represent Brazil’s “world of tomorrow,” even though in 1939 this style was still in its incubation. Costa and Niemeyer would each go on to have enormously successful careers and they would ultimately collaborate in designing the modernist city of Brasília, the magnum opus of Brazilian modern architecture. Like many other attractions at the Fair, Brazil obfuscated history in favor of a constructed fantasyland of a completely modern country. In considering the overall design of the fair, we can more clearly see how Brazil’s pavilion was attempting to assimilate into a larger international language of the industrialized world. The Vargas regime tried...
to export a, “hegemonic national culture in full possession of its faculties,” even though this was far from the case at home.38

**Conclusion**
The Brazilian Pavilion received resounding praise from a wide variety of critics. It was repeatedly featured in reports on the fair conducted by the international media. The subject of extended photographic spreads in architecture magazines, Costa and Niemeyer were continually lauded for their “superlative display” of Le Corbusian ideas.39 Curators from New York’s MoMA also took notice of the pavilion. In 1943, Phillip Goodwin, curator of Architecture at the museum, organized *Brazil Builds*, an exhibition that chronicled three centuries of architecture in Brazil and culminated with the modernist work of Costa and Niemeyer. Goodwin’s familiarity with the pavilion had provoked his interest in the subject and led to a research trip to Brazil and the subsequent exhibition. Furthermore, the architects became internationally celebrated and Niemeyer was appointed to the team of architects that designed the United Nations building in New York City (1947-1952). Although already somewhat known abroad, Portinari continued to be celebrated in American museums. He received solo shows from the Detroit Art Institute and MoMA, both in 1940, as a result of his participation in the pavilion.40 That same year, University of Chicago Press published an illustrated monograph in English, titled, *Portinari, His Life and Art*, making his work and biography available to broader U.S. audiences. And in 1943, he was commissioned to paint murals for the Hispanic Society at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. Even coffee sales in the U.S. increased because of the popularity of the coffee bar in the pavilion.41

A close reading of the Brazilian pavilion and exhibitions, from within the political and cultural milieu in which they were commissioned, provides a rich example of how representations of nationality can be manipulated to meet specific objectives. With the positive reception listed above as proof, the Vargas regime achieved its goal of being seen as a “tropically modern” country, at least in the cultural sphere. Although Portinari’s expressive paintings and Costa and Niemeyer’s restrained style of architecture may seem incongruous with one another, they both epitomized modernity, which became the carrier of *brasilidade* at the World’s Fair. They employed visual idioms of modernity that were accessible to international audiences,
while maintaining a commitment to Brazilian identity; they simultaneously addressed, “tomorrowness and otherness.”

Despite Vargas’ attempts, the meaning of *brasilidade* has remained elusive throughout most of the century and continues to plague cultural critics trying to pin down exactly what constitutes Brazilian-ness. This question points to a persistent national anxiety that was not just specific to the Vargas regime but one that reappears in literature and criticism. Such ambiguity is in large part a legacy of the colonial encounter. For over five centuries, racial and cultural mixing produced new, hybrid forms, creating a wide range of racial categories and cultural expressions. Religion, architecture, music, language, and cuisine, among many other things, all combined to invent unique mixtures. Consequently, by the first decades of the twentieth century, it was impossible to parse African and European bodies and cultures from the indigenous bodies and cultures with whom they had combined, an endeavor that has only become more complicated with globalization. One reason *brasilidade* has remained perpetually elusive is that there is no definitive “original” to be consulted. Instead, *brasilidade* has come to signify ever-changing states of hybridity, existing between what are generally considered to be the three principle cultural influences in the region. In confronting the complex hybridity of European, African, and indigenous cultures, the need for a nationalist project became even more acute during the Vargas regime. For those in political power, as well as the cultural brokers of the time, “tropical modernism” was a fantastic solution answering the call for a modern Brazilian identity.

ALECA LE BLANC is a Ph.D. candidate in the Art History Department at the University of Southern California, studying with Dr. Nancy J. Troy. Her dissertation, titled, *Mixing Modernisms at the Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro* (1948-1963), considers the various ways that internationally recognized modernist languages, such as Concrete art and International Style architecture, among others, were appropriated by Brazilians and put on display in Rio de Janeiro at mid-century.
NOTES:
1 The fair closed on October 31, 1939 and although it re-opened on May 11, 1940, this paper does not deal with the second year of the fair, which was largely modified from the original event. Richard Wurts and Stanley Appelbaum, *The New York World’s Fair, 1939/1940 in 155 Photographs* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), xvi.
3 Although Germany was conspicuous in its absence.
4 Rydell, 2.
6 This description has been culled from several sources, including a limited number of published descriptions, approximately five photographs and the building design plans. Because it was a temporary structure, it has not been as prominently featured in architectural books. Some sources consulted include: Zilah Quezado Deckker, *Brazil Built: The Architecture of the Modern Movement in Brazil* (London and New York: Spon Press, 2001). Williams; and Philip Lippincott Goodwin, G. E. Kidder Smith, and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.), *Brazil Builds: Architecture New and Old, 1652-1942* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1943).
7 Unfortunately, information identifying the landscape designer is not available. Although it resembles the work of Roberto Burle Marx, a frequent collaborator of Costa, Niemeyer and Portinari, according to Niemeyer, Burle Marx did not participate. Oscar Niemeyer, interview with author, 2 August 2006, Rio de Janeiro.
10 Le Corbusier visited Brazil in 1929 and lectured in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. I am not convinced he had a significant impact on Brazilian architects on that trip. He did meet Gregori Warchavchik, who was working with modern idioms and became the Brazilian member to CIAM in 1930. Le Corbusier’s return in 1936 had much more impact. It was only after the founding of CIAM and his prolific publications in the 1930s that architects in Brazil really became familiar with his ideas.
14 It is impossible to eliminate race from the discussion, (nor do I want to), but since I have chosen to focus on questions around the construction of a national identity and Brasilidade, I have refrained from delving into the valences that race plays in this construction. See Robert Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian
HEMISPHERE


15 Stam, 1.

16 Goodwin, Smith, and Museum of Modern Art.

17 Vargas was democratically elected to the presidency in 1950 and served until his suicide in the presidential palace while another coup was in process in 1954. This event is considered one of the most dramatic episodes in twentieth-century Brazilian history. Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith, "Brazil: Development for Whom?," in *Modern Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 164-169.

18 Williams, 196.

19 The 1904 St. Louis Exposition was an exception. A large Beaux-Arts style pavilion was designed by a Brazilian architect. It was later dismantled and re-erected in Rio de Janeiro to house the senate. It was demolished in 1981. In 1937, the pavilion that represented Brazil was a gift from the French government. Williams, 193-195.

20 Ibid., xvii.


22 Sisson and Jackson.

23 Claude Levi-Strauss, who was professor of anthropology in São Paulo between 1935-37, discusses the difficulties foreign intellectuals faced in Brazil after the initiation of the Estado Novo. This information was mentioned in Quezado Deckker, 51, note 42. The original source is Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 1st American ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1974). Because of this, it is highly unlikely that Le Corbusier would have been invited to consult in the post-1937 climate.

24 Quezado Deckker, 55-56.


27 Wurts and Appelbaum, xi.

28 Ibid., xii.

29 I am unsure to what degree the Board of Design imposed a style on the foreign buildings. I assume that there was a vetting process and that the designs had to be pre-approved by the fair’s Board of Design. However, I have never come across any evidence of this. None of the discussions I read concerning the Brazilian Pavilion indicate the need for approval of their plans.

30 Quezado Deckker, 63, note 10. My translation.

31 Quote by Vidal in Williams, 202.

32 Ibid.


34 This refers directly to a shift in the social policies concerning race at this time. It was believed that through education, the darker races could be “whitened” and therefore improved. An excellent resource on this topic is Jerry Dávila, *Diploma of Whiteness: Race and Social Policy in Brazil, 1917-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

35 MoMA acquired this painting on the occasion of this exhibition. *Museum of Modern Art* (New York N.Y.), *Art in Our Time; An Exhibition To Celebrate the Tenth Anniversary*
of the Museum of Modern Art and the Opening of Its New Building, Held at the Time of the

36 Williams, 217.

37 Pampulha is a suburb of the city of Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais, where
Juscelino Kubitschek was mayor and then governor, prior to assuming the presidency in
1956. He determined that there should be a recreational complex and so in 1938, he built
a dam and reservoir. He then commissioned several buildings from Costa and Niemeyer,
including a yacht club, a casino, and restaurants. They were inaugurated in 1942.
Portinari contributed murals to all three of the aforementioned projects; the Ministry
of Education and Health, the Brazilian Pavilion and the Pampulha complex. The famous
landscape designer, Roberto Burle-Marx contributed to the Education and Health building
as well as Pampulha. I have read conflicting statements about his participation in the
Brazilian Pavilion, which is why I have omitted him from my discussion in the body of
the text. Moreover, in a personal interview with Niemeyer in August 2006, the architect
confirmed that Burle Marx was not involved in the pavilion project. Regardless, it would
be interesting to consider why collaboration between the three became such a popular
combination for government patronage. They also all worked together in the design of
Brasília, the modernist city that was built and inaugurated as the new capital of Brazil in
1960 (also sponsored by Juscelino Kubitschek, who was then president).

38 Williams, 192.

39 Quezado Deckker, 63.

40 On the second page of this book, it is stated: "Most of the works listed were first shown
in the United States at the Detroit Institute of Arts; some forty additional works were
secured for the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York ... This catalog was
prepared by the staff of the Museum of Modern Art with the assistance of the staff of the
Detroit Institute of Arts." Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.), Portinari of Brazil

41 Williams, 205.

42 Ibid., 207.

43 This term “hybrid” is prevalent in post-colonial discourse and has been deployed by
theoreticians ranging from Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Nestor Garcia Canclini, who
discusses it specifically in terms relating to Latin America. Néstor García Canclini, Hybrid
Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity (Minneapolis, MN: University of
Minnesota Press, 1995).

44 For example, the prevalence of slaves in Brazil altered the Portuguese language spoken
there; rather than use two forms of “you” – formal and informal – as in most other romance
languages, in Brazil the formal version became so widely used by slaves that it is now the
standard way Brazilian Portuguese is taught.

45 This equation does not take into consideration the large Japanese population that
immigrated to Brazil in the late 1800s, establishing the largest ex-patriot community of
Japanese in the world. Because they were initially so highly concentrated in the state of
São Paulo, and arrived more than three centuries after the Europeans and Africans, they
did not figure into the nation-wide racial and cultural mixing and therefore have been
occluded from most of these accounts.
HUMOR, SUBVERSION, AND MEXICAN CINEMA: 
Cantinflas, el Pelado, and el Padrecito

Nancy Quiñones, Ph.D. Student

Cantinflas, Mexican National Consciousness, and the Rise of the 
Mexican Golden Age of Cinema

By 1940, Mario Moreno Reyes was the most popular comedian in Mexican Cinema. The movie role Moreno is best known for is Cantinflas, a persona that, “embodied the chaos of Mexican society in its quest for modernity.” Moreno’s popularity as Cantiflas, “magnified his influence on the national consciousness,” and ensured his central role in forging twentieth century Mexican ideology, folklore, and popular culture. His quick, interminable, and convoluted chatter came to typify his humor and became the voice of an era. I posit that Moreno’s banal and chaotic humor, as channeled through Cantinflas, contributed to the construction of a modern Mexican identity, while subverting hegemonic social constructs of language, socio-ethnic identities, and ideological institutions. Academic surveys of Moreno’s career are consistently riddled with lacunae. Rarely is he or his oeuvre analyzed as politically and culturally subversive. His humor and semantics are not generally examined or viewed as a Gramscian organic intellectual exercise, for example. Moreover, Moreno is scantly commemorated even within the context of La Epoca de Oro del Cine Mexicano or The Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1936-1956). This essay aims to address this particular gap. Additionally, I will explore how Moreno employs humorous semantics as a means to subvert hegemonic establishments.

With few exceptions, Moreno dedicated his cinematic career to the portrayal of the pelado. The pelado refers to the urban poor at the turn of the nineteenth century. The byproduct of modernity, the pelado is the peripheral proletariat regarded only in terms of labor and production. Through Cantinflas, Moreno deliberately examined ideological constructs and experimented with humor without seeking to “speak” or “represent” the proletariat. Instead, he mimicked himself and spoke for himself. Moreno was born in 1911 in an urban, working-class subdivision in the heart of Mexico City. Moreno and his family were pelados, urban poor, treacherous and obscene, hopeless ruffians of the urban slums of Mexico City at the turn of the twentieth century. To the Mexican elite, the pelado was inferior and undeserving. For the hegemonic bourgeoisie, Cantinflas represented
nothing more than the unfortunate, yet inevitable, human remnants of a society that claimed itself industrialized.

By definition, *pelado* is the effect of having been peeled, as one peels a banana, leaving it bare to the elements. The image connotes that once peeled, exposure leaves the fruit unprotected where it can be devoured by appetite or pestilence. Using oppressive ideological constructs, the bodies and minds of Mestizos and *indígenas* were marked and relegated to the caste of the *pelado*. Cantinflas, the persona, does not minimize his interpretation to political advocacy, nor does he commodify it for the interest of appreciation. For many, “Cantinflas became the theatrical voice of the forgotten man.”

To honor Moreno’s allegiance with the *pelado* majority of Mexico City, Diego Rivera conceived a tribute to Cantinflas with the *Mural del Teatro de los Insurgentes* (1951) in Mexico City. Rivera epitomized Moreno’s representation of the *pelado* and positioned Cantinflas at the center of the national mêlée of Mexican identity and representation. Rivera depicted Cantinflas as a divine emissary, postured between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. With his arms extended between the Church and the bourgeois world on one side, and the poor, indigenous, Mestizo world of the *pelado* on the other, the mural depicts Cantinflas as a Christ figure performing his martyrdom. Rivera situated Cantinflas and the *pelado* at the center of the arts, literally and figuratively. By locating the mural in the Mexican capital, Rivera placed Cantinflas and the tensions of Mexican identity at the heart of Mexican life. The mural artistically toys with a transformation of Cantinflas from actor/comedian to a divine form, and a text of Mexicanness, identity, and representation. In this mural, Rivera amalgamated three cultural polarities: the *pelado* and the elite; *arte folklóricas* or low arts and the *bellas artes* or high arts; and the banal and the divine of mid-twentieth century, Mexican culture. Yet, Rivera’s exceptional opus is predictably futile in emancipating Cantinflas and the masses from the periphery, both sociologically and artistically.

The censorship conveyed by the silence of the Mexican elite at the time of Moreno’s passing unremittingly marks him and his *oeuvre* as transient and ephemeral. Furthermore, through limited discussions of Moreno’s legacy within the context of Mexican Cinema, he has been systematically written out. In 1982, Carl Mora extensively surveyed Mexican filmmaking.
and Moreno is noted in regard to his first film, the establishment of his production company, his struggle for leadership within the union, and for the films he produced in association with Columbia Pictures. Mora acknowledges Moreno’s astute subversion of language as the “perfect counterpoint” to ridicule and outwit the “hypocritical creole,” however, he does not explore the counterpoint by which Moreno contests hegemony. Mora suggests that the power to subvert remained largely in the jurisdiction of directors and emerging modern representations of Mexican identities. Thus, Moreno is reduced to an essentially insignificant role as an actor and comedian in Mexican Cinema.

