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# HEMISPHERE

VISUAL CULTURES *of the* AMERICAS

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VOLUME XII, 2019

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# HEMISPHERE

## VISUAL CULTURES *of the* AMERICAS

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VOLUME XII, 2019

*Hemisphere* is an annual publication produced by graduate students affiliated with the Department of Art 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. The journal welcomes submissions by graduate students at institutions in the United States and internationally. Through the production of *Hemisphere*, students cultivate and promote their educational and professional interests as they gain first-hand experience in academic publishing and foreground new research on the Americas. Submissions written in English, Spanish, or Portuguese will be accepted. A call for papers will be sent out each year to invite submissions for the next issue.

Subscriptions are not available at this time; however, we welcome donations to support the production of *Hemisphere*.

## Editor's Introduction to Volume XII

Latinx art in the United States has been historically underrepresented in, if not ignored by, major educational and art institutions, and scholarly publications. For the past 50 years or so, however, Latinx art has been featured in community centers and galleries around the country, as well as by more localized, community-oriented museums, such as El Museo del Barrio in New York City (founded in 1969) and the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago (founded in 1982; now, the National Museum of Mexican Art). It has only been in the last three decades or so that Chicano art history courses have been offered at colleges and universities, and more recently, that Chicana/Latinx art has been actively collected by major museums and exhibited in the U.S. and abroad, such as the well-received Chicano art show, "*Bridges in Times of Walls/Puentes en época de muros*" at the Carrillo Gil Art Museum in Mexico City.

Over the past 10 years, U.S. Latinx art has been undergoing a process of re-evaluation resulting in significant developments, such as the hire of the first curator of Latino Art at the American Art Museum at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C., and the founding of a new museum of Chicano art in Riverside, California featuring the collection of comedian/actor, Cheech Marin. Organizations, such as the Ford Foundation, have also been channeling funds into cultivating interest in Latinx art, exemplified by the U.S. Latinx Art Forums the Ford has been organizing nationwide in cities, like Santa Fe, New Mexico. Similarly, Latinx art conferences are being organized around the country, such as, the ongoing *Latino Art Now* conferences and the Latinx Art Sessions recently held at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. The coeval emergence of scholarly publications, such as the U.S. *Latinx Art Forum Newsletter* and *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, a new journal produced at UCLA, reflects the traction that Latinx art is building among academics, curators, collectors, and interested members of the public.

Most of the activity revolving around the production, collecting, and study of Latinx art has been logically concentrated in those areas of the country with significant Latinx populations, such as New York, Florida, the Southwest, and the West coast. In spring 2019, the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) conference was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The conference theme was, "Indigenous Knowledge for Resistance, Love, and Land: *Lecciones* for our Children, for our Future." Recognizing these developments and desiring to, both, contribute to ongoing conversations about the status of Latinx art in the U.S. and focusing attention on Latinx artists, it was decided that the next issue of *Hemisphere: Visual Cultures of the Americas* would focus on the theme: "U.S. Latinx Art: Then, Now, and Tomorrow." Our hope is to identify and feature new research based in creative approaches drawn from the increasingly overlapping fields of art history, visual and material culture studies, gender studies, queer studies, social activism and politics, and others.

— Mandolen Sanchez

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# Evidence of Things Unseen: Pepón Osorio's Embelequero Aesthetic in the *Scene of the Crime*<sup>1</sup>

RAQUEL FLECHA VEGA  
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“Osorio treats the image as an object and the object as an image, in order to animate the history of otherwise absent figures. The effect is a dreamlike displacement or condensation of people and things.”<sup>2</sup>

On February 26th, 1993 detectives entered the Whitney Museum of American Art on Manhattan's Upper East Side to investigate the scene of a violent homicide. In what appeared to be a small apartment and amidst a chaotic backdrop of downturned furniture, broken glass, and heaps of scattered décor, detectives encountered a shrouded female body face down in the center of the home. Although the space and the many personal belongings give potential insight into the identity of the female, she remained unknown with her face obscured from full view. While actual detectives used yellow caution tape to cordon off the *Scene*, this horrific mise-en-scène was no ordinary crime. Instead, the unsettling site was a large installation work called the *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)* (1993) by Puerto Rican-born installation artist Pepón Osorio. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Pepón Osorio, *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)*, 1993, mixed-media and video installation (as shown at the 1993 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), Collection of the Bronx Museum of Arts, New York. Image credit: Frank Gimpaya (Source: J.A. González, *Pepón Osorio*, xvi.)

The work debuted at the controversial 1993 Biennial of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Divided public reception was captured in the pages of *The New York Times*: on the one hand, condemning the Biennial for abandoning traditional aesthetic values and, on the other, praising the show for its visionary inclusivity of underrepresented artists and new media.<sup>3</sup> A number of critics from the *National Review* to the *Third Text*, however, decried the show's "political correctness" in telling phrases that described the "artist as victim's representative," displaying "ethnic narcissism," and "excess" linked to "cultural torpor."<sup>4</sup> Some reviewers even featured imagery ("battered women" or "wounded bodies") and photography of the *Scene of the Crime* to visually represent their argument of the show's literal and detestable nature.<sup>5</sup> These particular attacks and visual cues make plain the large impact that Osorio's work had on critics. Between loathsome dismissals of show's PC agenda and praise for its critical foresight, reviewers of the time failed to closely analyze Osorio's aesthetic interventions with the figure, vernacular form, and medium.

My analysis of the *Scene* examines these understudied symbolic and material qualities through the lens of Osorio's *embelequero* (embellishment/er) aesthetic. As a critical practice, this aesthetic embellishes everyday objects and sites with consumer goods as a critique of consumer culture. The arresting scene of the *shrouded* figure overwhelmed by material possessions in her working-class apartment, reveals how the *embelequero* aesthetic works in the tensions, or liminal spaces, between what is seen and unseen, or in/visible.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the contingencies of the in/visible unfold within a proliferation of objects and images—a kind of hyper-visibility within which the invisible takes place. Caught between fantasy and reality, this *embelequero* drama elicits an emotional response and shift in perception for the viewer. Art history and visual culture scholar Jennifer A. González describes the ways that this *embelequero* aesthetic creates its visual idiom by appropriating "signs already circulating in mass culture" to critique cultural commodification and highlight the constitutive power of consumption on "subject formation and class disparity."<sup>7</sup> *Embelequero's* engagement with the politics of visibility, meaning, and representation provides new insight into the role of the central figure as an orienting subject in an embellished world of consumer critique.<sup>8</sup> Before exploring the symbolic figure at the center of the *Scene*, I first expound on biographical, sociohistorical, and contemporary connections to Osorio's *embelequero* aesthetic as a primer for understanding its material complexity in the *Scene of the Crime*.

Benjamin "Pepón" Osorio Encarnación was born in 1955 in Santurce, Puerto Rico, a cultural hub in the island's capital, San Juan. As a teenager, he had a formative encounter with Francisco Oller's (1833–1917) famous allegorical painting *El Velorio* (*The Wake*, 1893).<sup>9</sup> (Figure 5) Standing at a massive 96 x 156.5 inches, the iconic painting is a model of Oller's unique fusion of realism and impressionism, and depicts a rural Puerto Rican ritual feast called the *baquiné* (a child's wake).<sup>10</sup> Twenty-four individuals of all skin tones including barefoot *jibaros* (peasants or mountain folk)

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and Catholic clergymen occupy a traditional native *bohío* (a wood home with thatch roof). The figures stand in various poses and states of anticipation awaiting the roast pork feast, all except for an older dark-skinned man who gazes upon the child at the center of the painting. The *jibaro's* headscarf and earring provide a visual cue that he was formerly enslaved, alluding not only to his social standing within the painting but to the intersection of race, class, and nationality during late nineteenth-century Puerto Rico.<sup>11</sup> Adeptly critiquing the cultural hegemony of Spanish colonial rule, the work is a provocative post-abolition indictment of the continuing racial oppression in Puerto Rico twenty years after the emancipation of 1873. As one of the earliest Spanish settlements to enslave native Caribbeans and Africans and as a U.S. territory since 1898, Puerto Rico shares in the long history (of the Atlantic slave trade) of racially instituted slavery, including the legacy of racism and colorism that persisted on the island and in the Jim Crow South. This complexity is symbolized visually by the Afro-Puerto Ricans who occupy the dark spaces of the composition or who are otherwise obscured from full view. In a 2004 interview, the artist recalled his connection to the conscientious *jibaro* saying, "I just stood there and became that man..."<sup>12</sup> Osorio's early exposure to Oller's famous work had a lasting impact on Osorio's visual idiom, including the use of narrative, symbolism, dialectic tension, and archetypal representation within a tableau-like composition meant to convey a larger message through a local scene.

Leaving behind the longstanding graphic arts tradition of socially engaged art and the burgeoning avant-garde scene of San Juan, Osorio arrived in New York City in 1975. His arrival coincided with art movements like Minimalism, Conceptualism, Pop, Neo-expressionism, and social practice art. There he completed a Bachelor's in Sociology at Lehman College and worked for the city as a social worker while being involved with social organizations like the United Bronx Parents (UBP).<sup>13</sup> At one political action with UBP, Osorio protested the racist representations of Puerto Ricans and Blacks in the Western-inspired police crime film, *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (1981). This event no doubt informed his ongoing interests in what cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall have described as the "politics of representation."<sup>14</sup> In the mid-eighties, Osorio began work in stage design, performance, and sculpture in Puerto Rico and New York, a connection visible in the dramatic narrative form of his later installation work, including the *Scene of the Crime*. Performances, such as, *Escalio (Tillable Land, 1983)* and *Cocinando (Cooking, 1985)* explored land rights and identity in Puerto Rico. Artistic concerns such as vernacular culture, urban spatial politics, displacement, site-specificity, and representation characterize the social practice at the heart of Osorio's emerging *embelequero* aesthetic. Osorio's mid-seventies migration to the United States, early engagements with social activism, social work, and socially minded performances laid the groundwork for his critical praxis.<sup>15</sup>



In Osorio's words, an *embelequero* is "someone who is capable of making a temple out of nothing."<sup>16</sup> The term is adapted from the mid-century vernacular practices of Puerto Rican *embelequeros* (embellishers) and *rescatadores* (rescuers) who constructed and embellished makeshift *casitas* (small houses) from disused objects and sites in a process of land reclamation.<sup>17</sup> The *casitas* of the 1970s South Bronx are a model of this practice and a good example of Puerto Rican adaptation to significant urban disinvestment through neighborhood improvement and cultural place-making. Building on these vernacular traditions, Osorio's *embelequero* aesthetic of "more is better" focuses on six overlapping artistic concerns: 1) the appropriation of consumer goods and objects of popular culture aesthetically rendered as a dramatic concentration of forms; 2) site and cultural specificity in tandem with community collaboration; 3) unsettling displacement rooted in urban spatial politics, which shifts peoples, places, and signs as a way to move between familiar and unfamiliar spaces; 4) the play of image and object, or the simulacrum and the real; 5) a class-based critique of identity markers such as nationality, race, and gender; and, finally 6) the "politics of display," which is related to the politics of representation and politics of visibility.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, it is evident that Osorio's critical *embelequero* aesthetic is often conveyed through the tension of in/visibility, re-purposing, re-locating, and re-signifying to highlight and critique the matrix of social associations undergirding our understanding of representation and meaning.

Early mixed media works like *La Bicicleta* (*The Bike*, 1985), *La Cama* (*The Bed*, 1987), and *El Chandelier* (1988) forecast the *Scene's embelequero* tendencies and play with in/visibility. For example, the cruiser, four-poster bed, and crystal chandelier, everyday objects embellished with photos, multi-racial dolls, figurines, plastic fauna and floral decorations, delicate fabrics, and frills, represent working-class aspirations of upward mobility. They are not only embellished consumer symbols, they are oddly out of place within a museum setting, their drama and careful detail highlight the complex nexus of identity-formation through the signs of nationality, race, gender, and class. In doing so, the works raise many questions about the politics of visibility, about who and what is seen and not seen. In other words, the undisclosed owner of the bike, bed, and chandelier is made visible, or given meaning, through their objects of conspicuous consumption as well as the highlighted and hidden symbolic meanings in the images and objects. This matrix of in/visible associations "give shape to a given set of social relations and communities," such as the physical location and building of cultural institutions and the ideologies and norms that encode them. Osorio calls this concept of in/visible societal associations "social architecture" and describes it as the "intersections between individuals, communities, and the built (or rebuilt) environment."<sup>19</sup> Working with the dramatic tension of in/visibility, the *embelequero* aesthetic calls attention to the substructure, superstructure, and façade of cultural representation and attempts to shift our assumptions about the social and visual worlds we create.

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Osorio's predilection for vernacular ornamentation and drama has led some critics to dub his style "Baroque," "Nuyorican Baroque," and even kitsch. However, this tendency to quickly label can overlook important precedents while limiting this work to a form of derivative art.<sup>20</sup> Despite modern Euro-American conceptions of kitsch as a more contemporary manifestation of popular material culture, Osorio's *embelequero* aesthetic of everyday objects and *chuchertas* (knickknacks) has notable precedents in indigenous Caribbean traditions. Anna Indych, a scholar of contemporary Latin American art, points out that far from Greenberg's fixed conception of mass culture invading high art, kitsch is, in fact, mutable and subject to changes in context, history, and culture. Indych reminds us that even long entrenched concepts like kitsch are not fixed in stone and, if freed from its historical constraints, can shift our understanding of art's material and cultural origins and its contemporary valuation. Moreover, attempts to locate *embelequero* within a stylistic grouping must consider whether interpretive designations like kitsch are capable of capturing a culturally specific critical practice while exploring the longer history of embellished forms in the Americas.

A cross-cultural system of art made from traded goods existed well before Spanish colonization.<sup>21</sup> This early Caribbean form of embellished mixed-media is exemplified in the highly decorated sacred objects created by the Arawak-Taíno nation of the central Caribbean. A *Colonial Bible Lectern*, today housed at the Vatican's Missionary Ethnological Museum, testifies to the mastery of Taíno artists who used exchange objects, culturally-specific ways of making, and local forms of knowledge to create a lectern of fishbone and tortoiseshell shaped in the stylized form of a conch shell. This sanctified dais made of local and traded goods served as the foundation, the material support structure, for the Christian holy book. The lavishly appointed *Beaded Cemi* (ancestral effigy) at the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography is another construction of mixed trade goods.<sup>22</sup> Taíno artists used high-status European objects alongside local and imported goods to create the double-sided, Janus figure made of precious and everyday materials: such as rhinoceros horn, cotton, shell, glass beads, and mirror shards. In doing so, they transformed the cultural and social significance of glass and mirrors and extended the aesthetic expression of their local materials. Though there is limited space in this paper to explore the *longue durée* of this particular Caribbean tradition, it is important to cite the early Caribbean as a crucial site and source for an appropriative and embellished aesthetic in the Americas. The impact of this aesthetic is visible today in Latin American and Latino/a art practices, such as in Osorio's *embelequero*, *rasquachismo*, and strands of Ultrabaroque.

Though the *détournement* of French Marxist theorist Guy Debord continues to inform subversive critiques of Capitalist consumer culture, notably in the culture jamming of the 1980s, the Latin American and Latino/a counterpart is keenly attuned to the culturally convergent spaces of subject formation.<sup>23</sup> In the southwestern U.S.,

the exhibition *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo* (Phoenix, 1989), featured artists like Luis Jimenez and Gilbert “Magu” Luján who celebrated their working-class and bilingual culture by recreating everyday objects and popular images from the “*rasquache*” perspective of “los de abajo.”<sup>24</sup> Just over a decade later in the western U.S., the exhibition *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post Latin American Art* (San Diego, 2000) showcased works by *Tejano* Franco Mondini-Ruiz (*High Yellow*, 1999; *Mexique*, 2000; and *Infinito Botánico*, 2000) who played within the “excess of [consumer] signs” to critique cultural identity while troubling essentialized notions of *Tejano* or Mexican American art.<sup>25</sup> Other examples of this critical *embelequero* flair can be found throughout the Americas: Tirzo Martha’s installation *Spirit of the Caribbean*, 2005; Dimitri Obergfell’s installation *Federal Fashion Market*, 2017; Jose Castellón’s print series *Priti Biks* (2010); and in Miguel Luciano’s Pop inflected multimedia series *Pure Plantanium* (2006).<sup>26</sup> While there is much to be said about the differences and similarities across these aesthetic practices, the few examples above capture four decades of work engaged at the confluence of regional, national, and consumer interpellation, more recently pushing the discourse beyond fixed artistic styles and labels like Latino Art. Similar to Osorio’s *embelequero*, these aesthetics embellish to create an ongoing dialogue about the in/visible power dynamics of representation, identity, and consumer culture often via the cultural intersections of nationality, gender, race, and class.