Moreno’s atavistic performance is a combination of cinematic representations of Mexicanness (i.e. poverty, resourcefulness, and religiousness), securing the pelado as an emblem in the narrative of Mexican identity. It is Moreno’s reflection of Mexican Mestizo identity that perpetually obliges the bourgeoise to acknowledge the indio, the poor or pelado, and the Mestizo self. Moreno’s mimetic rendering of the plight of the systematically oppressed masses repudiates the ubiquity and violence of modernity’s domination of the Mexican majority. For García Reira, Cantinflas was the, “first real and living personage in a cinema characterized by its attachment to cheap histrionics.” Paradoxically, it is quintessentially how Moreno employed these “cheap histrionics” that irrevocably grants Cantinflas’ sanction to ridicule hegemonic institutions—Church, Law, order, education, and government—without consent or pretense. Cantinflas’ operative humor and effective ridicule forcefully constructed an anti-hegemonic space for the proletariat audience. As Cantinflas, Moreno mimicked the banality of the urban poor and proficiently employed a picaresque, comedic arsenal to evoke and/or engender a consciousness of liberation from hegemonic institutions and mores.

The Mexican Revolution, the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, and the Juxtaposition of the Charro and the Pelado
During the first half of the twentieth century, the Mexican Revolution and the process of industrialization fundamentally destabilized Mexican ideological constructs of land ownership, the role of the campesino or agricultural laborer, women’s roles, the Church, and undoubtedly, that of nation. The pelado population was the visceral manifestation of the displaced masses
from Mexico’s provinces—the campesinos—following the Revolution. As has been noted:

The Revolution offered some hope for social change, and indeed peasants and workers achieved important reforms... land redistribution...expansion of social services...gradual destruction of the hacienda system...[Conversely] along with these gains the Revolution brought about major transformations in other areas that negatively affected the same population. For instance, the commercialization of agriculture and the move toward industrialization forced thousands of Mexicans to migrate out of the countryside into larger cities and across the border into the United States.\(^\text{13}\)

Undoubtedly, this population was no longer submissive. Due to the revolutionary process, the once dormant masses now awakened and became a precarious new burden for the Mexican elite. Consequently, hegemonic politics and Mexico’s elites were categorically compelled to corral the thinking and restless pelado majority.

For the Mexican film industry, technological developments and the tumultuous historical vexes caused by the Revolution presented a new set of circumstances requiring interesting negotiations. These innovative technologies emerged as twentieth-century hegemonic institutions of development and progress with which to restrain and limit the awakened proletariat. For survival and success in Mexican cinema of the 1930s, directors like Fernando de Fuentes, “rejected the uncertainties and perils of revolutionary change and opted for an idealized pre-revolutionary social order in which individuals of different classes each knew their place and were the happier for it.”\(^\text{14}\) Clearly, for those who intended to continue in the film industry in Mexico, ideological choices were limited, at best. These tenuous personal and national negotiations for power yielded obtuse formulaic productions. For example, Fernando de Fuentes wrote the screenplay for, directed, produced, and edited the 1936 film, Allá en el Rancho Grande, which, “brought to life...a traditional [idealized, prerevolutionary social order] society...[and became] the prototype for the most enduring genre of the Mexican cinema,” the comedia ranchera.\(^\text{15}\)
In contrast, Moreno’s calculated selection and development of the *pelado* persona on screen must be contextualized within the hegemony of the cinematic *charro*—the elaborately attired, equestrian figure, which was the Mexican precursor to the iconic, American cowboy. In the fervor to coalesce a national identity, the Mexican film industry appropriated the *charro* to circulate and perform highly stylized constructions of Mexican masculinity and national identity, in order to popularize specific views of society. The creative force of the early years of Mexico’s cinematic Golden Age generated copious yet virtually mechanical filmic reproductions. In 1937 alone, the Mexican film industry produced thirty-eight films! Of the thirty-eight movies, the dominant genre was the *comedia ranchera* or rural comedy. The *comedia ranchera*, “romanticized life on the hacienda, [large agricultural estates, where]… the *charro* represented the ‘true Mexican,’” who defended country, land, and family. He sang *rancheras*, or country songs, danced, and loved women. This auspicious genre, privileged in its day, concomitantly carved the *charro* into the Mexican psyche within a 1930s, post-revolutionary cultural context, while situting its enactment in a romanticized pre-revolutionary past.

In Mexican film, the *charro* functioned as a device for ideological state apparatuses, since it promoted and reinforced the traditional, patriarchal, hierarchic, hacienda system—*hacendado/campesino, criollo/mestizo, rich/poor*—which had been contested during the Revolution. The performed *charro* ideal exemplified a paternalistic unity among men that stratified class and gender, “[c]onsequently this ideal of cooperation and unity [among men] translated into additional qualities for male behavior and served well in promoting social unity.” This “social unity,” constructed around national identity, structured a person’s place in society irrespective of individual ability. These cinematic, ideological constructs confined a perennially forged Mexican identity prohibitive of aspiration and mobility. Undeniably, Fuentes and other directors constructed *comedias rancheras* to indoctrinate the proletariat to their respective place in society.

Mexican President, Lazaro Cárdenas del Río concluded his six-year term in 1940. During his presidency, Cárdenas ended the practice of capital punishment, expropriated oil from foreign interests, nationalized *Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX)*, and acted on revolutionary promises of land reform. He reduced his salary by half, relocated the presidential residency to a
comparatively modest home, and transformed the previous extravagant presidential palace into the National Museum of History. Furthermore, President Cárdenas had former president, Plutarco Elías Calles, who had imposed his command over the nation for a span of eleven years, arrested and deported. During the Cárdenas presidency, from 1934 to 1940, Mexican Cinema thus experienced:

An intense climate of "socialist" nationalism...[and] interest in...vernacular practices and lifestyles of the common Mexican citizen...The Cardenas Administration encouraged limiting the distribution of American-made films...[However] under the more conservative Manuel Avila Camacho administration (1940-46), encouragement translated into institutional support in the form of tax exemptions, laws requiring theaters to feature a minimum number of Mexican films, and in some cases even financial backing.  

Notwithstanding the reforms of the Cárdenas administration, the surveillance of Mexican Cinema and government imposition was augmented during the Camacho administration. Film, art, and radio rapidly became the twentieth century technologies by which, “to mold minds [and construct wills], to create citizens, to nationalize and rationalize the wayward, recalcitrant, diverse peoples of Mexico.” The Ávila Camacho presidency ensured government support, control of film production, and that the, “ideological content of Mexican movies paralleled the sentiments of the current administration.” It is within this deep financial and ideological domination and vexed historical moment that the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema, which spanned two decades from 1936 to 1956, emerged.

Although the arts and radio were equally controlled, Mexican cinema was the select technology employed to subjugate the proletariat. Through visual means, film clearly illustrated the engrained and expected participation of one's role in society. These profitable and coercive productions of the Mexican film industry continually reminded the proletariat that attempts to change their social position in life was anti-nation, anti-family, and, above all, anti-God. Comedias rancheras therefore were overtly propagandistic in their performative, rhetorical formula, which attempted to rigidly regulate class and gender. Such ideological indoctrination constructed criollo
landowners as chosen by divine enlightenment to these roles of eminence and power. Thus, anyone who dared interrogate and question those divine appointments of domination, and by default, the poor and meager castes, were condemned as volatile threats to Mexican national interests.

Moreno rose to fame in the midst of the rise of this glorified cinematic *comedia ranchera* and *charro*. Cantinflas, unlike the *charro*, was born in the *carpas*—in the theatre of the urban poor. The *pelado* is not engendered in a rural, agrarian Mexico of the past, nor is his identity forged in cinematic production. The *pelado* was born of the conflicts of industrialization, modernization, and social unrest. This character symbolized Mexico’s social tensions and the adaptations precipitated by the imposing modern state. Cantinflas was centered, constructed, and performed as the emerging Mexican identity of the early twentieth century. From his first box office hit, the 1940 film, *Ahí está el detalle*, Moreno as Cantinflas typified the *pelado* in order to undermine hegemonic form and text. The *pelado* persona employs fissures in language and societal norms accessible to him in order to survive, create, and thrive. Addressing this type of response, Gayatri Spivak deconstructs hegemonic impositions of identity and submits strategic essentialism as a theory in order to subvert essentializing identities. 24 This post-colonial theory privileges the subaltern and recognizes its ability to transgress westernized constructs of the Other. Moreno subverts the essentializing notion of the Mexican urban poor, or *pelado*, and inverts these imposed limitations; instead, he introduced a confident, positive, three-dimensional character that thrived in the industrialized streets of Mexico. Additionally, Moreno employed histrionic humor and chaotic, linguistic formations as his avant-garde weapons to both destabilize hegemonic narratives of dominance and to deconstruct essentialist restrictions of Mexican identity.

As Moreno employed the persona of Cantinflas in *Ahí está el detalle* (*You’re Missing the Point*), he rejects the propagandistic script of the *comedia ranchera*. His movie unfolds in the city and locates the *pelado* and the elite within the same social spaces. As he mimics the *pelado*, Moreno undeniably exposes the existence of the urban poor at the turn of the twentieth century. In this film, the *pelado* is the protagonist and Cantinflas performs as the central figure of the story. The *pelado* speaks to the displacement and ambivalence of Mexico and its people as the direct effect of modernity. In contrast with
the *comedia ranchera*, Cantinflas personified the kind of quotidian poverty and injustice experienced by the proletariat. He appropriated the cinematic noose and subverted imposed ideological constructs that framed Mexican identity through the *comedia ranchera*. Although still male, the class and the location of his voice had distinctly shifted the center—through film, Cantinflas reawakened the proletariat and situated the *pelado* at the center of the Mexican political dialogue. Moreno explored the Mexican tension with modernity and industrialization. The marginalized, oppressed, and silenced Mexican majority found themselves projected on film as the hero, noble, and fearless revolutionary. Serendipitity and Moreno’s histrionics transformed the *pelado* to the most beloved icon of Mexican film and identity of twentieth century Mexico.

Moreno’s characterization of the *pelado* as the obscene, the forgotten, the silenced subaltern, yields a dynamic that does more than simply represent. For this dynamic to engender an aphoristic understanding, Cantinflas’ antics, histrionics, semantics, linguistics, and mimicry must be examined as a contestation of the hegemonic discourse. Through the use of humor and mimicry, Moreno transcended archetype reversals and theories of deconstruction. Cantinflas embodies a deliberate stratagem to displace the function of hegemonic signs of domination. As Renato Rosaldo explains:

> [Cantinflas] se convierte en héroe detectivesco. En ‘Ni sangre ni arena’ se burla de la fiesta nacional de los toros. Tampoco ha respetado a Shakespeare en su ‘Romeo y Julieta.’ En ‘Un día con el diablo’ pasa a mofarse de los militares y los políticos, en tanto que en ‘A volar, joven’ deja la tierra para aventurarse por el espacio.\(^{25}\)

Rosaldo’s mid-century analysis of Moreno’s subversion of elite cultural icons, politics, and national and patriotic pride reveals an early recognition of Moreno’s effective strategy in his performance as Cantinflas and the intent to disarm hegemonic institutions ranging from literature to government.\(^{26}\) On film, Moreno captured the struggles, the successes, and the visceral existence of the erased and invisible *pelado*. Subversively and for perpetuity, the *pelados* of Mexican society at the turn of the twentieth century are historicized in Cantinflas. It is within, “that conflictual economy of colonial [industrial/post-modern] discourse...[in which] mimicry represents an
ironic compromise.” Through mimicry, Moreno achieved a social tension in which the once silenced, urban pelados are joined in laughter by those at the helm of hegemonic institutions. As Cristina Gomez and Inma Sicilia explain, “Esta forma suya de expresarse es una manera de ser evasivo...y a la vez poner en evidencia y criticar el estilo de vida de las clases sociales latinoamericanas.”

The Mexican oligarchy, constituted by powerful criollos, succumbed to the lure of humor, while involuntarily and concomitantly having to acknowledge a violent indictment of Mexican-criollo discrimination, abuse, domination, and injustice. Through said mimicry, Moreno appropriated the pelado to manifest the power of the Other in the guise of the insignificant vagrant. According to Homi Bhabha, “The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing. For in ‘normalizing’ the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms.”

The persona of Cantinflas “normalizes” the presence of the pelados in the midst of the city, no longer as invisible objects, but as living, breathing, feeling, and thinking subjects of Mexican society. These pelados, as interpreted by Moreno, could transform into any number of people in Mexican society: priests, doctors, friends to the rich, racecar drivers, council members, even benefactors. Perhaps what the elite cannot forgive is Cantinflas’ ability to lure and mesmerize the public, themselves included—a reaction that explains the distance and lack of recognition of Moreno’s accomplishments in the Mexican academy and the arts.

In revolutionizing the pelado identity, Cantinflas walked a delicate political line as he benefited from ample political sanction, which in turn extended him tremendous creative space. It is evident that Moreno is a complicated historical figure. His politics were as convoluted as his “cantinfladas,” the nonsense ramble that Cantinflas used as his staple form of dialogue. Moreno’s politics, his fame, and his connection to the proletariat arguably proved to be a dissonant quagmire. As a historical figure, Moreno cannot be divorced from his historical setting. Yet from the perspective of the Mexican or Latin American proletariat, I contend that the actor was a subversive intellectual while the character is:
Cantinflas’ political subversion was whimsically strategic. His humorous ramble and supposed nonsense conveyed his and the “people’s” dissent. Humor and jest were devised and employed to challenge hegemonic ideological structures, while socializing, entertaining, and thus maintaining a congruent presence among the hegemonic ruling class. Moreno’s engagement through entertainment can be explored in several films, such as in *El Padrecito*.

**El Padrecito and the “Quaint” Mexican Village**

Moreno’s onscreen persona, Cantinflas, consistently contested Europeanized Mexican epistemologies and institutions of dominance. In 1964, he produced, *El Padrecito, or Little Priest*, where his direct contestation of the Catholic Church is cogently manifest. Cantinflas portrays a young priest sent to a quintessential *pueblecito*, or small rural town, of Mexico–San Jerónimo el Alto. There are at least eight Mexican states with a San Jerónimo municipality. Understandably, the circuit of these codes implies that this story could have taken place anywhere from San Jerónimo, Oaxaca to San Jerónimo, Chihuahua. The film, however, brusquely fractures the forged representation of the quaint, quiet, and peaceful Mexican town.

The movie begins by positioning the viewer over a picturesque cobbled street with narrow sidewalks at just the perfect angle to behold the imposing and exquisite grandeur of the colonial architecture. Music is the only accompaniment to this scene as the ubiquity of conquest and domination is made palpable to the viewer—to enhance this point, there is no dialogue for over two minutes. The camera is then placed at an angle to the horizontal for the viewer to encounter the first character, Padre Damián. The slope of the angle denotes and underscores the physical, and perhaps, social and spiritual descent of Padre Damián, portrayed by Ángel Garaza, as he leaves *CORREOS*, the post office. Dressed in his cassock, he steps out of the post office holding an envelope. He pauses briefly in the middle of the street to read the enclosed letter and immediately begins to rant. Forgetting all norms
of priestly equanimity, he waves his hands in the air, expressively flings the letter up and down, and greets no one on his walk home.

Padre Damián lives with his niece Susana, portrayed by Rosa María Vázquez, and his sister, Sara, portrayed by Angelines Fernández. As soon as he arrives at home, he communicates the content of the letter to them. He expresses his disgust with the opinion that his age might interfere with his duties and is determined to contest this injustice. He has been the priest of San Jerónimo for almost forty years and thus rejects the Church’s imposition of a younger priest on his parish and on himself. He declares, “Dios es justo, no puede disponer una injusticia.”\(^3\) To this, Susana remarks, “Bueno tío, pero probablemente lo hagan para que usted descanse un poco.”\(^3\) Padre Damián sharply replies, “Nunca he descansando. Jamás he hecho San Lunes, es el único santo que no es de mi devoción.”\(^3\) Acknowledging the depth of his expressed anger, his sister reminds him, “Siempre has dicho que la primera obligación de un buen sacerdote es la obediencia. Si tus superiores te lo ordenan, debes obedecerlos.”\(^3\) The cinematic insertion of this early collision with authority and norms sketches the contour of various narratives and tensions informing Mexican identity. The exchange reveals the guarded, and perhaps tenuous, social conventions of the performance and definition of priestly identity, obedience to authority, hierarchy, and injustice. Through *El Padrecito*, Cantinflas specifically demystifies these hegemonic narratives and guarded social conventions, positioning them as oppressive and duplicitous.