The Whitney entered the critical discourse of art and identity momentarily with its 1993 Biennial. Specifically, the Biennial followed a critical exhibition tradition that was pushing back against centuries of western, white, male dominance in the art world with shows like the *Great American Lesbian Art Show* (1980), *Magiciens de la terre* (*Magicians of the World*, 1989), *The Decades Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (1990), *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* (Los Angeles, 1990-93), and *Mining the Museum* (1992-1993). However, the Whitney’s track record for centering underrepresented art and artists is limited. In 1968 and 1971 the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) protested the museum demanding not only the inclusion of black artists but also the inclusion of black voices in authoritative roles. Though the 1993 Biennial was the first show in which white men represented the minority, the 1995 show that followed returned to a white male majority and the broad curatorial theme of “metaphor.” The artist-activists Guerilla Girls noted this return to exclusivity in their aptly titled public service message, “Traditional Values and Quality Return to the Whitney Museum, 1995.”<sup>27</sup>

Leading the charge in this atypical 1993 show was head curator, Elizabeth Sussman, who selected 150 works by 82 artists covering pressing social themes from imperialism and poverty to identity politics and the AIDS crisis. Artists in the Biennial included, now well-known, figures, such as, Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson, Glenn Ligon, Renee Green, and Gary Simmons, to name a few. Dubbed the “identity” Biennial for what critics thought was the show’s literal protest of inequality along identity

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lines, the exhibition was both commended and denounced for its attempts at political correctness.<sup>28</sup> *Times* writer, Robert Hughes sets the tone for conservative criticism in his article, “A Fiesta of Whining,” and more explicitly in his byline, “Preachy and political, the Whitney Biennial celebrates sodden and cant cliché.”<sup>29</sup> Echoing this sentiment, Michael Kimmelman of the *New York Times* describes the show’s moralizing condescension, literalness, and lack of visual pleasure, which he deemed puritanical leftism.<sup>30</sup> Kimmelman’s review included an image of the *Scene of the Crime* with a quote in the caption that reflects this insistence on a literal meaning: “It is as if the people who go to the Whitney are so witless and backward that they need to be told that sexual abuse and racism and violence are bad.”<sup>31</sup> A more favorable review in the *New York Times* titled “At The Whitney, A Biennial With A Social Conscience,” by female reviewer Roberta Smith, insisted that the “provocative and informative” show made its mark by taking a risk rather than passively following the trends of the art market.<sup>32</sup> These reviews reflect the contentious social and political climate of the time, but more importantly, they show how critics were remiss to move beyond a mere surface glance while missing “the cultural specificity and irony” conveyed in Osorio’s *Scene* and throughout the show.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, the irony evident throughout the show demonstrated the aesthetic and social urgency of many of the works featured in the 1993 show. The cosmic irony of the 1991 Rodney King footage by the “amateur” artist George Holliday is a case in point. John G. Hanhardt, the curator of film and video responsible for selecting both Holliday and Osorio’s work, maintained that the full King footage was in fact artistically rendered while bearing witness to the spectacle-fueled gaze of the late nineteenth century, therefore, producing “a new way of seeing what is around us.”<sup>34</sup> The well-known performance and multimedia installation, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña plays with irony by mocking the notion of “discovery” in farcical costumes and props while also referencing the barbaric World’s Fair history of exhibiting indigenous and African peoples. Hanhardt’s effort to extend the disciplinary boundaries of film and new media are deeply embedded in the long shadow of the “modern versus popular art” framework famously canonized in Greenberg’s 1939 essay, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*. The show’s critical response should be seen as resistance against the academic “cultural turn” of the eighties and nineties when Greenbergian modes of valuation were being challenged by the deconstructionism of postmodern theory.

The 1993 show must also be situated socio-historically, considering the political agendas and market forces that characterized the multiculturalism of the eighties. As Art historian, Shifra M. Goldman explains, the Latin American and Latino/a “boom” of the time was directly related to federal appointments, distinctions, and monetary awards for Latinos/as used to leverage support for Reagan’s unpopular Iran-Contra Affair. These “goodwill” campaigns supported many of the essentializing survey shows, including *Images of Mexico* (Dallas, 1988) and *Art of the Fantastic* (Indianapolis,

1987). Meanwhile, popular articles like “Hispanic Culture Breaks Out of the Barrio: A Latin Wave Hits the Mainstream” (1988) from *Time* magazine, exemplify the economic revival of Latin American and Latino/a cultural goods and the \$134 billion market that a decade of immigration produced.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the economic and political landscape of nineteen-eighties reflected competing desires to represent the emerging “Hispanic” market as cultural product and constituent base. Like Osorio, artists in the 1993 Biennial pushed back against this heavily politicized and corporatized multiculturalism, by (standing on the shoulders of the representational authority won by) continuing the legacy of the artist-activists of the sixties and seventies and earlier Civil Rights and liberation movements.<sup>36</sup> By engaging directly with the impact of corporate cultural appropriation, Osorio and his peers exposed the invisible forces shaping representation and identity.



Figure 2. *Pepón Osorio, Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)*, bar and metal screen partition detail, 1993, mixed-media and video installation (as shown at the 1993 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), Collection of the Bronx Museum of Arts, New York. Image credit: Frank Gimpaya (Source: J.A. González, *Pepón Osorio*, 33.)

In many ways, the works of the 1993 Biennial, like the *Scene of the Crime*, served as an invitation to the viewer to step into the liminal spaces between fiction and reality, to adjust their way of seeing and conceptualizing the world around them. The *embelequero* aesthetic facilitates this shift in its striking command of the beholder. Upon viewing the *Scene*, a sense of *horror vacui* (a fear of empty space) permeates every inch of the domestic space filled with signs of consumer, family, personal, and religious life. The large fictionalized apartment is partitioned by a bar and wrought iron screen that separate a living and dining room (Fig. 2). A red linoleum floor stretches beyond the installation into the viewing space, which is also closed-off by

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yellow caution tape. The dominant color scheme is consistent with the colors of the Puerto Rican and U.S. flags and also with the rich hues of Santería symbolism. The white and red of Chango, the god of thunder, and the blue of Yemaya, the god of the sea and the Atlantic Ocean, are evocative of the wrath of the cosmos and transnational displacement. Around the shrouded body, dark and light skinned Yoruban gods and hybrid Christian saints stand not only as reference to the Afro-Latino/a presence in the Caribbean but as witnesses of the *Scene*.<sup>37</sup> Among them stand the hybrid Oshun/Virgen de Caridad; marked by her gold regalia, she is the goddess of the waters and giver of life. Nearby, the syncretic Babalú-Ayé/San Lázaro, the god of healing, seems to awaken from his own death only to witness his devotee's destruction. Dramatically rendered, the relations between space, color, and iconography establish the larger composition within which the central figure and beholder are situated.

Above the body and arrangement of deities, a video of a vessel filling with blood and then shattering is projected onto a large framed mirror—a symbol of the construction and destruction, or more specifically, the geographic and ideological making and re-making of the hyphenated (colonized) Puerto Rican-American body. The moving image also conveys symbolic associations with ritual sacrifice in Santería Orisha devotion and the transubstantiation of the Christian Eucharist. The body represented by the vessel and its lifeblood attests to the religious practices that shape and constitute the figure. However, mirrored video not only alludes to the deceased women and diaspora subject but to the viewers who stand to watch the clip only to catch a glimpse of themselves in the mirror's reflection. Here, as in the extension of the red linoleum flooring that reaches beyond the yellow tape to unite the viewer with the space, Osorio's figure is positioning the viewer as active participants/witnesses in the process of construction and destruction while pointing to the constructed representation, or myth, of the *Scene* before them. Significantly, the video performs the play of in/visibility that the installation conveys as a whole by serving as both an invisible sign of corporeal remaking and a visible reflection of the situated beholder, hinting at the way the viewer is to see and how they are addressed by the work of art.

Another important aspect of Osorio's *embelequero* aesthetic is the play of images and objects, which works to convey the visible and invisible aspects of identity-formation. Framed photographs collected from Osorio's Bronx community and the archives of the Center of Puerto Rican Studies (Hunter, City University of New York) are placed among found or purchased objects from the Bronx, filling the tops of tables, ledges, and shelves. National and popular icons such as flags, decorative maps, and prints vie for prominent locations on furniture and walls. Cameras and lighting equipment, consistent with crime scene investigations and movie sets, shine a spotlight on the shrouded female. Osorio is not only framing the shrouded women through the camera light and lens but also highlighting the congruent forms of interpellation over time and space from archival photo to national icons. By creating tension between images of Puerto Ricans and their objects of national pride, Osorio plays up archival

and popular modes of representation that together produce and regulate personal and group identity.<sup>38</sup>



Figure 3. Pepón Osorio, *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)*, Dining Room Detail, 1993. Mixed media and video installation, as shown at the 1993 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Collection of the Bronx Museum of Arts, New York. Photograph by Frank Gimpaya. Source: J.A. González, *Pepón Osorio*, 35.

At the dining table, there is another in/visible tension at work between the happy smiling family pictured on the backs of chairs and the domestic violence represented by a newspaper on the table with a fragmented headline that reads “...Beat My Wife” (Fig. 3). The newspaper is located nearest to the chair-back photo of a young smiling woman in three-quarters pose holding a flower opposite a close-lipped man in frontal position. Their respective locations offer suggestions about who the undisclosed women in the other room might be, as well as the suspected abusive husband of the newspaper report. Along the width of the table, two other people appear: a young boy pictured left across from a more mature woman in an up-do. Though the dining room hints at the absent figures seated around the table, the black and white photos, hairstyles, and period dress hint that they are from another time, perhaps a nod to the mid-century Great Puerto Rican Migration, which is contrasted by the crumpled foil of a recently consumed takeout dinner on the table. Moreover, the display evokes the conflicting positionalities of the gendered domestic sphere in both the younger woman at the head of the table, the mature woman seated to her right, and the shrouded figure in the living room. Long, red zipper strips and frilly lace embellish the edges of the dining room chairs and a white table cloth trimmed

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in lace and covered in plastic offer a gendered and class-based frame for reading these historic images and table setting. The scene at the dining room table signifies the home as an apparatus of gendered control as well as a means of matriarchal agency and a space of working-class conspicuous consumption marked by devotion to cultural preservation. The *embelequero* sensibility of “more is better” is rich with iconography from the newspaper, the photographs, the disused items, and the delicate fabrics and finishes. These symbols stand-in for the unseen figures though their objects of historical, contemporary, and consumer representations. The dining room arrangement assortment of images and objects allude to habit of consumption: how we consume to self-fashion and how we are consumed by the readership of news media. Within the compositional structure and materials of Osorio’s installation, the *embelequero* aesthetic conveys a significant critique of the foundations and distribution of stereotypes and identity categories inside and outside of the home.

The mystery becomes more complicated when one encounters an important historical figure from the early twentieth-century depicted on a dining room chair: she is the visionary storyteller and educator Pura Belpré (1899–1982). As the first Puerto Rican librarian in New York City, her bilingual outreach programs brought the library to the homes of Latino/a children and Latino/a folk tales to the broader public. In fact, by contributing to the shelves of international literatures during a time heightened post-World War I nationalism, fables like Belpré’s *Perez and Martina* (1932) bucked dominant trends in U.S. children’s literature and education. Beyond subverting convention, Belpré was invested in the generative capacity of storytelling. Of her craft she once said, “storytelling is a living art, and each teller embellishes, polishes and recreates as she goes along without losing the thematic value.”<sup>39</sup> Belpré conveys not only the multi-authored nature of storytelling but some of its key principles; namely, that storytelling should be supported by strong central themes and that embellishment, refinement, and improvisation are related and informed by the live context of the storyteller and audience. Osorio references this tradition of “living art” while gesturing towards Belpré’s vision of storytelling as a portal to other worlds and worldviews and as a model for a multi-authored community building. Though much more could be said about Osorio’s citation of Belpré and her legacy for Puerto Rican representation in U.S. libraries, it is important to point out that like Belpré, Osorio works in and with the community to tell a fantastical story through the many objects and voices displayed in the installation, declaring an “enunciatory present” in which “objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience.”<sup>40</sup> In so doing, Osorio subverts the univocal narrative and legacy of U.S. imperialism and its continued impact on working-class Puerto Ricans. By the same token, the *Scene* aspires to a community-authored cautionary tale about the consumers, producers, and regulators of cultural representation.

Having scoured the *Scene* for what the in/visible contingencies reveal, I focus again on the orienting figure at the center of the *Scene* for more clues about her story and



fate. As is apparent from the photographic evidence of the 1993 installation, the figure is continuously obscured—she is present but eerily absent within the proliferation demanded of the “*embelequero* aesthetic.”<sup>41</sup> Professor of visual culture, Liliana Ramos Collado states that the shrouded woman represents the Puerto Rican female who has been the ongoing victim of the colonial legacy. She adds, “[t]he habitat itself is a sort of prosthesis of the victim: this dead body is the emblem of Puerto Rican culture as a whole. Don’t be mistaken, this is the ancestral victim, the perpetual victim: the Other.” Cultural historian, Celeste Olalquiaga adds to this translation, saying that the coloniality and hybridity characteristic of many Latin American histories and cultures, means the “Third World” was in some ways postmodern before the “First World.”<sup>42</sup> If this shrouded body represents proto-postmodernity, then does the *Scene of the Crime* represent the ravages of the consumer era? While this interpretation offers an apt translation of the figure’s allegorized significance, I return again for more clues about the ways her absence is mediated by presence, or given form, and the ways it structures meaning and relates to the viewer in this troubling dream-like installation.

The parameters set by the installation medium provide a clue about the relationship between the figure and the viewer and how they are positioned in space and time. For example, the extension of the red linoleum floor designed to include the spectator who is nevertheless restricted by the yellow caution tape means that the figure can only be accessed through the objects and images that signify the presence of a “real” body. The viewer at the *Scene* engages but always in a historically and physically posterior position; they must piece together the victim’s identity with the bits of evidence left behind in the aftermath.<sup>43</sup> Again, the woman orients the beholder, her loss and absence drive the narrative of this dream world, fueling the spectacle within the immersive installation experience. Photos of community members and ancestors, furniture, and personal tchotchkes serve as proxy for the unseen woman, her social and class ambitions, her spiritual devotion, and her role and station in the home. These positionalities are played out in a series of tensions between image and object, the simulacrum and the real, the visual and the sensate. Osorio’s spatial composition and aesthetic of abundance convey the shrouded body as a contentious site of representation.

Charges against the installation’s presumed hyper-reality soon evaporate upon discovery of the adjacent installation space within which another relation appears between gender, race, and nationality. (Figure 4) Though there has been little mention of this part of the installation in the reviews of the time, it offers another potential answer to the titular prompt and parenthetical (*Whose Crime?*). The viewer is presented with another collection of objects and images, organized rows of shelved VHS tapes with films depicting stereotypes of Latino men, a counterpoint to the shrouded female body on the other side of the wall. Accompanying each tape are labels written by Puerto Rican-American men in Osorio’s Bronx community, who described



Figure 4. Pepón Osorio, *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)*, adjacent video room detail, 1993, mixed-media and video installation (as shown at the 1993 Biennial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), Collection of the Bronx Museum of Arts, New York. Image credit: Frank Gimpaya (Source: J.A. González, *Pepón Osorio*, 34.)

their essentialized representations in popular culture as violent, hypersexual, and poor—stereotypes that equally refer to Puerto Rican women and stem from a long colonial legacy. Among statements reflecting a sense of internalized racism, one participant commented “[y]ou see the negative stereotypes portrayed in the movies so many times that at some point you start believing them yourself.”<sup>44</sup> Like Osorio’s moment of becoming that observant *jibaro* at the center of *El Velorio*, the statement by the Puerto Rican participant bears witness to the power of the visual and its ability to foster critical ways of seeing and understanding. As evidence of widely distributed stereotypes, the VHS tapes and dining room newspaper render visible the fantasy of Other played out on either side of the shrouded figure. If the criminal activity is initiated by Imperialist and consumer desire then representation becomes the site of the violent homicide, killing off subjectivity with the commodification of difference. The viewer is not only presented with a double encounter between female and male but between the rational, modernist grid arrangement of Hollywood typologies and the irrational chaos of postmodern consumer culture, a commentary on the very debates between Modernism and kitsch, between the “West” and the “Other.”

Along with the video of the vessel hung at the back wall, the VHS tapes and the newspaper build upon the layers of meaning that determine the shrouded figure. The breaking and reconstructing of the vessel speaks to the endless loop of corporeal construction and destruction, the cycle of being made and remade in the popular imagination. It is not only an indictment of Hollywood, the media, and cultural institutions but of a public who consumes these fictional images as the real. González

emphasizes the importance of the installation medium in conveying these meta-links influencing subject formation saying works like *Scene of the Crime* invite people to occupy the space as the subject, working with the objects as,

indexical links to a larger social history of people and things...this social history of things is shown to 'situate' human subjects, to contribute to the processes of their subject formation and/or subjection. Installation art offers the frame to examine these processes and sometimes becomes the site for their critical restaging.<sup>45</sup>

Gonzalez's appraisal of the immersive and constitutive impact of the installation medium speaks equally to the *Scene's* attempt to engage the viewer across multiple registers of experience—as a subconscious, sensual, spatial, and political subject—within a saturation of representations that render visible their arbitrary construction.

If the show's reviewers missed the complex discursive play at work in the show, it was partly because our critical world was not ready for this new field of artistic production. They failed to realize their role in the work as an actor in a fictional world of layered iconography—a world where one reads images and objects through free association, activated by a sense of shock, identification, repulsion, and even confusion. Through the immersive experience of the installation, the activated beholder explores the various relationships prompted by the deceased woman, who is cloaked from view amidst a world of representations that compete to define her. Echoing art historian Huey Copeland's exploration of "invisibility and projection" in Lorna Simpson's *Guarded Conditions* (1989), the viewers of the *Scene of a Crime* take up various positions as victims, accomplices, witnesses, and even criminals in a history of "undisclosed transgressions," given access to the shrouded female but unable to enter given the parameters set by the yellow tape and the viewer's degree of engagement.<sup>46</sup>

The answer to the parenthetical question (*Whose Crime?*), then, involves mining the in/visible elements of this fictional tableau for its "representational possibilities."<sup>47</sup> Situated between art and reality (or the simulacrum and real, image and object, particular and universal), *Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)* constructs the very mediation of identity through cultural representation in all of tangible and intangible variations. Osorio's *embelequero* aesthetic not only highlights this mediation but creates a complicated subject who is figured through in/visibility: *chucherías* and print culture serve as surrogates for the shrouded figure's gender, class, race, and nationality. In spite of these cultural clues, her identity remains obscured within a profusion of forms that spill out towards the edges of the installation. Osorio's critique of cultural representation as consumer spectacle makes plain the self-perpetuating circuit of cultural production-consumption: how what we see, or consume, in the visual world can co-opt our thoughts and behaviors, inform our consumer habits,

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and come to define our sense of individuality and group bonds. In/visibility enacts the reality-fantasy of identity-formation while explicitly challenging corporatized identity categories against more complex notions of subjectivity.