Cinematic mythologies constructed in the 1930s of quaint and content Mexican villages, such as *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, are further breached in *El Padrecito*. Don Silvestre, whose name means wild weeds, embodies the patriarchal, hacienda system. As the cornerstone of the social hierarchy, he dominates and manages the commanding male unity and ensures individual places in society. Strategically, the film substantiates the oppressive obsession with control and the increasing fragility of these guarded conventions through the voice of the wealthy *patrón hacendado*, or landowner and master, portrayed by José Elías Moreno (J.E. Moreno). The film rashly cuts the viewer from a scene of repentance, where Padre Damián kneels at the altar asking God for forgiveness for his earlier outburst with his niece, to a scene in which Don Silvestre furiously slams his hand on a desk and berates his son, Marcos, portrayed by Rogelio Guerra, and his *peones*, or agricultural laborers, about the news of a new priest. J.E. Moreno’s portrayal
of the patron connotes a perceived omnipotence and chronic desire to intimidate. The enactment is designed to reach the audience and be easily read by the proletariat. The viewer experiences the yelling, the force, and the subjugation imposed by Don Silvestre. As with the viceregal architecture earlier introduced, the audience is again violently seized by a stultifying domination. Don Silvestre orders the peones to spread the word that no one is to show up and greet the new priest at his arrival. Once the peones leave the room, he approaches his son and suggests that he meet the new priest at the bus terminal in order to threaten and intimidate him. Guerra's response to this parental suggestion is articulated with a childlike voice as he questions, “Oiga ‘apa, ¿y por qué piensa que ese curita será tan metiche?” The use of ‘apa’ to address his father suggests that Guerra's character, Marcos is naïve. The term is a truncated form of Papá or father, and is a term of endearment most often used by children. Don Silvestre responds, “Ah, qué hijo tan sonso. Porque todos los curas son iguales. Les encanta meterse en la vida de los demás. Y a mí no me conviene que nadie se meta en mi vida, ni en mis negocios que no son muy católicos. Padre Damián ya está muy viejito y no es de peligro...pero este nuevo curita, ¿quién sabe?” This father/son performance of the text demonstrates the means and ease with which cultural conventions are constructed and the hegemonic episteme of domination is circulated from one generation to the next.

The innocence of the young man is violently replaced in a quotidian exchange framed by an oppressive, stratified view of self and others. For the Catholic viewer, J.E. Moreno's performance represents wickedness, dishonesty, sinfulness, and unethical practices. Yet, for the viewer, there is a voyeuristic pleasure in witnessing the private confessions of the patrón hacendado. The patrón unveils what is blatantly obvious to peones, campesinos, and the proletariat. Roland Barthes theorizes on the pleasure of the text and submits that the voyeurism of the viewer is not necessarily in the wickedness confessed, nor in the violence expressed, but that such a “public confession” is uncommon. He explains, “It is obvious that the pleasure of the text is scandalous: not because it is immoral but because it is atopic.” For the audience, the fetish pleasure experienced through Don Silvestre's confession is analogous to the pleasure experienced with the portrayal of the pelado on film. In this instance, pleasure is derived from the form of the text, irrespective of its content.
Performance and Definition of Priestly Identity

In El Padrecito, the viewer meets Padre Sebastián, portrayed by Cantinflas, as he chats with the bus driver on the ride into town. He arrives at San Jerónimo wearing a modern habit, slacks versus sotana or cossack however, the signs of his pelado identity are distinctly marked: a small suitcase secured by ropes weaved over and across, a black hat too small for his head, a scanty-rascuache moustache over his lips, and a vernacular not fit for an educated man of the cloth. As he exits the bus, he is surprised to find himself on the streets of what appears to be a desolate town. As ordered by Don Silvestre, there is not a single person present to greet him, except for Marcos and his coterie who approach the bus on horseback. Don Silvestre’s son appears and warns the new priest to tread lightly and adds that he is not wanted or welcomed. From the first exchange, Marcos addresses Padre Sebastián in the diminutive of “padrecito” versus the customary and deferential “Padre” or Father. Padre Sebastián is then referred to as padrecito by virtually everyone he encounters throughout the rest of the film.

The film takes its title from this diminutive, which serves to evoke a humorous tone for the audience. More importantly, it connotes a sense of youth, perhaps immaturity and even disrespect. In terms of the macro-narrative of Mexican institutions of oppression, the paternalistic role of the Catholic Church in Mexico is directly subverted. Historically, the Catholic Church in Mexico relied on the paternalistic strength of its male Church leadership, which consisted of friars, priests, bishops and cardinals to maintain authority, obedience, and “justify...Spanish presence... [and] ensure Spanish permanence in Mexico.” 39 Although the confrontation between priest and young man emerges vis-à-vis the oppositional persona of the landowner’s son, the film contests the ideological mainstay of honor and respect to a man on mere dress or title—Cantinflas as Padre Sebastián will not rely on habit or label to secure respect. Instead, he employs his archetypal quick and picaresque dialogical practice in the skirmish with Marcos to engender agency through which he generates respect. Thus begins Cantinflas’ subversive journey in the exploration of the Mexican priesthood in the town of San Jerónimo de Alto.

After reading Padre Sebastián’s letter of reference, Padre Damián offers a frown and clearly tenders the noted personal shortcomings and priestly imperfection. He states, “Que es usted bastante nervioso y de memoria muy
flaca.”

To this, Padre Sebastián responds, “Pero como aquí espero comer bien, aquí pues ya me iré engordando ¿no?”

Cantinflas does not acquiesce but talks back. The historically iconic priest, here portrayed by Garaza, is accustomed to categorical reverence from all with whom he comes in contact. Thus he is visibly displeased with the young priest’s incongruous response. He comes from behind his desk, passing Cantinflas and leaving him in the background. As he approaches the camera, he looks ahead towards the left, and informs the audience that Padre Sebastián has a problem with talking back. Padre Damián says, “También me dice que es usted muy respondón.”

Unashamedly and without hesitation, Cantinflas accepts the categorization of “respondón.” In her work on Chicana feminism, Gloria Anzaldua welcomes the same oppositional consciousness of the “osicona”—the loud mouth.

Both Cantinflas and Anzaldua subvert the negative connotations of talking back and further appropriate them to destabilize identities. In his portrayal of Padre Sébastian, Cantinflas manifests his philosophy for talking back:

No es que sea yo respondón, pero también no soy muy dejado... entonces ¿pa' dónde jala uno? Pa'riba a lo mejor se cae. Jala uno pa' bajo y luego ¿cómo se sube? No esas cosas Padre... pues ciertamente...un individuo...yo entiendo...entonces lo mejor es estarse en un punto observativo, como quien dice ni muy arriba ni muy abajo...pero sí que usted pueda convivir esa convivibilidad unánime con la gente...que digamos hombre muy bien, bueno hora...si también...y que fuera uno...que casualidad...entonces también como se dice se cargan al cariño, se cargan al cariño y hombre pues tampoco está bien que abusen.

Through his quintessential, voluminous, and fragmented banter, he engages the conventional Padre Damián in dialogical exchange: the old versus the new, the modern versus the postmodern, and patriarchy versus defiance. The conception of agency in one’s self, and thus in the people, is defiant and insubordinate. A priest with self-ascribed agency is a heretic and an affront to the local authorities, the Crown, the Church, and all ideological constructs of domination. These constructs confine both the proletariat campesino and hegemonic class to their predestined caste. Padre Sebastian’s defiance was engendered through his awareness of self-efficacy and agency: “primero, porque puedo.”

Cantinflas evokes his right and the rights of pelados to speak and to think freely without reservation or regulation. Through film,
Cantinflas models to the masses the potential subversive power of speech. The character submits that those, “who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression.” Padre Sebastián speaks and over speaks as he evokes his human privilege to do so; naming and renaming the world creates and changes it.

**Obedience, Authority, and Hierarchy**

Garaza’s performance of the historical, hegemonic priest reveals inflexibility and a rigid decorum, and further informs the viewer that the reference letter notes Padre Sebastián’s inclination to offer personal comments concerning ecclesiastical matters. How then would Padre Damián, “tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet…bridle and saddle it…[or] make it lie down?” Through the young, Padre Sebastián character, Cantinflas finds a voice and becomes a subject who challenges mundane and banal expectations of everyday life. He says, “Bueno eso si Padrecito, para que lo des-niego, ¿verdad? Es que a mi me gusta hacer las cosas por convencimiento. No porque me digan has esto, que has lo otro…y si me conviene, pues allí estoy puesto. Que si no me conviene verdad, pues allí estoy indispuesto. ¿Cómo la ve desde'ai Padre?”

For Paulo Freire, elevating consciousness that humanizes the Other, “appears not as the pursuit of full humanity, but as subversion.” For Padre Sebastián, the new, young priest, this reflexive exercise transgresses what Freire defines as limit situations. Padre Sebastián represents the transgression and defiance against limiting situations to irrevocably engage in authentic acts of faith. For Freire, contesting limit situations is the incarnate act of a subject transgressing a frontier, which allows an individual to alter their identity from **Objecthood** to **Subjecthood**. Limit acts are not a sanitized relation with the world, but an engaged awareness and movement within it. Through the use of humor, Cantinflas presents an innovative form by which to contest and transgress social norms and stratifications. These subjective transgressions, fueled by agency and awareness, offer the audience novel methods to engage the issues of God, faith, and social and political environments. No longer are worship, obedience, and faith fetishes of domination and oppression, but entities of ecumenical love and understanding. To transgress one’s limit situations is to actively engage and wrestle for one’s personal liberation. Cantinflas constructs a conspicuous political statement and forges a
distinction between religiosity and a life of faith. Faith is introduced no longer as a practice of domination but as a praxis of liberation.

As the film progresses, Cantinflas subverts limit situations, one after the other, and thus transforms priestly identity. Padre Damián learns of these consistent acts of defiance and disobedience. The establishment portrayed by Garaza, as expected confronts the young priest about his choices. For example, the young priest opposed and refused to perform two Catholic sacraments that were considered divine and necessary to attain a more abundant religious experience or closeness with God. Padre Sebastián repudiates and declines to confess an adulterous husband with three lovers; he, too, rejects the idea of baptizing a child with the name of Nepomuseno, the child’s adulterous father. In the Catholic tradition, a child must be baptized to secure its salvation. Confession is also required for salvation. The Catholic Church maintains that if a Catholic believer dies with unconfessed sins, he or she equally jeopardizes his/her salvation. Outraged at Cantinflas’ refusal, Padre Damián asks the young priest, “¿Por qué siempre hace las cosas según su propia opinión?” Padre Damián demands an explanation for this blatant failure to perform sacred Catholic sacraments, what in essence damns the souls of the unfaithful husband and the young boy to hell.

In his performance, Cantinflas argues that an adulterous man can indeed be forgiven. Yet, one who chronically and proudly boasts of toying with three women is one who should not employ the Church and its confessional booth as an apparatus by which to sanction and continue his sinful practice. The young priest refuses to be complicit in such confessional practices or to listen to such a habitual counterfeit repentance. As for refusing to baptize the child, Cantinflas rejects the name Nepomuseno. Following tradition, the father informs the young priest that he wishes to name his son after himself but Padre Sebastián refuses and attempts to enlighten the family that this old name is no longer an agreeable one. The subtext of this scene lies in questioning the Catholic practice of baptizing a child; the practice is archaic and futile. As Padre Sebastián offers the space to question the name, he also questions the practice. Is baptism really necessary for a child to secure his or her salvation? Is this a legitimate practice for a child who is unaware, willing or able to make a conscious decision? In this scene, the child possesses no agency to consider the name or the act imposed by his parents’ tradition.
The parents exert no agency themselves as they perform mere customs and traditions imposed by societal and spiritual requirements.

Thus, when asked why he acts on his own opinion, Cantinflas replies, “En primer lugar porque la tengo, Padre. Y segundamente, porque considero que hay que ser sincero con uno mismo para llegar a ser un buen cura.” With this statement, Cantinflas subverts all hierarchal regulations of agency. Within the hegemonic Church, which Padre Damián represents, Padre Sebastián need only follow ritual. According to the Church, there should be no evaluative process from an individual; therefore, to act on one’s opinion was an act of defiance. Here, Cantinflas performs the defiant behavior both as pelado and priest, amplifying the transgressive act as both possible and accessible to the hegemonic men of the cloth as to the proletariat.

**Justice and Injustice**

*El Padrecito* presents several instances where definitions of justice and injustice are inverted. Cantinflas plays with this discourse so as to construct a multivalent understanding of these terms within the context of Mexican society. This inversion is portrayed in Padre Sebastián’s encounter with a young man who is in the act of stealing candles from the church. The priest confronts the young man and engages him in dialogue, but allows the young man to leave. Once the boy leaves the room, Padre Sebastián comments to himself and the audience that such crimes are crimes of survival. Such crimes would not exist if society and government would care for its people and provide opportunities for work and education. Within the context of justice, Cantinflas justifies the boy’s actions and makes a courteous yet precise indictment of hegemonic notions that maintain that the poor steal out of a defective moral compass.

Various perspectives of the discourse of justice are explored. One of these perspectives is found in the first conversation between Padre Sebastián and Don Silvestre, which centers on education and the fear that it may undermine the intimidation and oppression employed by the powerful. Cantinflas confronts the viewer with another unspoken Mexican reality: the hacendado is often responsible for the lack of education in a town and its people. Padre Sebastián visits Don Silvestre and asks, “¿Por qué se opone usted a que haya una escuela en el pueblo?” Don Silvestre walks around his desk calmly, approaches Padre Sebastián as he smokes his cigar, and while
he puffs, he states in the most, self-assured manner, “Pues, en primer lugar porque la educación solo trae descontentos y hace infelices a los hombres. Porque siempre acabanambicionando lo que no tienen...y en este pueblo por eso todos somos felices, porque se conforman con lo que Dios les da.” The representation of the hacendado and his statement are appalling, but not surprising. The audience is aware of this opinion, yet the callousness with which this ideological position is expressed is cinematically provocative. Padre Sebastián is bothered and his emotions allow the audience to vicariously release their contempt. Cantinflas simply responds, “¿Ah sí?”, or “Oh really?”

Cantinflas’ two-word reply may have been a chance response since the actor often adlibbed the script. Nevertheless, it declares a host of social frustrations that reflect restrictive definitions of social justice. It implies the imposition of an identity of complacency, subjugation, confined aspirations, and definitions of personal happiness. If one lives under a system that defines happiness by a measure other than one’s own, then one is oppressed. There is no individual justice if there is a corporate and legislative restriction over one’s access to education. Don Silvestre adds that, “El campesino no necesita saber leer y escribir...con que sepan arar y cultivar su tierra es suficiente.”

How could one navigate such visceral political and social structures if one is uneducated?

As the hacendado’s portrayal continues through ignorant and oppressive declarations about the campesinos, Cantinflas increases his arsenal and employs stronger language, couching the discourse in the grotesque reality of Mexico during the middle of the twentieth century. When Don Silvestre ends his sentence with, “su tierra es suficiente,” Cantinflas counters with, “su tierra.” Don Silverstre does not catch Cantinflas’ sarcasm and restates, “Sí, su tierra.” But Cantinflas clarifies the unperceived exchange of sarcasm in the appropriation of language to flout the hacendado. He then aggressively states, “Digo su tierra de usted. Porque aquí eso de que la tierra es de quien la trabaja es puro cuento. ¿Verdad Don Florido?...De manera que según usted, los campesinos no deben ni leer ni escribir para que no se den cuenta de sus derechos, ni de que ya se acabo la época de que los hacendados tenían esclavos. ¿O no?” This banter strategically materializes discourses of the oppressive caste system in Mexico. Cantinflas turns every stone as if to upset as many hegemonic institutions and individuals as possible. This cinematic
dialogue engages the viewer with a reality that is not new, but often remains unspoken. It allows the viewer to see and listen in on conversations that occur behind closed doors. This portrayal and dialogical exchange allows the viewer, both urban proletariat and rural campesino, to enter social spaces in which they have not been allowed, thus creating small fissures through which to enter and forge new identities, realities, and notions of justice.

Final Thoughts
Mexican society at the turn of the twentieth century was forged by hegemonic controls and ethnic differences. Work ethic, individual thought, and agency were seen as anti-social notions. Campesinos and the proletariat worked as hard and as long as they had to without recognition or adequate compensation. Mexican priests served without question in restrictive autonomy. And women were scarcely considered. Yet Moreno, through the persona of Cantinflas, began to demystify many of these constructed, imposed, social roles. Through film, he initiated new discourses. The list of the dialogical exchanges that Cantinflas presents is endless and the dynamic and wayward pelado, as developed by Moreno, deserves much closer attention and further study.

NANCY QUIÑONES, Ph.D. Student, is studying Cultural Studies at Claremont Graduate University. She is focusing on the topic of humor for her dissertation project.

NOTES:
1 Jeffrey M. Pilcher, Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc. Imprint, Wilmington, 2001), xv.
2 Ibid., xviii.
3 Ibid., 33.
4 Jeffrey Pilcher asserts that Cantinflas was instrumental in “constructing modern identities in Mexico and throughout the Spanish-speaking world.” Ibid., xviii.
5 In his Prison Notebooks, Antonio Gramsci theorizes that an Organic intellectual, unlike a traditional intellectual, is one who emerges from the proletariat. This organic intellectual rises from the waged people and is systematically tested by hegemony to maintain his/her connection with the people and their experiences. Organic intellectuals consciously identify with their location within the dominant ideology. According to Gramsci, organic intellectuals are tenuous individuals as they are at heightened risk of being usurped by the
hegemon. Thus, the relentless struggle of the organic intellectual to employ their tenuous positionality to subvert it.

6 Two 1937 produced by Russian screenwriter and director Arcady Boytler were the exceptions—Águila o sol and ¡Así es mi tierra!.


8 Ibid., 22.

9 Pilcher, 34.


11 For Mora, directors such as Alejandro Galindo and actor/comedians like Tin-Tan were the “divergent” talent whom exemplified the excitement and vigor of Mexican cinema in the 1940s. Mora states, “Tin-Tan’s talent, his art one might safely say, is happily receiving the recognition it has long deserved: ‘Perhaps it could be said that this comic is superior to ‘Cantinflas,’ since in his ‘pachuco’ role he reflected an entire phenomenology of transculturation, an entire historical problem based on Mexican-U.S. relations. Tin-Tan’s linguistic pochismo, his demysticizing character, antisolemn and iconoclastic, place this unforgettable artist as unique in his genre.’” Ironically, Mora quotes Emilio García Reira who declares Cantinflas was the indelible and original amalgamated representation of Mexicanness on film. See Mora, 83.

12 Mora, 54.


14 Mora, 47.

15 Ibid., 47.

16 Here, I introduce a distinction between a charro and a cinematic charro. Walter Benjamin theorizes that something is lost in the reproduction of an original.


18 Nájera-Ramírez, 7.

19 These identities did not begin in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, yet these were some of the dominant Mexican identities of the time: hacendado–campesino or landowner/worker, pobre–rico or rich/poor, hombre–mujer or man/woman, criollo–mestizo or European born on Mexican soil/mix blood.

20 Nájera-Ramírez, 7.

21 See Nájera-Ramírez, 8.


23 Nájera-Ramírez, 8.

24 Gayatri Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in Selected Subaltern Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). In this piece, Spivak elaborates her deconstruction of strategic essentialism. This strategy subverts hegemonic impositions of identity on who it considers objects. Spivak submits that as one can subvert the colonizer’s essentializing by appropriating this very essentialist definition and inverting it.
25 Renato Rosaldo, “Mexico y sus películas,” The Modern Language Journal 36, no. 2 (1952), Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the National Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations: 85. Translation: [Cantinflas] becomes a mischievous detective. In ‘Ni sangre ni arena’ he flouts the national festival of bulls. Neither has he respected Shakespeare in his ‘Romeo y Julieta’. In ‘Un día con el diablo’ he mocks the military and the politicians, in ‘A volar, joven’ he leaves earth to venture through space...

26 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge Press, 1994), 130. Bhabha states, “Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges.”

27 Ibid., 122.

28 Cristina Gomez and Inma Sicilia, Grandes Mexicanos Ilustres: Mario Moreno Cantinflas (Madrid: Dastin, 2003), 57. Translation: “His form of expression is a way of being evasive... and concurrently discloses and criticizes lifestyles of Latin-American social classes.”

29 Bhabha, 123.

30 Gomez and Sicilia, 61. Translation: “a defeated winner, who makes his weakness his strength, his fear his weapon, his wit his shield; though living in a hostile world, persecuted, turns adversity and always defeats misfortune.”

31 Although the quaint and peaceful aspects of the quintessential Mexican town are contested, there are tropes which the film does not contest. As hundreds of towns throughout Mexico, San Jeronimo de Alto has its cantinero (pub owner/business man), boticario (pharmacist), president de la municipalidad (mayor), el patron (the wealthy land-owner), a Padre (Priest/Father) and the omnipresent poor proletariat campesinos or peon.


33 Delgado. Translation: “Well, uncle, but probably they’re doing this so that you may rest a little.”

34 Ibid. Translation: “I have never rested. I’ve never been for Saint Monday. He’s never been a saint of my devotion.”

35 Ibid. Translation: “You’ve always said that the first obligation of a good priest is obedience. If your superiors have ordered you, you must obey them.”

36 Ibid. Translation: “Listen dad, why do you think the new little priest will be a menace?”

37 Ibid. Translation: “Ah, what a foolish son, because all priests are the same. They love to intrude in the lives of others and it is not convenient for me that anyone intrudes in my life, or my business, which are not so catholic. Padre Damián is very old and poses no danger...but this new priest, who knows?”


40 Delgado. Translation: “…that you are a very restless and of very thin memory.”

41 Ibid. Translation: “Well, since I hope to eat well here, I’ll begin to get bigger - no?”

42 Ibid. Translation: “They also tell me that you talk back.”

43 Gloria Anzaldua, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Borderland/La frontera. (San Francisco: Hunt Publishing, 1987), 53. See also Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Chicano Art: Inside/Outside the Master’s House (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998). In this text, Gaspar de Alba
expands on the notion of a double consciousness to an oppositional consciousness. The author submits this postmodern strategy as means by which to subvert the imposed identity of the colonizer or master. An oppositional consciousness is one of strength and agency, not reactive nor of subaltern or Other.

44 Delgado. Translation: “It isn’t that I talk back, but it’s that I’m not a push over...then, where does one go? If you go up, maybe you’ll fall. If you go down, how do you go up? Not those things Padre...because truly...an individual...I understand...so the best thing is to remain in a place of observation, one might say a place that’s not too high or too low...but if one is able to get along, a unanimous getting along with people...that one might say, hey good, its good...and also...if one were...by chance...one can amount caring, and amount caring and well its not good for others to abuse.”

45 Ibid. Translation: “First of all because I can.”


47 Anzaldua, 53.

48 Delgado. Translation: “Well, that’s true Padrecito, why should I deny it, right? It’s that I like to do things by being convinced of them. Not just because someone says do this or do that...and if it benefits me then there I will be. But if it is not beneficial to me, well, then I’m unwilling. What do you think of that Father?”

49 Freire, 59.

50 Delgado. Translation: “Why do you always do things according to your own opinion?”

51 Ibid. Translation: “First of all because I have it [an opinion], Father. And secondly, because I consider that one must be sincere with oneself in order to be a good priest.”

52 Ibid. Translation: “Why do you oppose the idea of a school in town?

53 Ibid. Translation: “Well, in the first place because education only brings malcontents and makes for unhappy men. Because they ultimately aspire to have that which they don’t...and in this town that is why we are happy, because everyone is satisfied with what God gives them.”

54 Ibid. Translation: “For the peasant, it is not necessary for them to read and write...as long as they know how to plow and cultivate their lands.”

55 Ibid. Translation: “…their land is sufficient (Don Silvestre)…your land (Cantinflas)…yes, their land (Don Silvestre)...I mean your land. Because here all of that talk about the land belonging to those who work it is all a fairytale. Right, Don Florido? In other words, according to you, campesinos should not read or write so that they are not aware of their right, or informed that the period when hacendados had slaves has ended. Right? (Cantinflas)”
HAVANA THROUGH THE LENS: 
MEMORY AND EXILE IN Abelardo Morell’s 
CAMERA OBSCURA PHOTOGRAPHS

Beth A. Zinsli, Ph.D. Student

The exile knows his place, and that place is the imagination.¹
Cuban-American poet, Ricardo Pau-Llosa

Salman Rushdie begins “Imaginary Homelands,” his essay on diasporic memory, loss, and writing, by evoking an old black and white photograph of his childhood home in Bombay. “The photograph,” he says, “reminds me that it’s my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.”² Rushdie speculates that he and individuals like himself, living in exile from their homeland, “will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions,” these fictions taking the form of imaginary homelands in the space of that loss.³ Rushdie’s imaginary homelands, his so-called “Indias of the mind,” are made manifest in his novel, Midnight’s Children, a work in which his imagined city of Bombay is cobbled together out of the incomplete shards and fragments of his memory. Rushdie speaks specifically to the cultural production of diasporic Indian writers, but his ideas on loss and memory are useful conceptual tools for thinking through the aesthetic representations of other diasporic groups, as well as the implications of the past on the present in conceptions of home. Like Rushdie working through the space of his exile from India in literary representations of Bombay, contemporary Cuban American photographer, Abelardo Morell explores his own exile from Cuba in his camera obscura photographs of the city of Havana. Part of a long-term series of photographs in which the artist replicates the centuries-old camera obscura optical system, Morell’s images of Havana were taken on a 2002 trip to Cuba, his first visit since leaving in 1962 at the age of fourteen.⁴ Morell’s photographs create a vision of Havana that is mediated both literally, through lens of his camera, and figuratively, through the symbolic lens of his dislocation and exile from Cuba. Morell’s camera obscura photographs visually represent the space of exile as the overlap of the past and the present, and investigate the implications of memory and the loss of exile in contemporary art photography.
The abrupt visual juxtaposition of interior and exterior spaces in the camera obscura photographs create an image of Havana that is at once intimate and strange, simultaneously concealing and exposing the disparate spaces. Morell’s extended camera obscura series, created from 1990 to the present, consists of over fifty images taken in numerous cities around the world, including New York, London, Paris, and Venice. I focus here on the silver gelatin prints taken of Havana, its suburbs, and the surrounding western province of Pinar del Río. In the camera obscura photographs, upside-down, almost ghostly images of the public spaces of Havana—boulevards, parks, towers, high-rise buildings, and monuments—are layered over interior spaces, private rooms often featuring deeply personal but simultaneously anonymous objects like framed portraits, open books, souvenirs, and unmade beds. Although the juxtaposed images of interior and exterior are, in reality, contemporaneous, they represent the intersection between the past and present in the images, or, to employ Rushdie’s terms, Morell’s photographic fiction, that is, his “Havana of the mind.” The camera obscura—the Latin term meaning dark room or chamber—is a technology in which light passes through a small hole or lens and an image is projected, inverted, on the surface or opposite wall. While the camera obscura apparatus can be reduced to the size of a shoebox or smaller, Morell converts an entire room into a “dark chamber.” Morell creates the camera obscura photographs by making hotel rooms and other anonymous indoor spaces completely dark and then directing a small, concentrated amount of sunlight in through, “a simple pinhole through the masking on a window—or, in a couple of virtuosic photographs, [a hole] in a cardboard box.” Through this tiny opening, Morell projects a detailed image of the cityscape outside onto the walls and surfaces of the room. He then takes a photograph of the resulting phenomenon—the exterior visually juxtaposed with the interior—using a large format film camera. Morell captures these images doubly mediated through the lenses of both the camera obscura and his modern film camera. While the effects of the camera obscura apparatus are the natural product of light and optics, the projected images appear magical and unreal, like ghostly, glowing apparitions from the past, hovering upside down on the walls and surfaces of a room. The formal qualities of light created by the camera obscura images infuse Morell’s photographs with the sense of dreamy ephemerality: a fleeting, glimpsed vision of a memory imbued with the diffuse light of dislocation and loss.
Morell's initial experiments with a camera obscura were a means to indulge his artistic interest in optical effects and photographic vision. However, the technique of converting an entire room into a camera obscura became a strategy through which Morell could investigate deeper issues about the relationship between photography and representation in his work. As Morell has acknowledged, the camera obscura becomes more than, “just a device for projection onto a blank slate, but part of an encounter between inside and outside.” It becomes a way of conceptually and visually connecting the obscured, personal spaces of memory and the actual public spaces of the present. Morell’s employment of the camera obscura technique has deeper consequences than merely making unique and evocative photographs; the images he creates have implications on his position as an artist in exile, as well as the more universal condition of exile in modernity. Many visual studies scholars position the camera obscura as the indisputable antecedent to modern photographic technologies because of the similar structural elements and the ability to produce verisimilar images of the world, the camera having the perceived advantage of fixing the image to film. But art historian, Jonathan Crary argues that the camera obscura does not fit so neatly into the teleology of the camera. More than just producing an imaged replica of the world, the camera obscura creates an entirely different viewing environment that enables a mediated, if disembodied, means of looking. From the vantage of the camera obscura, Morell performs what Crary describes as the, “operation of individuation,” in which the observer seeks to isolate or obscure himself in the space of the apparatus from the world beyond the lens. This isolated vantage point within the apparatus of the camera obscura suggests a reading of these photographs not just as visual representations of Morell’s individual dislocation and memory, but also as a metaphor for the exilic condition of modernity more generally. The recurring juxtaposition of interior and exterior spaces in his photographs, however, interrupts the isolated vantage point inside the camera obscura and automatically re-implicates Morell, as well as the spectator, in the bustling scenes of the contemporary Havana that exists outside of the darkened chamber.

Like the other camera obscura photographs in his series, Morell’s black and white image of a western suburb of Havana laid over a cluttered hotel room, titled, *El Vedado, Havana, Looking Northwest* (2002), initially inspires a sense of disorientation (Figure 5). The juxtaposition of the interior and
exterior views suggests that the photograph is a fiction, fashioned out of the memories of the past and the realities of the present. The lower third of the image depicts a hotel room filled with recognizable objects: a closed ironing board set against the dark door, an armchair with a plaid patterned fabric, a pair of framed pictures on the wall, and a low, wooden cabinet with decorative glass bottles including a studio portrait of a glamorous looking blonde woman arranged along the top. The upper two-thirds of the photograph, however, present an inverted urban scene, dense with a combination of modern high rise structures and old fashioned stucco buildings with deep verandas receding toward a distant horizon. The transposed image of Havana is projected on the walls and ceiling of the room—it is clear, distinct and detailed, and yet also transparent and ethereal. The city scene appears to flow down the bare, screen-like walls and over the framed pictures, the upper half of the door and ironing board, barely overlapping the upper edge of the portrait photograph. The repeated, overlapping shapes further emphasize the visual disorientation and the implied connection between the two spaces caused by the abrupt juxtaposition of the interior space of the room and the exterior space of the urban landscape of Havana. The two disparate sections of the photograph intersect along the central horizontal axis of the image. The vertical, rectangular shape of the dark wood door, bisected by the horizon line of the projected image, mimics the repeated shapes of the upside-down high-rise buildings. Similarly the regularly spaced square holes in the underside of the ironing board visually replicate the multiple windows that mark the edifices of the buildings in the projected image. These formal elements visually connect the private, interior world of the room and the public, exterior space of the city. The viewer's inability to immediately distinguish between the separate interior and exterior spaces represented in the photograph ruptures the similarly presumed distinction between the past and the present, creating a strong sense of what cultural theorist, Homi Bhabha terms, “the unhomely,” furthering the notion of the photographic space as fictional, as an imagined “Havana of the mind” cobbled together out of visual fragments of memory.