However, if the shrouded figure is an allegory of the ravages of modernity, meeting the viewer as the subject-forming “Other,” then what are we to make of her demise? Is this the site of a domestic homicide, as indicated in the dining room newspaper? Did her material accumulation kill her? Was it Hollywood and the cultural institutions that finished her? Does she cease to exist as a harbinger of our postmodern humanity? Or, does our reading need to move beyond the surface of death to what can or must emerge, perhaps, a proposed new birth or new way of seeing? If we read the story being told at the site of the body, then we can position hybrid figures such as Oshún, the giver of life, and San Lázaro, the resurrected, as storytellers of her awakening.



Figure 5. Francisco Oller, *El Velorio (The Wake)*, 1893, oil on canvas, 96 x 156.5 inches, Collection of Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte, Universidad de Puerto Rico, San Juan. Public Domain.

I conclude by returning to the ritual spectacle depicted in Oller's *El Velorio* created exactly one century before Osorio's contemporary installation because it may offer some productive points of comparison for understanding the shrouded figure's demise. (Figure 5) Like the *Scene of the Crime*, *El Velorio* takes place in a (working-class) home, centers around a deceased figure, and is filled with signs of cultural and national identity while symbolically and compositionally employing a number of in/visible tensions. Walls neatly inventoried with period-specific objects contrast against indigenous foods hanging from ceiling beams, creating a “native” backdrop for a crowded event presided over by Spanish Church officials. A figure on the left plays a colonial guitar between a pair playing the Taíno maraca and *güiro*.

On the right, a native wooden *duho* (ceremonial chair) appears next to a lacquered chair of the colonial era. At the center, a ray of light squeezing through the wall planks shines a spotlight on an old man with a cane, who solemnly stands over a deceased child on a table covered in white lace and flowers. The observant *jibaro* calls attention to the distracted clergymen directly opposite him, who are inattentive to the ritual and fixated on the decadent feast. Oller describes this clerical greed in a show text in which he denounces the Church for its appropriation of local customs and describes the *baquiné* scene as “an orgy of brutish appetites under the guise of gross superstition.” The allegorized child calls attention to Oller’s critique of colonial hegemony, and like the shrouded woman of the *Scene*, positions the beholder of the life-sized tableau. Considering Osorio’s impactful experience with the work, it is not surprising that it was the *jibaro* with whom he most identified. More than a symbol of the colonial “Other,” who must shoulder the coeval burden of racism and classism, the Afro-Puerto Rican *jibaro* is the only figure mindful of the fall of his people to the exploits of imperialist expansion.<sup>48</sup>

Painted only five years before the Spanish-American War and the cession of Puerto Rico to the U.S. (1898), *El Velorio* offers a clear analysis of the center-periphery (colonizer-colonized) dynamic rendered by the native presence in a waning Spanish colonial world. This dialectic is visualized in the juxtaposition of native and modern objects and furniture as well as the peasant-bourgeoisie relation. Literary historian, Ramón E. Soto-Crespo interprets this iconography as symbolic of late colonial Spanish rule in Puerto Rico, saying, “it figures the truncated possibility of a nation in its youth and shows the mourning of a redundant space of thwarted possibilities.” Soto-Crespo’s passage becomes clearer when read against the economic and political context of the time in which Spanish taxation, plantation monopolies, and colonial reforms caused extreme economic and civic disparities resulting in pro-independence uprisings and the island’s first political parties. It represents not only the collapse, or death, of a young Spanish nation in turmoil, but an emerging “national aesthetic consciousness” caught in the tension of the Manichean world in crisis.<sup>49</sup> Not dissimilar to *El Velorio*, the shrouded figure of the *Scene of the Crime* represents the death of an old order of representation and an emerging aesthetic consciousness caught in a critical moment in Puerto Rico-U.S. history. Osorio expands Oller’s colonial (modern?) commentary with a postmodern inflection using recycled forms and traditional motifs to critique consumer subjectivation in a Late-Capitalist world.

In the end, the fantasy of the *Scene* speaks through a culturally specific lens (idiom) to amplify a larger critique relevant today, about the ways we are made and remade in the age of consumer culture. As an installation of a fictional Puerto Rican home staged within the galleries of a U.S. American museum, the *Scene of the Crime* facilitates this critique by displacing private and public spaces to create a new field of meaning and shifted perception. In this alternative world, the viewer is overwhelmed by the

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chaos and decorative excess surrounding the deceased protagonist whose crime they are implored to solve. *Emblequero* forms, like the Baroque fear of empty space, corroborate modern and postmodern fears of loss and displacement, anxieties transposed onto the domestic site of conspicuous consumption. Within the in/visible interstices of material surplus, The *Scene's emblequero* aesthetic also reveals the evidence of things unseen: the producers, regulators, and systems of cultural representation and subject formation.

By doing so, the installation invites the viewer to contemplate the lasting impact of colonial-consumer desire on the Other prostrate before them. Signifying both the end of her subjectivity and the conclusion of her commodification, the Other's murdered body becomes an embodiment of the viewer's alienation within a world of spectacle. However, if Osorio's *emblequero* aesthetic teaches us anything, it teaches us that the edifice we call Self is fundamentally constructed and can also be remade. Further, *emblequero* elements—like the looping video, hybrid deities, portraits of community members, and photo of Belpré—hint at an unfinished story in need of recreation. As makers in our own right, we might envision new “social architectures” in which difference is remade as a critical form of agency and collaborative process of community building.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the scholarship of Jennifer A. González, where I first learned about Osorio's self-proclaimed “emblequero” aesthetic; Jennifer González, *Pepón Osorio* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Press, 2013), 24. I would also like to thank my GC 512 Writing Workshop and my art history department peers and faculty at the University of Illinois at Chicago for their help and support.

<sup>2</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Kimmelman, “Art View: At the Whitney, Sound, Fury, and Little Else,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 1993, 1-4; Roberta Smith, “At the Whitney, A Biennial With A Social Conscience,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 1993, C1.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Kimball, “Of Chocolate, Lard, and Politics,” *National Review*, April 26, 1993, 55; Luis Camnitzer, “The Whitney Biennial,” *Third Text* Vol. 7, No. 23 (1993): 128; Rober

Hughes, "A fiesta of whining," *Time* Vol. 141, No. 2, April 22, 1993, 68.

<sup>5</sup> Camnitzer, "The Whitney Biennial," 130; Kimmelman, "At the Whitney," 2 & 4.

<sup>6</sup> The following scholars have contributed to my understating of in/visibility: Krista Thompson, "The Evidence of Things Not Photographed: Slavery and Historical Memory in the British West Indies," *Representations* Vol. 113 (Winter 2001): 39-71; Huey Copeland, "Bye, Bye Black Girl: Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat," *Art Journal* Vol. 64 No. 2 (Summer, 2005): 62-77; Stuart Hall's "articulation" theory of cultural processes—production, regulation, representation, identity, and consumption—see Paul Du Gay et al., *Doing Cultural Studies; The Story of the Sony Walkman* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), xxx.

<sup>7</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 10. *El Velorio (The Wake)* was exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1895. It is now housed at the Museum of Anthropology and History of the University of Puerto Rico. See Edward Sullivan, "Chapter Two: Francisco Oller at Home and Abroad," in *From San Juan to Paris and Back: Francisco Oller and Caribbean Art in the Era of Impressionism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014), 80.

<sup>10</sup> Sullivan, "Francisco Oller," 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> González, "*Pepón Osorio*," 10.

<sup>13</sup> For Osorio's activism with UBP, see González, *Pepón Osorio*, 3. The film, starring Paul Newman, was directed by Daniel Petrie and was controversial among police for its portrayal of a "bad cop" while also being controversial with Black and Puerto Rican Americans for its racist depictions. See Paul Skenazy, "Plots That Go Bang in the Dark," *The Threepenny Review* No. 8 (Winter, 1982): 26-27.

<sup>14</sup> For the "politics of representation" see Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley et al. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 441-449; Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "Stereotype, Realism and the Struggle Over Representation," in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism And The Media* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 178-219.

<sup>15</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 14-15 & 18-21.

<sup>16</sup> Susana Torruella Leval, "Introduction," in *Con To'lo Hierros* (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1991), 3 & 22; González, *Pepón Osorio*, 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 4-5.

<sup>18</sup> Félix Joaquín Rivera, "Why More Is Better," in *Con To'lo Hierros*, 37; González, *Pepón Osorio*, 6; Chon Noriega, *Pepón Osorio*, 1; Marvette Pérez and Yvonne Lassalle, "Interview with Pepón Osorio," *Radical History Review* Vol. 73, No. 4-21 (1999): 4-5 & 14.

<sup>19</sup> González, "*Pepón Osorio*," 91-92.

<sup>20</sup> Anna Indych, "Nuyorican Baroque: Pepón Osorio's Chucherías," *Art Journal* Vol. 60, No. 1 (Spring, 2001): 73; Coco Fusco, "Vernacular Memories," *Art in America* Vol. 79 No. 12 (December 1991): 99.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-74.

<sup>22</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 91.

<sup>23</sup> "Mode d'emploi du détournement" (The User's Guide to Détournement) was originally published in the Belgian surrealist journal *Les Lèvres Nues* #8 (May 1956); Also see "Guy Debord: Guide psychogéographique de Paris. Discours sur les passions de l'amour, 1957,"

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FRAC Centre-Val De Loire, accessed May 15, 2019, <http://www.frac-centre.fr/en/authors/rub/rubworks-318.html?authID=53&ensembleID=135&oeuvreID=652>; The legacy continues today in recent shows like *Corpocracy* (Houston, 2016) and *The Museum of Capitalism* (Oakland, 2017), which explore the ongoing realities and fantasies of consumer culture.