**The Unhomely in Havana**

Bhabha’s concept of the unhomely is a crucial theoretical instrument to conceptualize the temporal flux of interstitial spaces depicted in Morell’s camera obscura photographs of Havana. Unhomeliness, according to Bhabha is, "the condition of extra-territorial and cultural initiations,"
and is situated interstitially as an overlap of the public and the private spheres, rather than as a hard boundary between those seemingly discrete spaces. The unhomely further provides for the, “articulation of cultural differences,” as experienced in exile. It is an aspect of literal homelessness, as well as geographic, cultural, linguistic, and political dislocation, such as experienced by one living, even for many years, with the memory rather than the experience of one’s homeland. The unhomely state, as envisaged in Morell’s camera obscura photographs, is an emotional and an intellectual experience; it encompasses longing, disorientation, empowerment, struggle and loss, as well as recovery from the position of dislocation.

![Figure 5. Abelardo Morell, El Vedado, Havana, Looking Northwest (2002), silver gelatin print. © Abelardo Morell / Courtesy Bonni Benrubi Gallery, NYC.](image)

Visually merging the idealized past of memory and the harsh realities of the present, Morell’s photographs of Havana present us with a black-and-white vision of Bhabha’s unhomely space. The fragments of memory and the persistent loss of exile and dislocation surface constantly in the camera obscura images. Despite Morell’s use of an antique technology, he avoids
unproductively romanticizing the past or homogenizing the cultural complexity of the present through his deliberate juxtaposition of interior and exterior spaces. In his photographs of Havana, Morell refuses to gloss over or mask the tragic, creeping decay of Havana’s buildings and infrastructure since Fidel Castro’s assumption of power in January 1959. For example, in the camera obscura photograph, *La Giraldilla de La Habana in Room With Broken Wall* (2002), Morell layers an idealized vision of Havana’s historical past over the jarring reality of the present, thus visually rendering Bhabha’s unhomely state (Figure 6). La Giraldilla, the cast metal statue of a woman holding a stylized cross and a tree branch, sits on top of the watchtower of the *Castillo de la Real Fuerza* (the Castle of the Royal Force), the fortress structure that occupies the right third of the photograph. The statue, whose image is also featured on the label of the popular Havana Club rum, is a ubiquitous symbol for the city of Havana. Further, the Real Fuerza fortress, built in the sixteenth century, is a potent and centrally located reminder of Cuba’s prosperous yet conflicted colonial past. In Morell’s photograph, the flat, bare wall of an empty room serves as a nearly unblemished screen for the projected image of the inverted fortress and the tiny La Giraldilla, as the structure is bisected by the flowing canal and the hilly suburbs of Havana across the harbor. The watchtower hovers between the dark, evenly spaced horizontal frames created by the upside-down image of the fortress wall above and the floor of the room below, connecting the exterior space of Old Havana with the interior space of the room. As the fortress wall retreats at a diagonal behind the watchtower, however, the reality of the crumbling, jagged doorway disrupts the idealized vision of the past and abruptly interjects the ruined interior space of the present into the evocative, picturesque, though inverted, exterior view. Reiterated by its own rough shadow, the uneven, torn looking doorway, recedes into a narrow, murky tiled space. The otherwise clearly projected image of the *Castillo de la Real Fuerza*, the narrow harbor canal, and the trees of the *Plaza de Armas* is lost in the shadowy darkness and busy visual geometry of the decaying room. Despite the shock in the sudden exposure of the destroyed space of the present, the vertically positioned, obelisk-shaped watchtower and the back wall of the tiled room mirror each other and further link the inside and outside, and thus the past and the present, in the image.

It is impossible to see the fictional spaces of Morell’s “Havanas of the mind,” as either locked in a romantic, pre-Revolutionary period or as the
final achievement of the model communist state. Although Morell was an adolescent when his family left Cuba, he was certainly old enough to remember the city as it had been prior to Castro’s Revolution and almost fifty years of communist rule. Morell has remarked that the camera obscura technique allows him, “to contemplate new realities under the half-light of things remembered,” and to literally align his childhood memories of Havana with the city’s present condition. Literature scholar, Bonnie Costello notes that Morell is visually describing, “the fragility and exposure of the personal world in this dilapidated communist state,” in the *La Giraldirra de La Habana* photograph. I believe, however, that this photograph is about more than the present state of disrepair that haunts Cuba’s historical architecture and infrastructure. Instead, as memories of the idealized past and the realities of its political present visually coalesce through Morell’s lens, the camera obscura photographs serve to collapse the distinction between the past and the present, and thereby, the difference between public and private, fully embodying neither temporal space and existing instead in the ambiguous space of the unhomely.

![Image](image_url)

Representing Exile

Although Bhabha’s theorization of the unhomely allows for a consideration of the photographs as fictional visions of Havana, it does not fully address the complex issues of exile that are implicated in them. Thus, I will mobilize conceptions of identity in exile to push against the limits of Bhabha’s theorization. Setting aside issues of his legal citizenship and immigrant status, which usually reveal little about the phenomenological experiences of exile and migration, Morell’s identity as both a Cuban and an American informs his photographic work and complicates his simple categorization as an immigrant from Cuba. For this project, I position Morell as living in exile, necessitating the mobilization and extension of an extensive scholarly dialogue about the politics and definitions of exile in general, and Cuban exile, in particular. According to literature scholar, Nico Israel, exile is a, “way of describing the predicament of displacement,” yet embodied in the etymology of the term are the contradictory senses of the individual both being forced out of a place and leaving as an expression of free will.14 Although it is often difficult to distinguish clearly and absolutely between political and economic motivations for migration, the first waves of Cuban emigrants to the U.S. after the Revolution in January 1959 moved abroad primarily for political reasons.15 For Cubans who fled the Revolutionary government in the years immediately following Fidel Castro’s rise to power, including Morell’s family, who left in 1962, the stance of political exile carries within it the burden of having made the choice to abandon the homeland and the painful feeling of compelled banishment.

Morell’s experiences are further distinguished by the unique circumstance of the Cuban exile in the United States. Cuban American cultural studies scholar, Gustavo Pérez Firmat suggests that the Cuban American’s “life on the hyphen” is ultimately shaped by the negotiation of two “contradictory imperatives” of culture and identity within the space of exile: tradition and translation.16 Playing with the terms in both Spanish and English, Pérez Firmat conceives of tradition, rooted in the Spanish term traer—to bring—as a system of cultural “convergence and continuity,” the essence of the home culture brought to the space of exile. On the other hand, traducir—to translate—insinuates, “linguistic or cultural displacement [that] necessarily entails some mutilation of the original,” or a distinctive, degenerative, and noticeable change in culture and language.17 Pushing against the conceptual borders of Bhabha’s theory and its culturally indeterminate notion of the
unhomely, Pérez Firmat’s specific articulation of Cuban Americanness suggests that identity in exile is polyvalent and encompasses individuality, conciliation, and fluidity over temporal and geographic distances. Therefore, Morell’s position as an exile, and as a Cuban American, extends the conceptual framework to include a more culturally specific and individual notion of the unhomely in an interpretation of his camera obscura photographs.

“Once an exile, always an exile,” Pérez Firmat declares, “but it doesn’t follow that once an exile, only an exile.” In extending Bhabha’s conception of the unhomely with a more complex and culturally specific notion of exile, I suggest a means to avoid essentializing Morell as an exiled Cuban artist living in the United States, whose work speaks directly or solely to the negotiation of a singular Cuban identity through his aesthetic representations of Havana. Identity in the space of exile requires the constant negotiation and renegotiation of multiple histories and a spectrum of selves. Morell himself has made conflicting statements about his status as an exile and its impact on his work. He has replied to inquiries about why his photographic work does not more directly address his exile from Cuba with the seemingly dismissive response, “Because I am more interested in life.” In contradiction, he has also referred to his dislocation from Cuba as, “still stirring at the bottom of much of what I do in art now. Somehow the conflicts of cultures, languages and places that I felt...gave me a sense of exhilaration, a feeling that things out there were wild and surreal.” While it may appear that Morell is being intentionally evasive on the subject of his dislocation from Cuba, embedded in his statements is much more than a mere repudiation or celebration of his status as an artist in exile. Morell sees his exile from Cuba as a critical part of his art and his identity, but the way in which he playfully twists the situation of exile into the feeling of exhilaration suggests that his sense of the unhomely encompasses a range of creative articulations within the space of exile. Morell’s camera obscura photographs of Havana, and his statements about his status as an artist in exile, further a conception of exile as a multifaceted space of complexity and conflict, but also as a space of intense creativity, as well as deep pleasure and excitement.

The multiple articulations of exile employed here in the discussion of Morell and his camera obscura photographs circulate around the conception of the exile as an individual, yet none of the images of Havana feature a visual representation of this exiled individual. Put bluntly, there are no
people in the photographs at all. This is due, in part, to the impossibility of remaining immobile for the eight to ten hour film exposure required for the photographs. Beyond the physical impracticality, the lack of individuals in the camera obscura photographs speaks more directly to the concept of the unhomely within the space of exile by insinuating, but not revealing, the exiled individuals negotiating within it. The photograph, *Valley of Viñales from Hotel Room, Pinar del Río, Cuba* (2002) exemplifies the suggestion of the exile in Morell’s fictional Havana without the actual representation of one (Figure 7). In this photograph, the upside-down image of the hilly, rolling landscape around Havana, viewed from the deep porch in the foreground, is laid over the black screen of the walls, ceiling, and curtained windows of a hotel room. The corner of the room is crammed with furniture: a double bed with a sinuous wooden headboard, a console table littered with a vase of flowers, full water glasses, and a transparent bottle, and a low bedside table with a small lamp and telephone. The landscape, vertically bisected by the corner where two walls meet, overlaps the top two-thirds of the room while the crests of the hills in the distance brush the upper part of the headboard. The image of Pinar del Río is just barely punctured by the top of the lamp and the bottle of water. The lamp, with its slender body and umbrella-shaped shade, mimics the palm trees in the middle ground of the landscape image, and the doubled arches of the headboard repeat the shape of the hills in the background. The large bottle and the clear glasses on the console table cast transparent reflections on the camera obscura projection of the sky above the hills, further juxtaposing the images of the outside and inside. As in the majority of Morell’s camera obscura photographs, the overlap of the exterior and the interior spaces visually connects them and ruptures the presumed distinction between public and private, causing a momentary disorientation in the viewer and amplifying the experience of the unhomely.

In the *Valley of Viñales from Hotel Room* photograph, the suggestion of the absent individual also contributes to the notion of the unhomely space and the implications of memory and loss within it. In addition to the projected image of the exterior space onto the interior space, the narrative created by the insinuated presence of an individual emphasizes the juxtaposition of the public and private. Because many of Morell’s camera obscura photographs are taken in hotel rooms or rented rooms, they frequently feature beds. Beds usually carry the heavy burden of connoting eroticism and sexuality. In this image, however, the half unmade, empty double bed strongly evokes
the absence of the individual who had recently slept there. The inverted lounge chair in the exterior space that hovers directly above the bed also suggests the individual: chairs are often interpreted as, “markers for people and invitations to enter the space, to rest, to consider…[and] they define the individual’s most localized space.”22 The empty lounge chair refers directly to the exile’s contemplation of memory and loss as perceived within the tropical Cuban landscape. The Havana Club rum container on the console table, with the slogan, *El ron de Cuba* (The Rum of Cuba) printed across the bottom and the emblematic image of La Giraldilla, reiterate the cultural specificity of exile from Cuba, but without the presence of a particular individual—exile is not bound to single iteration of identity and it remains open to interpretation and variation. Finally, the anonymous hotel room featured in the photograph is representative of the space of the unhomely, implied by the sense of homelessness. Hotel rooms are simultaneously private and public, spaces through which individuals circulate temporarily, leaving traces of their presence. They are also anonymous spaces, allowing for the articulation of the individual experience of exile. In suggesting the individual in the representations of the unhomely spaces of his photographs, Morell rejects the notion of a singular, essentialized exilic identity and furthers his camera obscura photographs as a vision of his imagined, “Havana of the mind.”

**Exile Beyond Havana**

Morell’s camera obscura photographs of locations beyond Cuba, however, disrupt and complicate a tidy reading of the images of Havana as speaking directly to his memory and the loss of his original home in exile. Morell has printed and published only five camera obscura images of the city of Havana; the majority of the photographs in the series feature either his present home in a Boston suburb, or European cities across the Atlantic Ocean. These camera obscura photographs represent similarly unhomely spaces for Morell, despite the distant remove from Havana. For example, *Houses Across the Street in Our Bedroom, Quincy, MA* (1991), reveals the intimate, personal space of Morell’s bedroom. The photograph features a double bed with a simple wooden headboard, the covers slightly disheveled, and the pillows rumpled, like the anonymous beds in the Havana hotel rooms. The wall above the bed is overlaid with an inverted image of tidy East Coast suburban homes, neatly painted white and gray, and framed by tall trees and their spreading, deciduous canopies. Like the images of
Havana, a diffuse light created by the camera obscura technique imbues the photograph with a sense of the ephemeral, evoking the dreams of the recently departed sleeper. The image of the exterior scene extends down the wall and over the bed, creating again the strong juxtaposition of public and private spaces. In *Houses Across the Street*, the repetition of forms in the vertical trees, the bedside lamp and the bedposts link the two spaces visually and the blank white wall creates a screen for the projected exterior image. Unlike the photographs of Havana, which are littered with visual referents to the city and Cuban culture and history, there is little beyond the title to mark it as a specific location in a Northeastern suburb in the United States. Small details like the indentations on the pillows lend a sense of intimacy but the photograph lacks the deep resonance of memory and loss found in the images of Havana. Morell signals that this is indeed a home space, though a home found in exile. However, if we understand the camera obscura photographs—even those that do not refer to Havana—as visual representations of the exilic space, then perhaps the words of another writer also speak to the generalized unhomeliness of Morell’s camera obscura.
Photographs as a series. Living in a significantly different kind of exilic space than Salman Rushdie, nineteenth-century American poet, Emily Dickinson taps into the notion of exile as negotiating between conceptions of memory and home, writing: “We deem we dream/ And that dissolves the days/ Through which existence strays/ Homeless at home.”

Photographs like *The Tower Bridge in the Tower Hotel, London, England* (2001), on the other hand, taken neither in Morell's current home in the United States nor in his original home of Havana, employ the same visual strategies (Figure 8). The projected image of the exterior, featuring the historic London Bridge, is juxtaposed with the interior of another anonymous yet strikingly modern and austere hotel room. The visual connection between the inner and outer spaces is again suggested by the projection of one on top of the other, yet in this case, the area of overlap is minimal and the spaces are therefore more distinct from each other. In addition, rather than forming a visual link connecting the public and private spaces on the level memory, the two projected towers of the bridge, with their sharp, pointy turrets, loom threateningly over the vacant pillows, which bear obvious indentations suggesting recent occupation by a pair of sleeping guests. The implied violence of the scene created by the dagger-like towers hovering over the vulnerable pillows differs from the more contemplative renderings of Havana from hotel rooms, in which the city- and landscapes flow more peacefully over the interiors and objects. The clarity of focus, sharp contrast of tones, and relatively minimal décor in *The Tower Bridge* photograph also eliminate the sense of the ephemeral in the image, created by the juxtaposition of memories of the past and the realities of the present. Despite the remove from Havana or his current home in exile, Morell's photograph of London represents a similarly unhomely space through the camera obscura projection.