<sup>24</sup> Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "The Chicano Movement/The Movement of Chicano Art," in *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?* (Museum of Fine Arts Houston, International Center for the Arts of the Americas, 2012), 1032-1033; Chicano scholar Ybarra-Frausto describes "Los de abajo" as an "underdog" worldview of survival and adaptability; see Holly Barnet-Sanchez, "Tomás Ybarra-Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Bains: A Critical Discourse from Within," in *Art Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Winter, 2005), 92; Joan Ross Acoella, "Osorio's Plastic Heaven," *Artforum* Vol. 30 (January 1992): 65; Rivera, "Why More Is Better," 37.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Armstrong, "Impure Beauty," in *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2000), 4-5; Armstrong and Victor Zamudio-Taylor, "Franco Mondini Ruiz," in *Ultrabaroque*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Tirzo Martha (Curaçao) Dimitri Obergfell (United States) Jose Castellón (Panama), and Miguel Luciano (United States).

<sup>27</sup> Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards An Ethics Of Curating* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 98-157; For a review of the 1995 Whitney Biennial see M. Kimmelman, "A Quirky Whitney Biennial," *New York Times* (March 24, 1995); Caroline V. Wallace, "Exhibiting Authenticity: The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition's Protests of the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1968-71," *Art Journal* No. 2 (Summer, 2015): 1.

<sup>28</sup> In addition to Sussman, curators for the show included Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, Lisa Philips, and Jeanette Vuocolo; see Reilly, *Curatorial Activism*, 124-26; Camnitzer, "The Whitney Biennial," 128; Hughes, "A fiesta of whining"; Kimball, "Of Chocolate, Lard, and Politics," 54-56; Kimmelman, "Sound, Fury, and Little Else"; Jennifer González and Chon Noriega, "Peposo! A Conversation with Pepón Osorio," filmed May 16, 2014 at *Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños*, Hunter College, City University of New York, New York City, video, run time 1:44:08, <https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/events-news/events/meet-author/peposo-conversation-pepon-osorio>; Smith, "A Biennial With A Social Conscience," C1; Also see head curator Elisabeth Sussman's reflection on the Biennial in "Then and Now," *Art Journal* No. 64 (Spring, 2005): 74-79; For an overview of the 1993 Whitney Biennial see Judith Wilson, "Tackling White Privilege and Western-Centrism" in *Curatorial Activism*, ed. Maura Reilly (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 124-129.

<sup>29</sup> Hughes, "A fiesta of whining," 68.

<sup>30</sup> Kimmelman, "At the Whitney," 2-3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, "A Biennial with a Social Conscious," C1.

<sup>33</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 2; Hughes, "A fiesta of whining," 68; Kimmelman, "Sound, Fury, and Little Else," 1993; Smith, "A Biennial With A Social Conscience," C1.

<sup>34</sup> Sussman, "Then and Now," 75; Susan Muchnic, "King Beating Footage Comes to the Art World," *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 1993, [http://articles.latimes.com/1993-03-10/entertainment/ca-1355\\_1\\_art-world](http://articles.latimes.com/1993-03-10/entertainment/ca-1355_1_art-world).

<sup>35</sup> Shifra M. Goldman, "Latin American Art's U.S. Explosion," in *Resisting Categories: Latin American and/or Latino?* (Houston: Yale University Press, 2012), 903; bell hooks and



Amalia Mesa-Bains, *homegrown: engaged cultural criticism*, (Boston: South End Press, 2006), 82.

<sup>36</sup> Artist-activist included the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, the Art Workers' Coalition, New York "Art Strike" against War Repression, Racism, and Sexism, and the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee; See Wallace, "Exhibiting Authenticity," 5.

<sup>37</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 2 & 31.

<sup>38</sup> González and Noriega, "Peposo!," 34:01.

<sup>39</sup> Marilisa Jiménez-García, "Pura Belpré Lights the Storyteller's Candle: Reframing the Legacy of a Legend and What it Means for the Fields of Latino/a Studies and Children's Literature," *Centro Journal* Vol. 25 No 1 (Spring, 2014): 123.; Belpré's first 1932 publication, *Pérez y Martina*, recounts an inter-species folktale about lovely cockroach and dapper mouse that happily marry only to succumb to a tragedy of greed.

<sup>40</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 178.

<sup>41</sup> Photographs of the *Scene of the Crime* at the 1993 Whitney Biennial were commissioned by Osorio and taken by photographer Frank Gimpaya. A 2003 version of the *Scene of the Crime* was installed at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico (San Juan) and had a slightly different arrangement according to the photos. See, "Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)," Interview with Pepón Osorio," in *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 1, episode "Place," 2001, <https://art21.org/read/pepon-osorio-scene-of-the-crime-whose-crime/>

<sup>42</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 37; Cited from Lilliana Ramos and Manuel Alvarez Lezama, "Hollywood Kills: Performance of a Do-It-Yourself Dialog Kit," in *Pepón Osorio: De Puerta en Puerta/Door to Door*, ed. Marimar Benítez (San Juan: Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, 2000), 76. Indych, "Nuyorican Baroque," 74; Cited from Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 83-84.

<sup>43</sup> Tiffany Ana López, "Imagining Community: Video in the Installation Work of Pepón Osorio," in *Art Journal* Vol. 54, No. 4 (1995): 58; Copeland, "Bye, Bye Black Girl," 68.

<sup>44</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 1 & 33; López, "Imagining Community," 59.

<sup>45</sup> Jennifer González, "Introduction," in *Subject To Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge: MIT, 2008.), 10; Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 11.

<sup>46</sup> Copeland, "Bye, Bye Black Girl," 68.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson, "The Evidence," 39.

<sup>48</sup> González, *Pepón Osorio*, 34; Sullivan, "Francisco Oller," 86.

<sup>49</sup> César Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, "Introduction" and "1898—Background and Immediate Consequences," in *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1-32; Sullivan, "Francisco Oller," 81-83; Cited from Ramón E. Soto-Crespo: "'The Pains of Memory': Mourning the Nation in Puerto Rican Art and Literature," *MLN* Vol. 112, No. 2 Hispanic Issue (March, 2002): 451.

## Guillermo Gómez-Peña's Barriopunk Performance and Postcolonial Cyborg Invasion

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In 1978, performance artist, Guillermo Gómez-Peña crossed the Tijuana-San Diego border on foot to attend the California Institute of the Arts. In the mid-1990s, the artist described his experience as an immigrant in the U.S. as being trapped in a “disnarrative science-fiction film.” Outlining the plot of this uncanny reality, he wrote: “The Cold War ends as the U.S. drug war begins. The South replaces the East as the new threatening otherness...The Berlin wall is abolished exactly when the United States begins to militarize its border with Mexico...Central America and Mexico move to the right...the United States invades Panama.”<sup>1</sup> These events characterized the surreal era during which Gómez-Peña migrated from Mexico to the United States. His border crossing also aligned with key political, economic, and techno-scientific developments within and between both nations. Increasingly contentious North-South American relations were concurrent with breakthroughs in computing technology and the genesis of the World Wide Web. The rhetoric of “openness” that defined late twentieth-century global trade liberalization seemed to seep into the promotion of these new technologies, which were branded as free from identity, politics, geographic borders, and bodily limitations. However, the new cyber frontier was inaccessible for many in the global south who were kept out by national, technological, and political barriers.

In the early 1980s, many Latin American countries including Chile and Mexico, encountered a period of precipitous economic decline referred to as the “lost decade.” As the Mexican economy stagnated and national debt grew, workers were under pressure to immigrate to North America. This rapid defection from South to North galvanized anti-immigration attitudes in U.S. culture and society, as well as politics.<sup>2</sup> Gómez-Peña’s father, concerned with Mexico’s financial instability, advised that he, “stay in Southern California and wait for better times.”<sup>3</sup> The artist complied and settled north of the U.S.-Mexico border, where he would witness the cultural and political backlash against South American immigrants that came to define the 1990s.

In order to confront the influx of Mexican immigrants and reinforce its economic foothold in Latin America, the U.S. signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Mexico and Canada in 1992. Gómez-Peña responded with performances that mapped both junctures—the dawn of the digital age and the resurgence of racialized anti-immigrant sentiment—onto one site: the body. Along with collaborators and his still-active performance collective, “La Pocha Nostra,” he ventured into temporal and virtual borderlands, appropriating and re-politicizing cyberculture and media through performances of ‘ethno-cyborg’ personae. Together,

the members of “La Pocha Nostra” built worlds and birthed characters as a mechanism through which to confront the new, developments in technology and geo-politics that were emerging towards the end of the millennium. Gómez-Peña upended the utopian and dystopian ideologies found in U.S. and European science fiction, commandeering its tropes to critique the misrepresentation of Mexican migrants in pop culture and political discourse.

### **Early Performances and Postcolonial Science Fiction**

In his early performances throughout the 1980s, Gómez-Peña addressed issues surrounding immigration through various performative interventions at the border between the U.S. and Mexico. However, Gómez-Peña’s practice evolved from site-specific to temporal, confronting contemporary intercultural antagonism by exploring its roots in colonial history. He was particularly critical of the 1992 Quincentenary ‘celebrations’ of Columbus’s arrival in the “New World,” and joined the subsequent outbreak of counter-demonstrations through performance art. Gómez-Peña and Cuban-American artist, Coco Fusco, collaborated on a series of performances collectively known as, *The Year of the White Bear*, which centered on appropriating and satirizing the whitewashed history of the Americas to counter hegemonic accounts of the 500-year history of colonialism in the region. Among the first of the artists’ Quincentennial performances was, *Norte-Sur* (1990), which is documented in the publication, *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back* (2000).<sup>4</sup> In a series of photo-performances, Fusco and Gómez-Peña smile while holding bottles of Coca Cola and a box of microwavable pizza, as a self-explanatory caption reads: “Authentic Cuban Santera (i.e. Coco Fusco) and El Aztec High-Tech (i.e. Guillermo Gómez-Peña) welcome Columbus with Ritual Offerings.” Their sardonic gifts of commercial goods sought to upend colonial readings of indigeneity as inherently primal or savage. This rupture was literally embodied by “El Aztec High-Tech,” who wore a kitschy costume based on traditional Aztec attire, including a gold chest plate, arm and leg cuffs, a headdress and loincloth, black sunglasses, and boots.<sup>5</sup> The outfit was a fusion of customary garments and “modern” accessories that created what Fusco referred to twenty years later as a, “guttural mix of Náhuatl phonemes and global brand names” that conflated ostensibly incongruous temporal signifiers.<sup>6</sup> Arguably a blueprint for future ethno-techno performance personae, “El Aztec High-Tech” also explored the legacies, contemporary manifestations, and futures of European and U.S. imperialism in Mexico as a time travelling storyteller. In the 1994 collection of performance documentation and texts, *Warrior for Gringostroiika*, Gómez-Peña explained that “El Aztec High-Tech” was able to, “zigzag from past to future and from the personal to the historical,” sharing stories from various perspectives and times.<sup>7</sup>

These performances critiqued what John Rieder, author of *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008), described as, “the idea of development as linear, cumulative and unlimited,” dating back to nineteenth-century colonial expansion.<sup>8</sup>

During this era of imperialism, “the anachronistic structure of anthropological difference,” that is, a reading of non-Western cultures as earlier, inferior versions of the colonizer’s society, was a core concept of coloniality, techno-scientific thought, and the fictions they inspired.<sup>9</sup> Gómez-Peña and Fusco overturned this anachronistic reading throughout *The Year of the White Bear*, culminating in their well-known collaboration, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (1992–1994), which drew attention to the exhibition, objectification, and fetishization of non-Western cultures and bodies throughout history. Touring around the world from the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C. (1992), to the Columbus Plaza in Madrid, Spain (1992), and the Whitney Biennial in New York (1993), they performed stereotypes of an ‘authentic,’ ‘primal,’ Other. *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* was largely based on the history of colonial-anthropological displays created to satisfy European audiences’ voyeuristic impulses toward the Other, inaugurated by Columbus’ exhibition of an Arawak person from the Caribbean in Spanish Court 500 years earlier.<sup>10</sup> From within a golden cage, the artists satirized the objectification and fetishization of non-Western cultures and bodies by performing as members of an “undiscovered” indigenous culture from the fictional island of “Guatinaui.” Gómez-Peña and Fusco enacted colonial fantasies of control and cultural purity as they arrived in leashes held by white, uniformed guards, entered the cage, and performed for viewers by singing, dancing, and telling stories in their fictional language. However, their use of contemporary media throughout the performance quickly ruptured the fantasy: Fusco danced for the crowds but she did so while playing rap music and wearing Converse sneakers. In a joint interview with Anna Johnson in 1993, Fusco described this as an attempt to defy the desire for “authentic” cultures that are assumed to come from, “a time and place that is completely untouched by Western civilization.”<sup>11</sup> In response, Gómez-Peña elaborated on the fetishization of authenticity, noting:

Authenticity is an obsession of Western anthropologists...when I am in the United States, North Americans are constantly making this artificial division between what is an “authentic” Chicano, an “authentic” Mexican, an “authentic” Native American in order to fulfill their own desires. Generally speaking, this authentic Other has to be pre-industrial, has to be more tuned with their past, has to be less tainted by post-modernity, has to be more innocent and must not live with contemporary technology.<sup>12</sup>

The artists subverted this colonial-anthropological desire with their intermittent use of laptops, televisions, and other techno-artifacts in *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*. For those who believed their performance was an actual display of indigenous people from faraway lands, the use of electronic media were violations of the fetishistic desire for cultural purity. Along with the performers’ inclusion of contemporary

commercial products in *Norte-Sur* and “El Aztec High-Tech’s” sartorial temporal bricolage, their work subverted the ethnocentric narratives of indigeneity that were foundational to early science fiction stories.

### **The Barriopunk Uprising**

*The Year of the White Bear* was an important antecedent to the cyberpunk-rooted performances that Gómez-Peña produced in the years that followed. He settled in California in the mid-1990s, after touring internationally with Fusco, by which time the personal computer and the internet had become promising tools for accessing information, improving interconnectivity, and defying physical barriers in cyberspace. The virtual world was designated as an apolitical, post-identity, post-corporeal, digital utopia. A corollary symbol of techno-utopian disembodiment, the hero-cyborg became a popular premise in stories wherein, according to Adam Bostic, a New York-based artist and writer, “the hero’s transformation through technology into a new, improved whole” proceeds from their embracement of, “fragmentation as an element of an enhanced cyborgian body and self.”<sup>13</sup> The popularization of computers not only reinvigorated a cultural fascination with science fiction but also became a useful tool for filmmakers to realize their futurist visions onscreen. The groundbreaking computer-generated adventure *Tron* (1982), released during Gómez-Peña’s time at the California Institute of the Arts, epitomized the budding pop cultural fascination with cyberculture and technology’s role in rendering futurist fantasies on the silver screen.

When Gómez-Peña graduated from Cal Arts in 1983, the personal computer had been named *Time Magazine’s* first and, thus far, only machine of the year, heralding an era of new hopes and anxieties about technology’s potential displacement of human beings.<sup>14</sup> The latter sentiment was fomented in popular culture a decade later with the science fiction sub-genre, known as cyberpunk. Introducing their collection of critical writings on cyber culture, *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (1996), Featherstone and Burrows defined cyberpunk as an exploration of, “the twin themes of technological body modification and the notion of cyberspace.”<sup>15</sup> They cited cyberpunk films, including Ridley Scott’s near-future fiction, *Blade Runner* (1982) and James Cameron’s action adventure, *The Terminator* (1984), as rejoinders to early cyborg heroism that take a grimmer stance on techno-mediated disembodiment. Both films, Featherstone and Burrows noted, are set in “implosion ‘communities’ of Los Angeles,” and both envisioned, “the intersecting of the digital domain with the technology of the street” in which “a complex continuum of human-machine fusions” began to supersede optimistic cyborg heroism.<sup>16</sup> Cyberpunk proposed futures wherein our understanding of and control over the machines we were yet to build had already been lost. Inverting the fantasy of cyberspace and cyborgs as empowerment through technology, U.S. cyberpunk envisioned the use of machines to exploit humanity’s vulnerabilities.

Gómez-Peña's first engagement with cyberpunk can be seen in an early iteration of his series of living dioramas, *Ethno-Cyberpunk Trading Post & Curio Shop on the Electronic Frontier* (1994–1995). The living dioramas were complex installations that served as backdrops to interactive performances featuring props, costumes, and sets made from objects and materials that evoked racial-ethnic stereotypes of Latin Americans. Audiences navigated these mysterious, often chaotic environments, in which offensive tropes and absurd caricatures had materialized alongside then-reified technologies. The *Trading Post* diorama featured the performances of Gómez-Peña and long-time collaborators, “La Pocha Nostra” members, Roberto Sifuentes and James Luna. The following year, Gómez-Peña published, *Temple of Confessions: Mexican Beasts and Living Santos* (1996), in which he detailed the anthropological roots of the display and described the performers as, “exotic specimens.”

“La Pocha Nostra” opted to create a website for the *Trading Post* so that audiences could provide feedback by answering an anonymous ethnographic questionnaire that probed their unbridled feelings towards, and opinions about, Mexicans and Native Americans. Viewers’ intercultural confessions served as a unique, if not disturbing, source of inspiration for some of Gómez-Peña’s most well-known, later performances. In his 2001 essay, “Chicano Interneta: The Search for Intelligent Life in Cyberspace,” the artist notes that his early ambivalence toward technology was superseded by a desire to, “work against it, to question it, expose it, subvert it, and/or imbue it with humor, radical politics, and *linguas polutas*.”<sup>17</sup> “La Pocha Nostra’s” inaugural use of nascent computer technology in their performances self-reflexively critiqued the utopian, apolitical discourse surrounding commercial cyberspace.