One way to approach these images in relation to Morell's photographs of Havana is to again reconsider the definition of exile and its relation to a single or unique home space. Peréz Firmat's conception of exile, or “life on the hyphen,” necessarily supports both the stability and the disruption of the home culture as part of a multifaceted articulation of exilic identity. Referring to the perhaps peculiar pleasures of exile, Edward Said notes that, “seeing the ‘entire world as a foreign land,’” as the exile does, “makes possible
[an] originality of vision,” which, though fraught with anxiety, offers immense creative potential. Although deeply imbued with emotional loss, for both Pérez Firmat and Said exile is also a space of creativity that allows for plural or polyvalent understandings of home, cultural identity, and memory. The photographs of Havana, which suggest both the fragmentary nature of the past and the foreign nature of the present to the artist, are Morell’s imagined homeland, his fictional, photographic, “Havana of the mind.” Morell’s camera obscura photographs visually represent the unhomely space of exile as the encounter between the interior and exterior spaces of Havana, yet they also reveal the overlap between the fragmented nature of the past and the frequently foreign nature of the present as mediated through the camera’s lens. In this light, Morell’s camera obscura photographs present more than just a vision of the unhomely or an imagined homeland; they also suggest that, in the geographic, intellectual, and psychological spaces of exile, both everywhere and nowhere are home.

BETH A. ZINSKI is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Art History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her scholarship focuses on the transcultural relationships between the United States and the Caribbean as manifested in travel, migration, and commerce. She works with Professor Jill H. Casid.

NOTES:
3 Ibid., 10.
9 Ibid., 39.
11 Ibid., 9.
12 Morell, “Cuba from a Dark Room,” 85.
13 Costello, 10.
15 Robert L. Bach, “The Cuban Exodus: Political and Economic Motivations,” in The Caribbean Exodus, ed. Barry B. Levine (New York: Praeger, 1987), 112. The “golden exiles,” as Bach refers to the first waves of migrants from Cuba after the Revolution, were typically but not exclusively, educated middle- or upper-class Cubans who feared political retribution as well as the redistribution of their assets under the new communist system.
16 Pérez Firmat, 3.
17 Ibid., 3.
18 Ibid., 11. Emphasis original.
20 Remarks by Abelardo Morell upon acceptance of an Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts,
HAVANA THROUGH THE LENS


21 Costello, 7-8.

22 Ibid., 9.


Whether dancing, carousing, or masquerading as Don Quixote or as a Revolutionary, the calaveras that populate José Guadalupe Posada’s satirical illustrations exemplify Mexico’s vibrant graphic tradition. Satire in Mexico, as a critical approach in graphic art meant to effect political and social change, began in the nineteenth century with Posada and his contemporaries. It then extended to the Taller de Gráfica Popular in the late 1930s and continues in the work of contemporary artists, such as Enrique Chagoya.\(^1\) Pictorial satire in Mexico is thought to mirror the development of narrative publications that proliferated with the gradual liberalization of the press following Mexico’s declaration of independence in 1821.\(^2\) Prior to this time, printed illustrations were infrequent in books, pamphlets, newspapers, and broadsides due to the authoritarian control of the viceregal government. By the mid-nineteenth century, Mexican newspapers, such as El Calavera and El Iris, included illustrations that employed caricature and lampoon to satirize societal ills and governmental misdeeds.\(^3\) However, scholars have been indifferent or slow to examine the sources for the origin of pictorial satire in Mexico, particularly during the colonial period.

The image of viceregal Mexico City presented in the numerous maps, courtly biombos, and devotions is one of an orderly, wealthy, and devoutly Christian society.\(^4\) Though true, these representations reflect the hegemonic dominance of the Spanish crown and the Roman Catholic Church, and thus convey only half of the story. As Inquisition records attest, the authority of the Crown and the Church was continuously challenged. In many censored prints and books, another image of New Spain emerges, one in which satire was employed as a means to subvert authority.

Fray Joaquín Bolaños’s 1792 moral satire, La portentosa vida de La Muerte was censored by the Inquisition several months after publication for its fabrication and perceived grotesque treatment of death.\(^5\) This book was written as a criticism against reforms of funerary practices by the Bourbon regime that undermined the Catholic stratagem of propagating ideas of death via representations to instill the fear of God in the faithful.\(^6\) Illustrating La
portentosa are eighteen engravings that chronicle the fictitious life of Death by the little-known Mexican printmaker, Francisco Agüera Bustamante (active 1784-1829). Employing strategies of humor, irony, and sarcasm, the artist ridicules man's vices and shortcomings. Bustamante's illustrations add a new dimension to the existing knowledge of subversive prints, and, it is my contention, locate the origin of Mexican pictorial satire in the colonial era, providing a likely precedent for the nineteenth-century political cartoons that shaped the image of the revolution and Mexico's popular culture.

Satire in colonial Mexican graphic art has yet to enter the critical art historical discourse. Nevertheless, two recent studies by Julie Greer Johnson and Linda Curcio-Nagy, which explore the pervasiveness of satire throughout the colonial period in performance and literature, are indicative of the mounting rebellious tone of the late eighteenth century. The authors discuss how the creoles employed satire as a means of self-definition and political resistance against peninsular authority. One example relayed by Curcio-Nagy is the 1724 parade in honor of Louis I of Spain. The parade was composed of the usual thematic floats and marchers, though a satirical tone added to the spectacle. Students dressed as cats and riding on horseback accompanied one float while meowing and threatening the onlookers with their claws. The float featured an obese cook surrounded by pots filled with pork, a parody of the King. The group of students dressed as howling cats were meant to represent the King's subjects as they begged the cook for a few scraps of food. As the float passed, the cook threw pieces of meat at the crowd.

Among other anti-government sentiments was the Lord's Prayer in which the petitioner asked God to protect and save colonial subjects from the poor government inflicted on them by peninsular Spaniards. Courtly life and the subordinate status of women were also targeted. Critical of the idealized vision of femininity projected in courtly lyric poetry, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, one of New Spain's most celebrated poets, composed comical, satirical poems using the strategies of inversion, sarcasm, and burlesque. In Respuesta, for instance, she contends that even the world's greatest authorities could learn from women:

But, lady, as women, what wisdom may be ours if not the philosophies of the kitchen? Lupercio Leonardo spoke well
when he said: how well one may philosophize when preparing dinner. And I often say, when observing these trivial details: had Aristotle prepared victuals, he would have written more.\textsuperscript{10}

This blend of wit and criticism is similarly found in Bolaños’s \textit{La portentosa}, albeit not as overtly humorous. In the epitaph to the death of the doctor, Don Rafael Quirino Pimentel y de la Mata, who had been Death’s greatest ally, Bolaños wrote:

\begin{quote}
This elegant funerary monument belongs to a doctor, as is evident. In dispatching people to the Otherworld he had no equal. With a single vomiting remedy that Don Rafael prescribed, he would sentence the sick man to the penalties of purgatory. Death now blushes with resentment because she has lost a life that has given her so many others. What a difficult and desperate situation! Death’s own favored son was unable to escape her.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Although \textit{La portentosa} finds its place among the canon of satirical literature covered by Johnson in \textit{Satire in Colonial Spanish America}, it differs by its inclusion of illustrations.\textsuperscript{12}

Satire is found in literature and performance, as well as in the graphic arts. The reason for the absence of knowledge of this pictorial genre during the colonial period is two-fold. First of all, the ephemerality of prints contributed to their easy disposal. This characteristic was magnified in a culture where paper was in constant shortage and therefore constantly recycled. Unfortunately, many prints have been lost. Others are tucked into books and stored in rare book collections. While preserved, they often remain obscure and inaccessible. Additionally, art historical scholarship largely overlooks graphic arts. For example, the Philadelphia Museum exhibition catalog for, \textit{The Arts in Latin America, 1492-1820} discusses at length colonial painting, decorative arts, textiles, silver, sculpture, and furniture.\textsuperscript{13} Not one woodcut or engraving printed in New Spain is included. Rather, the authors perpetuate the stereotype of prints as mere models for copy.

Kelly Donahue-Wallace, professor of Art History at the University of North Texas, is the only English-speaking scholar who has investigated colonial
Mexican printmaking in any depth. Her research has elevated printmakers from the label of simple “craftsman” to that of an intellectually and socially engaged artist.\textsuperscript{14} While Donahue-Wallace does not directly explore satire, she discusses subversive imagery and iconoclasm in viceregal prints.\textsuperscript{15} Donahue-Wallace contends that printmakers generally functioned outside the control of secular and ecclesiastical authorities.\textsuperscript{16} They catered to the needs and desires of their clientele, handling legal issues when they arose. The absence of publication approval requests for printed images in the Mexican National Archives further indicates that the civil laws requiring publication licenses for printed material were ignored. The Index of Prohibited Books issued every few years by the Inquisition included previously published texts and images.\textsuperscript{17} Although technically censored, many books remained in circulation. This phenomenon explains why Bolaños’ text was published and then censored months later.\textsuperscript{18}

It is important to recognize that the significance of prints and print production in New Spain was not solely an eighteenth century phenomenon. Immediately following Cortés’ landing in the “New World,” woodcuts and engravings were employed as signs of authority and as didactic tools for conversion.\textsuperscript{19} While the printing press, introduced in Mexico City in 1539, was mainly used to create heraldic devices in official documents, images of devotion, and to illustrate histories, \textit{vidas}, and scientific manuals, unorthodox imagery also existed. Playing cards were frequently decorated with unsanctioned imagery, a somewhat surprising fact since their production was government-regulated.\textsuperscript{20} Marginalized sectors of society eventually appropriated and exploited the strategies used by both the imperial regime and evangelical clergy as powerful vehicles for moral and political criticism. Prints were particularly appealing for the dissemination of subversive expression. Since, as sheets of paper, they were inexpensive and accessible to all sectors of society, they could simply be destroyed or discarded, and multiple copies could be produced easily.\textsuperscript{21} “So long as artists could put knife or burin to a woodblock or copperplate and people could purchase the results for pennies,” says Donahue-Wallace, “the medium was too anonymous, too rapidly disseminated, and too widely popular in appeal to be contained.”\textsuperscript{22} Bolaños and Bustamente undoubtedly were aware of this print culture when they engaged in writing, illustrating, and publishing \textit{La portentosa}, a social criticism that chronicles the birth, baptism, marriage, and death of its central character, “Death.” Both of them most likely knew
that this subject would be viewed as an act of subversion and they must have been conscious of the possible consequences if caught under the mandates of the Inquisition.

Few contracts between patron and printer exist, and this is true of Bolaños and Bustamante. For this reason, the extent to which Bolaños dictated the details of each image or made the selection of chapters to illustrate is unclear. Typically, the printmaker created the image and then the patron was permitted to alter it at his discretion. There is no evidence to suggest that this arrangement was otherwise. Little is known of the printmaker Bustamante except that he was active in Mexico City from 1784–1829. He created at least sixty engravings and etchings, mainly for the publications of Joseph de Jauregui and Felipe de Zúñiga y Ontiveros’ firms—La portentosa was published by the former. In addition to these prints, he created devotional images, scientific illustrations, and engravings of pre-Hispanic stone carvings for Descripción histórica y chronológica de las dos piedras by Antonio de León y Gama in 1792, the very same year Bustamante illustrated La portentosa. This book was the first scholarly publication on the archeological discoveries made during the renovations of the Zócalo in the late 1780s. As will become clear, these contributions are significant as they confirm Bustamante’s knowledge of Pre-Hispanic mythology.

Bustamante created eighteen images to accompany La portentosa: one frontispiece and seventeen illustrations corresponding to the adjacent chapters. His imagery, specifically the figure of the animated skeleton, finds its source in the Christian theme of the “Dance of Death” that was first illustrated in France in the fifteenth century. The motif’s original form was an elongated mural painting that depicted a procession of alternating living and dead figures, arranged in order of precedence. This tradition spread throughout Western Europe, although no pictorial representations of the “Dance of Death” are known to exist in Spain. Considering the influx of Northern prints to the Americas, it is possible that Bustamante’s inspiration came from these sources. In 1538, the German artist, Hans Holbein the Younger published his version of the allegory in a series of forty-one woodcuts that combine the “Dance of Death” with the tradition of Memento Mori, the Latin term that translates as the phrase, “Remember that thou shalt die.” In each woodcut, Death appears with a single figure, invoking the message that death is universal regardless of status. While it is unclear if Holbein’s Danza
de la Muerte circulated in the “New World,” distribution was likely, given the frequency of European prints imported to Mexico and the popularity of the book. Eleven editions of Danza de la Muerte, not including those that were unauthorized, were published before 1562.

Personifications of Death were rare in seventeenth-century Flemish prints, which often depicted genre scenes of everyday life. Nevertheless, these works often had a moralizing tone and employed a combination of text and image, much like Bustamante’s engravings. When genre was paired with a religious subject, the religious element was expressed in words, typically in Latin (as is the case in La portentosa engravings) while the profane was illustrated by images. When the allegory of Death did appear, the message stressed the importance of maintaining a harmonious relationship with death. Unlike the “Dance of Death,” which promotes the idea that no one can escape Death, the Flemish prints warn against clinging to earthly riches. In the first of two etchings by Werner van den Valckert, for instance, Death antagonizes a couple. The accompanying inscription reads, “To those who pursue an evil life, silent Death appears, a cruel and deadly enemy.”25 The second etching, by contrast, depicts a couple befriending Death. The inscription states, “But to those who learn how to die, with steadfast hope besides, Death can be an angel full of life.”26

While it is possible that Bustamante may have known these European prints, since little is known of his life and training at this point, these European influences remain speculative. Perhaps more direct inspiration came from the representations of Death that are common in Mexican funerary sculpture. These moveable funerary structures, typically reserved for royalty and men of distinction, were often ornately decorated with animated skeletal figures. In one panel from the eighteenth-century catafalque of El Carmen, now housed in the Museo de Bellas Artes in Toluca, Death is seen in old-age, hunched over, walking with the assistance of a cane. The text above, spoken by an angel hovering behind him, reads, “Death runs hand in hand with time.”27 Printmakers were frequently commissioned to engrave reproductions of catafalques to be included in books of funerary rites, such as the engraving by an unknown artist of the catafalque for Carlos II. Though many of these existing engravings reproduce the entire architectural structure of the catafalque, some, like the Allegory of Death by Manuel Galicia de Villavicenio, reproduce just the panel section.
Bolaños’ chronicle of Death’s life parodies the format of the *vidas exemplares*, printed biographies that proliferated in New Spain during the eighteenth century. Their purpose was to demonstrate an exemplary Christian life and to inspire their Christian readers to similar lives. Visual representation of this ideal was embodied in printed portraits that accompanied Novohispanic clerical biographies. For instance, in an engraved depiction of Pedro de Gante published by Wilhelm Edgar in *Vita admirabilis Laici, Minoritae strictioris Observantiae, Fratris Petri de Gandavo* (1625), the friar stands before scenes from his life that portray his Flemish heritage, his arrival in the “New World,” his conversion and baptism of the natives, his influence in the construction of religious architecture, and his death. While Bustamante illustrates some of Death’s more heroic accomplishments—Death preaching in the city of Granada, for instance—other engravings depict Death’s achievements as embodied in the sacraments of baptism and marriage since the Catholic Church viewed these sacraments as an expression of faith and a means toward salvation.

Imitating the conventions of the *vidas* format to produce a humorous effect, *La portentosa* opens with a printed portrait of its exemplary subject accompanied by the appropriate celebratory description, “The portentous life of Death, empress of the graves, avenger of offences against the Almighty, and a real woman of human nature, whose celebrated history is entrusted to men of good taste, Joaquín Bolaños” (Plate 4). Bustamante’s composition further enhances the mockery of this genre that privileges narrative clarity over Baroque decoration. Death stands alone triumphantly rather than against a cluttered background of heraldic vignettes. Dressed in courtly robes, with head crowned, and scepter in hand, she appears on stage, seemingly ready to present her life story. While at once humorous, the associated iconography of Death as a reminder of the brevity of life, a prompt to lead a Christian life of humility, and a marker of life’s vanities is here reconfigured as exultant, and surely functioned as a reminder of human immortality.

The satiric vein of the first engraving is straightforward in comparison to the second (Plate 5). The image, titled, “Motherland and Parents of Death,” juxtaposes Christian references to sin with the Aztec notion of death coming to life. Adam and Eve, hand in hand at the Tree of Knowledge, glance back toward Death in her crib. Bolaños informs the readers that Death’s motherland is paradise. She is the legitimate daughter of the sin of Adam.
and the guilt of Eve, her mother.” \(^3^3\) Death is shown as both the child of sin and as old as mankind. While the iconography of Adam and Eve was likely derived from European sources, the vision of Death in her crib was certainly a manifestation of the artist’s imagination. Stanley Brandes explains that death in eighteenth-century Mexico, and throughout Europe, was typically represented as a two-sided staircase: on the left, ascending side, a depiction of a baby represented the birth of life, and on the right, descending side, a skeletal figure symbolized the end of life. \(^3^4\) Death as an infant, as coming to life, found its precedent in other sources.

The notion of life being born out of death in paradise parallels the Aztec creation myth conveyed by John Bierhorst. \(^3^5\) According to this version, Quetzalcoatl, the creator god, gathered together the bones of man and woman and left Mictlán, the land of the Dead, for Tamoanchan, the paradise of the Aztecs. There, the bones were ground up by the Earth Goddess, Cihuacoatl, and fertilized with Quetzalcoatl’s blood. A new race of man arose from this mixture. As previously noted, Bustamante was familiar with the Aztec creation myth through his illustrations for León y Gama’s book. By alluding to both mythologies Bustamante employs the satirical strategy of inversion, turning the original message of the allegory of death upside down. Death is no longer seen as triumphant over life, but as an integral part of life.

Another notable element of this engraving is its adherence to originality of thought, a rarity in colonial printmaking. Technical perfection, as exhibited in Bustamante’s engravings of Aztec stone carvings for Descripción histórica y chronológica de las dos piedras, was regarded as the ultimate artistic achievement; it was thus encouraged by the Academia de San Carlos and desired by patrons and/or potential buyers. \(^3^6\) The rejection of academic standards, however, was made manifest in the pre-revolutionary period, coinciding with the proliferation of illustrated periodicals. \(^3^7\) Like Posada and his contemporaries, Bustamante had not trained at the academy. While he was technically proficient, his lack of training perhaps permitted him a greater freedom to explore his imagination. In “Motherland and Parents of Death,” Bustamante’s illustration of Adam and Eve follows a conventional representation; however, “Death in her crib” is not only an unusual image by itself, but the added element of the skull and crossbones at the head post and the slightly askew angle of the crib to suggest a rocking motion are pure invention.
Almost all eighteen illustrations are imbued with such inventiveness. “Death Lays Siege on an American Woman, an Assault by which he Wins the Fortification of Her Heart,” for instance, could almost be mistaken for an early nineteenth-century cartoon (Plate 6). Death accompanied by his companions to the far left of the frame is depicted operating a cannon that is aimed with fatal intention at a young maiden who peers out from a second-floor balcony. With her head slightly tilted and her fan coyly open, she seems to be completely unaware of the cannonball and billowing smoke coming toward her. Rather, she appears to be flirting with Death. The Latin inscription just below the engraving reads, “Ascendit mors per fenestras nostras” (Receive death by our window). Bustamante’s illustration is an almost-literal representation, yet humorous in its absurdity.

From this point, Bustamante’s illustrations of Death’s life continue up to Death’s own demise (Plate 7). With her scythe mounted to the wall, rather than in hand, Death lies in a coffin. Through the adjacent window above, a trumpet, signaling Judgment Day, sounds and the sand in the hourglass on the floor indicates the nearing passage of time and the brevity of life. Even Death can not escape God’s verdict.

Similar to the political cartons that pervaded nineteenth-century newspapers and broadsides, Bustamante’s engravings employ the satirical strategies of inversion, lampoon, and humor to ridicule societal mores. Through his use of satire, Bustamante’s engravings reveal another artistic strategy in printmaking from which to undermine authority. Further study of Bustamante’s iconography, a subject too extensive for this essay, would elucidate how the “Dance of Death” was interpreted in colonial society and follow its transformation into what is now commonly referred to as Las Calaveras, a political tool of Mexican graphic work of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

ELIZABETH DEROSE is a Ph.D. candidate at the Graduate Center, The City University of New York where she is working under the guidance of Katherine Manthorne and concentrating on modern and contemporary Latin American Art.
PICTORIAL SATIRE IN VICEREGAL MEXICO

NOTES:
3 French caricature by Honoré Daumier and Paul Gavarni, among others, circulated in Mexico at this time and is believed to have had the greatest influence on Posada and his contemporaries. Lyle W. Williams, “Evolution of a Revolutions: A Brief History of Printmaking in Mexico,” in Ittmann, 4; Bailey in Tyler, 92.
4 This is the sixteenth century vision embodied in Francisco Cervantes de Salazar’s chronicle of a city “beautiful and distinguished on all sides.” Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, “The Interior of the City of Mexico,” in Life in the Imperial and Loyal City of Mexico in New Spain, trans. Minni Lee Barrett Sheppard (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1953), 51.
8 Ibid., 121-22.
9 Ibid., 134.
10 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, quoted in Johnson, 83.
12 Colonial satire circulated principally in manuscript form during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. By the eighteenth century, typographic and image-based printing presses were more numerous.
15 One Inquisition case that Donahue-Wallace examines is the 1767 investigation of Manuela de Candia, who commissioned a seemingly seditious engraving of Saint Josephat. See Kelly Donahue-Wallace, “La casada imperfecta: A Woman, A Print, and the Inquisition,” Mexican Studies / Estudios Mexicanos 18, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 231-
Critical of the Jesuit expulsion from Spain and its territories that same year, Candia requested that the image bear the following inscription: “Saint Josephat Archbishop of Polotsk, Martyr, by obedience to the Pope, said that the enemies of the Jesuits were his as well. He held them as suspects in their Catholicism and looked upon them as reprobates.” Ibid., 232. Candia’s written criticism of the Bourbon authorities brought her print to the scrutiny of the Inquisition. Her coupling of seditious language with a known image was a strategy used to confuse “true” images with “faulty” ones. Ibid., 240. This strategy, as will be discussed later, was similarly employed by Bustamante through his appropriation of allegorical images of death.


In the introduction to La Portentosa the editor suggests that the book avoided initial censorship because it was dedicated to fray Manuel María Trujillo, who held the title of “calificador del consejo de la Inquisición y comisario general, visitador y reformador apostólico de todas las provincias y colegios de Indias.” Given that the text is satirical, it is plausible that Bolaños’s dedication was an ironic gesture. The delay in censoring the book, then, was due to the jurisdiction of the Inquisition over already published books.

The print run for La Portentosa is currently unknown, although three rare book collections in the United States have first edition copies: The New York Public Library Rare Book Collection, the Yale University Sterling Memorial Library, and The Cushing Memorial Library at Texas A&M University. This indicates that the book circulated before censorship and possibly even following the mandate.

Serge Gruzinski suggests that the perceived failure of devotional images to bring desired results provoked iconoclastic response against them. “The image was insulted, whipped, scratched, burned with candles, broken, torn, trampled, stabbed, pierced, and shredded with scissors, tied to a horse’s tail, covered in red paint or human excrements, and used to wipe oneself.” Serge Gruzinski, Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492 – 2019) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 167.

In a deck from 1583, the woodcut images depict European and pre-Hispanic motifs, including representations of Motecuhzoma, Cuauemoc, and Quetzalcoatl. Crisobal Bermudez Plata, “Contrato sobre fabricacion de naipes en Nueva España,” Anuario de Estudios Americanos 2 (1945), 720.


Kelly Donahue-Wallace, Prints and Printmakers in Viceregal Mexico City, 1600-1800, PhD Diss. (University of New Mexico, 2000), 329.

James M. Clark, The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Glasgow: Jackson, Son & Company, 1950), 42.


Stanley Brandes, Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead: The Day of the Dead in Mexico and Beyond (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 56.
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30 “La Portentosa vida de La Muerte, emperatriz de los sepulcros, vengadora de los agravios del altíssimo, y muy señora de la humana naturaleza, cuy célebre historia encomienda á los hombres de buen gusto Fray Joaquín Bolaños...,” Bolaños, unpaginated.
31 Donahue-Wallace, Prints and Printmakers in Viceregal Mexico City, 1600-1800, 114.
32 Lomnitz, 278.
33 “La Muerte es hija legítima del pecado de Adan, la culpa de Eva podémos decir que fue su Madre...” Bolaños, 4.
34 Brandes, 56.
35 John Bierhorst, Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature: Quetzalcoatl/The ritual of condolence/Cuceb/The night chant (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), 17-21. See also Gregory Lee Cuellar, Passages in the New World: Books & Manuscripts from Colonial Mexico, 1556-1820 (College Station: Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, Texas A & M University, 2006), 44. The author is the first to note that in La portentosa vide de la Muerte Bolaños describes places similar to Mictlan, the Aztec underworld.
36 Antonio de León y Gama, Descripcion histórica y cronológica de las dos piedras, que con ocasion del nuevo empedrado que se esta formando en la plaza principal de Mexico. (México, D. F. Don Felipe de Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1792), Fold.-out plates, I, II, and III.
ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: SAGE DAWSON
Maps & Metaphysics

Historically, maps have been used as tools to represent space: to make large things smaller or abstract things more concrete, as well as to consult for travel. Maps document not only literal representations of land—the distinct identities of spaces, imperialistic expressions of power, and scientific understanding, but also abstract organizational systems, historical development models, states of mind, and world views. They may be, in a sense, the largest portraits of communities that we have.

To this rich history, I contribute my maps. Familiar imagery & architectural references encourage viewers to imaginatively inhabit the landscape. I hope to suggest that history, the production of space, & human experience influence the formation of individual and communal systems of belief, and thus responses to existence in general. These maps recall and invent such influences, re-evaluation the archaic notion of sublimity, and explore map-making beyond the physical world and into a more epic landscape of history, space, myth and scripture.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sage was born in Michigan and has lived primarily in Missouri. Her work draws from community histories, the landscape, and architectural research in Israel (2004) and India (2008).

Sage received an MFA in Printmaking with a minor in Museum Studies from the University of New Mexico. There, both in collaboration with the Tamarind Institute and alone, she worked beyond the constraints of the traditional press bed size using multiple panels to create large-scale prints. She has exhibited nationally and internationally, and was most recently awarded a solo exhibition at WomanMade Gallery in Chicago. Sage’s current work draws upon the history of cartographic rendering: mapping a physical landscape in order to investigate constructed systems of belief, sublimity, and the distinct identities of spaces.

contact@SageDawson.com
Sage Dawson, *Study of Albuquerque: Convergence of Interstate 25 and 40* (2008), Dry pastel and acrylic on collograph. 19.5 x 31.5".
Sage Dawson, *Choreography: Parts of a Whole & General Features Between Regions* (2007), Acrylic, dry pastel, gold leaf on collograph. 4’11” x 7’10”.
Sage Dawson, *Hair Maps: Studies of Albuquerque and Jerusalem* (2007), Hair and gold leaf on collograph. 3.5 x 5.5" each.

Sage Dawson, *City Plan II: Dome Study for Itinerary Map West Through Space & Time* (2007), Dry pastel, ink, and gold leaf on collograph. 4.5 x 10".
Sage Dawson, *Itinerary Map West Through Space & Time (in a set progression)* (2007-2008), Acrylic, gold leaf, and collagraph on Japanese rice paper. 7’10” x 23’9”.
Sage Dawson, *Itinerary Map West Through Space & Time (in a set progression)* (detail)
5.5 x 23.75”.

Sage Dawson, *Timeline* (2008), Gold leaf, acrylic, and hair on lithograph,
4’10” x 17’10”.
Sage Dawson, *Timeline* (installed)


PLATE 6. Francisco Agüera Bustamante, *Death Lays Siege on an American Woman, an Assault by which he Wins the Fortification of Her Heart* (1792). Engraving, 4 ½ x 3 in. From Joaquín Bolaños, *La portentosa vida de La Muerte* (México, D.F.: Joseph de Jauregui, 1792), unpaginated.


IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES IN ESCULTURA SOCIAL:
A NEW GENERATION OF ART FROM MEXICO CITY

Exhibition curated by Julie Rodrigues Widholm, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Museo Alameda in affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution, San Antonio, Texas; from July 31, 2008 to October 26, 2008.

Reviewed by:
Rebecca Gomez, M.A. student,
Edward Hayes, Jr., M.A. student,
Caitlin Solis, M.A. student

The exhibition, Escultura Social, presents twenty contemporary artists who disinherit their work from traditional approaches and nationalizing curatorial agendas. Escultura Social artists engage in social critique by employing a variety of media. María Alós, Carlos Amorales, Gustavo Artigas, Miguel Calderón, Los Super Elegantes, Yoshua Okón, Damián Ortega, and Fernando Ortega all present time-based projects. Working in two dimensions, Nuevos Ricos juxtaposes film stills with newspaper photographs; Pablo Helguera presents a photographic journal of his Panamerican travels; Dr. Lakra tattoos found posters and objects with eclectic graffiti; and Julieta Aranda, Stefan Brüggemann, Gabriel Kuri, and Mario García Torres explore semantic territory in text-based work. And working in three dimensions, Fernando Carbajal, Abraham Cruzvillegas, Daniel Guzmán, and Pedro Reyes stretch the elastic boundaries of sculpture and installation.

Through the transformation of conventional materials and the use of new media, the artists discontinue the post-Revolutionary social realist project of muralismo—the enigmatic and idiosyncratic painting of Mexican modernism, in particular, from mid-century Rufino Tamayo to Francisco Toledo of the present—and 1980s neomexicanismo—the critical movement to revisit national identity. As noted by curator, Julie Rodrigues Widholm of Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), the Escultura Social artists engage in a, “rigorous new vocabulary that embraces untraditional sculptural materials, as well as video, photography, installation, and performance.” Severing a relationship to mexicanidad, or the semiotics of Mexican identity, Escultura Social reflects the tenets of transnationalism and postcolonialism in a global contemporary art context as it deconstructs
Identity, reconsiders community dynamics, and explores new conceptual approaches.

**Transcending Identity Politics**

*Escultura Social* brings together artists born from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, who share two common threads—a connection to Mexico City and a distinct approach to artistic expression that is not preoccupied with the portrayal of a traditional Mexican identity. For example, the group, *Los Super Elegantes* displays two music videos, reflecting a transcontinental MTV generation that was raised in the internet age. In *Sixteen* (2004) and *Nothing Really Matters* (2006), the artists mix pop music videos with *telenovela* (Spanish language soap opera) conventions. By ironically employing a variety of popular media, the artists claim they are, “pulling identity politics off the map and traveling with freedom passports.” In lieu of making Mexican or Latino art, the artists reach a global audience through the realm of video and the medium provided by modern computer technology, which greatly expands the real time–space limitations of the traditional museum setting. Instead of reaching a limited audience during the abbreviated period that an exhibit is on public display, the artists are able to impart both art and message without temporal or physical impediments. For example, their work can be found at any time of the day or night on internet sites, such as Youtube. Consequently, their influence as artists is enhanced, not to mention the prospect for financial remuneration.

Likewise, in *Useless Wonder* (2006), a double-screen video displays an apocalyptic vision on one side while on the reverse, a black and white map of the world deconstructs like a jigsaw puzzle. The images used are from the liquid archive, a digital database of drawings that is, “based on photographs of digital vector drawings synthesized into ambiguous forms that combine silhouettes with traces.” In this stark landscape, Carlos Amorales juxtaposes an ominous, raven-headed woman, skull-faced monkeys, and a creature that is half-wolf and half-woman with eerie, jarring music. This combination is perhaps intended to provoke fear and hope in the viewer simultaneously. These fused creatures are identifiable by their parts, but the narrative into which they are placed is purposefully confusing. The artist employs an unsequenced narrative for two reasons. It stretches the limitations of what video production can convey and compels the viewer to discern order from the chaos that Amorales created. By discerning that order, the viewer attains...
a more profound understanding of the artistic subject and, therefore, of reality. This invitation enhances Amorales’ message of hope.

While set in Mexico, Los guerreros (The Warriors, 2007), made in collaboration with Amorales and Nuevos Ricos, pertains not to national identity, but examines instead an urban gang subculture that thrives on both sides of the Rio Grande. The work consists of twenty digital prints, each with two images, and an archival newspaper image depicting non-fictional gang scenes. Los guerreros demonstrates how fantasy evolves into reality while it makes visible the insidious influence on urban Mexican youth of popular culture imported from the United States.9

For The School of Panamerican Unrest (SPU, 2006), Pablo Helguera traveled by van from Alaska to Argentina, making twenty-seven stops along the way (Plate 8). He dialogued with the audiences he encountered on his travels throughout the Americas about the meaning of the term “American” in a globalized world. As a “trans-nationalist,” who was born in Mexico and now lives in New York, Helguera suggests that his project represents a “Bolivarian” notion of American identity, a reference to Simón Bolívar who led several South American countries to independence during the nineteenth century. Helguera argues that this notion of identity supersedes his personal identification with Mexico.10

Escultura Social elicits questions relating to motives, target audiences, and equality in terms of cultural exchanges. As the first group exhibition of Mexican artists at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the exhibition represents an artistic parallel of free trade in the post-North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) age.11 Through this historic precedent, issues of art market politics emerge; the exhibition is marketed to a broader audience while maintaining Mexico City as its geo-political unifier. Mexican art historian, Cuauhtémoc Medina, of the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City, states that a paradox has developed with works in the global art system. While art institutions represent Mexican artists or art from Mexico, they produce an inversion in terms. According to Medina, “De-localizing this work has the possible consequence of re-nationalizing it.”12 Exhibition curator, Widholm attempts to avoid “re-nationalizing” the artists in Escultura Social, focusing less on a geographic categorization and more on linking works that deal
with a shared social perspective in order to group men and women who represent a new generation of artists. Difficulties emerge in breaking the bonds and boundaries of nationalism, thus challenging the curator to organize an exhibit that transcends national identity.—Rebecca Gomez

**Community as a Site of Creative Expression**
The concept of community surfaces throughout *Escultura Social*. The artists explore the complex dynamics of representation of the marginalized. The artists are at times in a privileged position as outsiders of the represented communities. Through their incorporation of the subjects’ personal lives, the artists border on exploiting the subaltern for purposes of creative expression. At the same time, the artists’ creations are exported for public, and significantly, foreign consumption. While Pablo Helguera engages communities across the Americas to articulate a transnational or Panamerican identity, Yoshua Okón deconstructs the insider/outsider positionality in popular media. By using an altered basketball rim and video, Gustavo Artigas brings attention to the often stigmatized, stereotyped, young men of color from the inner city who work collectively towards a positive goal.

Emerging from a socio-cultural project of establishing a Panamerican intercontinental and multilingual community through verbal exchanges, Helguera creates a constructed society by superimposing his notion of Panamerican identity onto established yet isolated communities across the Americas. His project deviates from a creative and innovative practice and moves into problematic territory since he does not readily address the means to move beyond communication towards concrete action. To a certain degree, the project evokes anthropology’s colonialist tendencies, in which an outsider enters a locale to glean useful artifacts and observations from a given society and reports the findings to a foreign audience. Helguera envisions his project as raising questions about Panamerican identity, rather than providing a platform for true discourse and articulation of solutions in places racked by extreme poverty, industrial abandonment, civil wars, cultural imperialism, and colonialism. While his motives appear genuine and commendable, the limitations in the work weaken Helguera’s constructed Panamerican community with a measure of contrivance.
Unlike Helguera, Okón approaches his pseudo-ethnographic projects without lofty pretenses and instead uses video to challenge perception and representation through humor. Situated in a darkened room in which the aural component of *Lago Bolsena* (2005) surrounds, even overwhelms, the viewer, a three-channel video projection simultaneously depicts wide, medium, and close-up shots of residents of the Santa Julia neighborhood of Mexico City as they behave in a mock-primitive, exaggerated fashion. While the subjects' style of dress and surroundings are entirely modern, their actions and demeanor call to mind dated *National Geographic* documentaries in which anthropologists studied populations untouched by Western ideals and technology. Throughout the disjointed, disorienting, and deceptively short video, Okón raises questions about whether he merely reinforces a subaltern status by representing the Santa Julia community in such a way for a foreign museum audience, or whether he provides a platform for deconstructing artificial representations of subalterity.

The video shows scenes of neighborhood residents emerging from an open manhole and practicing primitive tribalistic rituals. The video also depicts a gendered binary in which the male and female characters are filmed separately as they engage in gender-specific actions. Wide-angle group shots of male and female characters show them crawling in animal-fashion, grunting, and growling. Because the cameraman is clearly visible, the film also captures the process of constructing artifice. Considering that Okón exhibits *Lago Bolsena* to a foreign audience, the motivations behind the work take on significant implications. Okón not only challenges the designated “Third World” status of Mexico and its people, but he also questions the definition of what constitutes Mexican art. While conceptual forms of art are certainly not new to Mexico—for example, Gabriel Orozco has been creating conceptual art since the 1980s—U.S. audiences of the past twenty to thirty years have generally not been aware of the existence of such art practices in Mexico. *Escultura Social* effectively counters this ignorance and educates audiences about the established trajectory of conceptual art in Mexico.

Taking the concept of community to a different level in *Juego de Pelota Event Project* (2007), Gustavo Artigas demonstrates seamless and simultaneous integration of collaboration, performance, and documentation (Plate 9). In addition to presenting a conceptual nuance in the game of basketball by placing the hoop vertically, the artist provides museum visitors with an
innovative perspective on the inner city that is not reduced to the mainstream media’s one-dimensional portrayal of street life, warped as it is by stereotypes. Through community collaboration, Artigas provides a portrait of a barrio, which despite being beset by poverty and gang violence, refuses to embody a fatalistic attitude, thus transcending marginalization. Commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art, the artist collaborated with the Resurrection Basketball League of southwestern Chicago, which serves the predominantly Mexican neighborhoods of Pilsen, Little Village, and Back of the Yards. The Resurrection Project’s mission of community organizing mirrors Artigas’ commitment to forging relationships in order to create new avenues for social change. Artigas’ strategy involves collaborating with communities to create fresh and radically different experiences out of familiar contexts, such as sports. In comparison, the approaches of Helguera and Okón underscore the construction of community. Helguera’s work raises questions of reciprocity—to what degree is power shared between the artist and participants in The School of Panamerican Unrest? Does he return to the communities and bestow what he has produced as a result of their interaction and how do the subjects respond to the project? Through sardonic means, Okón leaves the viewer ambivalent about the agency of the participating actors and the outcome of producing and touring internationally a work such as Lago Bolsena. Reflecting the tenets of participatory or action research used in anthropology, Artigas conveys a sense of true collaboration to the viewer. In Juego de Pelota Event Project, the subjects are the agents of representation and they share the power of documentation with the artist.

Mechanics of Escultura Social: Collaboration and Appropriation
Considering influential and mythic German artist, Joseph Beuys’ 1973 artistic credo of Social Sculpture, or Social Architecture, which enlisted everyone as an artist, Widholm attempts to articulate the German avant-garde pedagogy in Latin American terms. But beyond, or in addition to provoking, documenting, or operating through social engagement, the Escultura Social artists can be considered a cooperative body united by conceptual ties and interlaced histories. Widholm acknowledges that the exhibited corpus is indebted to artist-driven, collective practices of the 1990s, and views the subsequent grassroots infrastructure as a result of “DIY (do-it-yourself)” approaches to curating, promoting, fundraising,
and generating criticism.\textsuperscript{18} During their formative years, a majority of the \textit{Escultura Social} artists joined collectives and created artist-run exhibition spaces under the conceptual wing of Gabriel Orozco.\textsuperscript{19}

Widholm uses the titles, “Nature and Culture,” “Social Engagement and the Function of Art,” and “Transforming Everyday Materials and the Word as Image” to categorize the works of the twenty artists.\textsuperscript{20} Scaffolding the theoretical and spatial organization of the exhibition, Beuys is more than referenced—he ideas are appropriated to didactically interpret the conceptual artworks. But the influence of Beuys extends beyond Widholm’s curatorial parallel, which may appear as a forced attempt to fuse a 1970s experimental, social, and democratic agenda with a twenty-first century art exhibit. The influence, surfacing in the conceptual tendencies of \textit{Escultura Social}, is more accurately traced through Gabriel Orozco, who organized and participated in \textit{A Propósito} at the Museo del Ex-Convento del Desierto de los Leones in Cuajimalpa in 1989, an homage to Beuys.\textsuperscript{21}

Beyond the unauthorized intellectual theft implicit in the term, appropriation functions most subtly in the work of María Alós, whose two videos and opening performance hyperbolize the social norm of welcoming. Alós directed hired greeters to cordially and incessantly maintain public relations by engaging those entering and exiting the exhibition.\textsuperscript{22} Alós then completely removed the human interaction after the opening and looped a greeting and a farewell video at the entrance and exit of the gallery, respectively. Verging on invasiveness and oscillating between sincerity and mechanical politeness, her project charts the institutionalization of customs and highlights the ambiguity of museum-patron relations.

Julieta Aranda’s, \textit{Untitled} (2007), also known as, \textit{Coloring Book II} or “please fill in the squares with the indicated color,” appropriates an illusionistic vocabulary (Plate 10). A section of the poststructuralist color chart reads, “\textit{Dark as Night, First Light, Rain Drop, Just Barely, Siesta, Mom’s Lipstick, Innuendo, Sweet Nothings}.” The desaturated lexicon plays with what Aranda refers to as society’s, “logic of desire.”\textsuperscript{23} Aranda proposes that, “by interfering...[it] is possible to complicate the exchanges and interject a measure of productive confusion into the prevalent modes and models of operation.”\textsuperscript{24} By decontextualizing the nomenclature, Aranda semantically
disrupts prescribed meanings to create an anarchic moment in the otherwise didactic and interpretive context of the exhibition.

In Stefan Brüggemann’s, *Explanations* (2002), capitalized text in British-inflected English, without a Spanish translation, reads: ALL MY IDEAS ARE IMPORTED, ALL MY PRODUCTS ARE EXPORTED, and (ALL MY EXPLANATIONS ARE RUBBISH). Brüggemann aggressively represents themes of marginalization in three panoramic phrases. Appropriating a dominant voice, font, and scale, Brüggemann’s *Explanations* offer mantras for those in the shadow of cultural imperialism. Interestingly, the bilingual, Museo Alameda does not translate any of the English texts into Spanish. Brüggemann’s choice of language reflects a decision complicated by the need to address artistic self-determination and cultural agency in the so-called “Third World.”—Edward Hayes, Jr.

**Conclusion**

Unbound by an entrenched relationship to *mexicanidad*, or the semiotics of Mexican identity in art, *Escultura Social* reflects the tenets of transnationalism and postcolonialism in the context of contemporary art. Eliseo Ríos, Interim Executive Director of the Museo Alameda, asserts that these artists move beyond the notion of identity in their art to reflect a global transcultural dialogue. By acknowledging communities as creative bodies capable of overcoming token representation through the conceptual tactics of collaboration and appropriation, the exhibition participates in a larger dialogue, within and outside of the national and geographic nexus of Mexico City. While their work addresses issues concerning, “political culture, urban life, and current political issues,” the transnational artists included in *Escultura Social* overcome the trappings of identity and express innovative trends appropriate to the post-millennium contemporary art world.
REBECCA GOMEZ is an M.A. student in the Art History Department at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She is studying under Dr. Teresa Eckmann, Assistant Professor of Contemporary Latin American Art.

EDWARD HAYES, JR. is an M.A. student in the Department of Art History at the University of Texas at San Antonio and is also working with Dr. Teresa Eckmann. He is currently conducting thesis research on the work of contemporary artist, Francis Alÿs in Mexico City.

CAITLIN SOLIS is an M.A. student in the Department of Bilingual Bicultural Studies at the University of Texas at San Antonio. She is currently working with Dr. Josie Méndez-Negrete, Dr. Sonia Saldívar-Hull, and Dr. Keta Miranda. She is examining how authors, Junot Díaz and Loida Pérez articulate the experiences of the Dominican Diaspora through a new form of magic realism in their novels, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Geographies of Home*, respectively.

NOTES:

1. The exhibition *Myth Mortals and Immortality: Works from the Museo Soumaya de México*, which ran concurrently with *Escultura Social* at the Museo Alameda, illustrates the tendency towards traditionalism and nationalism when organizing exhibits of Mexican art.

2. Also, architect Fernando Romero who originally exhibited at the MCA as an *Escultura Social* artist, presents the model of the museum bearing his wife’s namesake, Soumaya Slim de Romero, on the Museo Alameda’s first floor, marrying the postcolonial to mid-modern collection with the contemporary.


4. Though there is debate over definitions of generations, the artists of this exhibit all fall under the category of Generation X. The term Generation X came into use for defining this generation, following the publication of Douglas Coupland’s 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991).

5. Los Super Elegantes is comprised of Martiano Lopez-Corzet and Milena Muzquiz, a Los Angeles-based duo.


7. Ibid., 61.


9. Nuevos Ricos is a hybrid art venture and record label on which Amorales collaborated with Julian Lede and Andre Pahl. Widholm, 160.
IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, & CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES


11 The agreement was implemented in January of 1991. In Spanish, NAFTA is Tratado de Libre Comercio de América del Norte (TLCAN). The intent of the treaty was to “remove most barriers to trade and investment among the United States, Canada, and Mexico.” The international, Panamerican viewpoints and expressions of these artists (engaging in an artistic “free trade” if you will) parallel their commercial counterpart, codified in NAFTA. That is, they utilize the concept of oneness or interdependency transcending national borders. See Foreign Agricultural Service, United States Department of Agriculture, “North American Free Trade Agreement,” available at http://www.fas.usda.gov/itp/Policy/nafta/nafta.asp (accessed May 11, 2009).


13 Widholm, 9.


16 Attesting to the collaborative nature of his project, “the participation of kids at risk and the meaning of the inverted hoops gave to the piece a possibility of readings regarding the action of the group inside the American society. …Everything was discussed in advance with [the participating youth] since the beginning so they had a good idea of the final result. After the show was open they were invited for a special tour of all the works in the show. As part of the activities of the Resurrection Project, the video was shown as part of their open cinema program during the summer. They kept the video copy as part of their archives.” Gustavo Artigas, interview with Caitlin Solis, 18 June 2009.


18 Widholm, 10.

19 In 1993 Abraham Cruzvillegas, Daniel Guzmán, and Damián Ortega among others created “a space for self-education...and a space for experimentation, since its future destruction permitted all sorts of direct interventions.” See Olivier Debroise, “Temístocles 44,” in The Age of Discrepancies (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006), 404. Amorales, Kuri, and Fernando Ortega later joined them to exhibit under kurimanzutto, a gallery founded by Monica Manzutto, José Kuri and Gabriel Orozco that operates as a network (more so than a space) and represents nearly half of the Escultura Social artists. Available at http://www.kurimanzutto.com (accessed November 20, 2008).

20 Debroise, 384.

22 According to Eliseo Ríos, Interim Executive Director of the Museo Alameda, San Antonio, the performers involved were from Jump Start, a local non-profit performing arts organization in San Antonio, TX. Eliseo Ríos, interview with Rebecca Gomez and Eddie Hayes, 2 December 2008.


24 Ibid.

25 Eliseo Ríos, Interview with Rebecca Gomez and Eddie Hayes, 2 December 2008.

26 Widholm, 10.
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