In 1993, Gómez-Peña explained the impetus for mining U.S. media for appropriable elements, which included not only pop cultural tropes, stereotypes, and fictions, but also the communication technologies through which they were propagated.<sup>18</sup> He described this as an act of *rasquachismo*, the “political practice” of repurposing “everything the United States sends to Latin America” through the humorous and irreverent appropriation of its images and materials to produce, “voluntary kitsch... an altar from hubcaps, a temple from plastic, a decoration for the house from cereal boxes.”<sup>19</sup> Four years prior, the influential art historian, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, theorized *rasquache* as a creative problem-solving process, listing Gómez-Peña as one of many artists engaging with a mode of Chicana cultural production and resistance rooted in appropriation, reversal, and inversion.<sup>20</sup> This “bicultural lived reality” and “working class sensibility” encompassed the everyday strategy of splicing of multiple sources, objects or ideas—including the ostensibly incongruous, low or kitsch, discarded, disreputable, etc.—as a form of survival, resistance, and subversion.<sup>21</sup> By 2000, Gómez-Peña dubbed the online elements of his ethno-techno performances as “techno-rasquache art,” which fused, “performance art, epic rap poetry, interactive television, experimental radio, and computer art, but with a Chicanocentric perspective and a sleazoid bent.”<sup>22</sup> By employing the ethnographic online survey in *Trading Post*, he

reversed the notion of cyberspace as an escapist utopia by turning it into a site of racial revelations. Describing himself as a “newly arrived cyber-immigrant,” “Web-back,” and “el nuevo virus virtual,” he sought to combine viewers’ prejudices and undisclosed fetishes with cyberspace to politicize technology, to “brownify” and “infect” it.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, *Trading Post* featured a performance by Robert Sifuentes as an ethno-techno called “El Cyber Vato,” described as an inner-city Chicano youth, “wanted by MTV and the Los Angeles Police department,” who is tech-savvy, addicted to drugs, and a, “survivor of innumerable cultural drive-by shootings,” as indicated by his streetwear, which is riddled with bullet holes.<sup>24</sup> (Figure 1) In 2010, Lysa Rivera, scholar of Chicana and African American literature and culture, analyzed the details of this persona’s hybrid body, which invokes the metaphor of the cyborg to, “symbolize and literally embody the constructive ‘nature’ of Chicano media stereotypes” that takes place through, “language, social practices, and regimes of knowledge and power.”<sup>25</sup> However, “El Cyber Vato’s” satirizing of media constructions does not stop at racial-ethnic or national stereotypes but extends more broadly to the good/evil or hero/villain binaries that pervaded U.S. science fiction narratives and their ostensibly-nuanced iterations in cyberpunk.



Figure 1.  
*Cyber Vato Prototype from El Mexterminator Project Series*  
 1997  
 Roberto Siguentes  
 Photo-performance.  
 Photo © Eugenio Castro  
 Courtesy of the La Pocha  
 Nostra Archive, San  
 Francisco

Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes incorporated the conventional traits of science fiction protagonists, who benefit from and are praised for their radicality and anti-authoritarianism, into the ethno-technos' backstories. In his 2016 book, *Biopunk Dystopias*, Lars Schmeink argued that despite the discursive distance between cyber-heroes and cyberpunks, the humanist ideals of the former are also embedded in the latter's, "outcast heroes, the lowlifes, drifters, drug users, and petty criminals" who are characterized by an "aggressive rejection of authority... as well as on the disillusionment with the established order of late capitalism." Even machines in cyberpunk science fiction are capable of—and celebrated for—resisting control through rugged individualism. As historian Walter McDougall noted in 1985:

Americans delight in such futuristic epics as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* precisely because the human qualities of a Captain Kirk or Han Solo are always victorious over the very technological mega-systems that make their adventures possible. We want to believe that we can subsume our individualism into the rationality of systems yet retain our humanity still.<sup>27</sup>

The same could be said of cyberspace heroes and their later cyberpunk anti-hero counterparts that push against, but do not dismantle, the systems around them. Schmeink notes that U.S. cyberpunk's critical and revolutionary potential is severely limited, as its protagonists, "easily navigate the multinational capitalist world and find their own way of survival rather than trying to incite social changes."<sup>28</sup> "La Pocha Nostra's" ethno-technos, on the other hand, directly address issues of race, gender, and nationality, and collectively seek liberation. A core irony of "El Cyber Vato's" *Matrix*-esque hacking skills, indestructibility, and criminal past is that his traits align more closely to North America's cyber-heroes and anti-heroes than to its villains.

In racializing cyberpunk concerns, "La Pocha's" ethno-technos can be readily placed within the context of Mexican and Chicana science fiction literature and cinema. South of the U.S. border, Mexican science fiction reflected skepticism of NAFTA and its proponents' assurances that a new era of economic prosperity would be ushered in at the turn of the century. Pepe Rojo noted in 2015 that, in response to increasingly urgent issues of financial turmoil and anti-immigrant hostility, Mexican science fiction tends to frame, "science and technology...as the mechanisms through which neo-liberalism encroaches and embeds itself in the body in order to produce wealth, and not as liberating devices."<sup>29</sup> Storytellers' focus on physical labor, restricted transnational movement, and economic production complicates the issues of corporeality, corporate greed, and urban decay that U.S. cyberpunk has only begun to explore; consequently, their particular engagement with the genre can be categorized as *rasquache*. By hybridizing generic cyberpunk with specific, pressing, cultural concerns, Mexican and Chicana appropriations were more politically-attuned to



issues of labor, capital exchange, neoliberalism, and techno-scientific threats, as well as more equipped to overtly confront them.

As such, Border and Chicana futurisms from the 1990s, along with “La Pocha Nostra’s” ethno-techno performances, might be referred to more specifically as “Barriopunk,” to borrow a term from Matt Martínez, guitarist of the Chicano punk band, *Over the Counter Intelligence*.<sup>30</sup> Categorically associated with, but distinct from cyberpunk science fiction, “Barriopunk” can encompass borderland cyber-stories that take U.S. cyberpunk’s mise-en-scène as a launchpad for more radical speculative futurisms that address not only the potentially fraught co-existence of humans and machines in future urban society, but also the intersecting concerns of geo-politics, neoliberal capitalism, immigration, race, ethnicity, (bi)nationality, and class. “Barriopunk” subverts and complicates cyberculture by re-orientating its motifs towards the barrios between and within the U.S. and Mexico.

### **Invading Mass Media**

Responses from the *Trading Post* online questionnaire continued to pour in throughout the run of the exhibition, prompting Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes to keep the website running. They embedded/integrated viewers’ anti-immigration confessions into their newest projects, resulting in mechanical, gender-bending, culturally-spurious chimaeras built to invade, both, the fantasies and nightmares of cyberspace and cyborgs in U.S. popular culture. Through *techno-rascuache*, Gómez-Peña built ethno-technos from the fragments of U.S. cyberculture and Mexican/Chicana stereotypes that became progressively more overt and damaging in the midst of NAFTA negotiations between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. Political rhetoric in California paralleled these negative media images. As stated by sociologist, Douglas Massey, although, “[U.S.] politicians have [continually] found it convenient to demonize immigrants during periods of social upheaval and economic insecurity... during the 1980s the symbolic portrayal of immigrants as a threat reached new heights.”<sup>31</sup>

Gómez-Peña’s “El Mexterminator” is a mashup of references from *Mad Max* (1980), *The Terminator* (1984), and viewer suggestions submitted through “La Pocha’s” online questionnaire. (Figure 2) In *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back* (2000), Gómez-Peña describes “El Mexterminator,” also known as “El Mad Mex,” in detail. This ethno-techno crosses the border illegally in stilettos; he is a “jalapeño-pusher” and defender of immigrants’ rights; he is a fugitive from the FBI and the Smithsonian; he practices “narcoshamanism” and is, “sponsored by the Gulf Cartel and Zapatista movement.”<sup>32</sup>

The Zapatista Liberation Army, a guerilla group from Chiapas, Mexico that rallied against the neo-liberal agenda of NAFTA in 1994, used the internet as a tool of



Figure 2  
*El Mexterminator Project*  
Series  
1993  
Photo: Monica Naranjo  
Courtesy of the La Pocha  
Nostra Archive, San  
Francisco

communication and organization. Gómez-Peña references the Zapatista uprising, since the indigenous-led, internet-mediated protest exemplified the appropriation of technology as a tool for resistance. Inspired by their revolutionary re-orientation of computer technology, Gómez-Peña used viewer responses to build “El Mexterminator,” a persona derived from fictional images of infallible techno-villains in Western cinema spliced with real-world fears of invading Mexican immigrants. As the artist stated in an interview,

Since a majority of the [survey] responses... portrayed Mexicans and Chicanos as threatening Others, indestructible invaders, and public enemies of America’s fragile sense of coherent national identity, we titled our new performance project, Mexterminator, referencing the superhuman, robotic assassins of the Schwarzenegger movies.<sup>33</sup>

Gómez-Peña used the audience’s feedback as inspiration to delve deeper into their

own nightmares about the future. The character is cyborgian in both costume and conceptualization, stitched together with viewers' anxiety and paranoia, and reborn to confront them as the Frankenstein of their own cultural misconceptions and futurist fictions.

The utopian narrative of openness in cyberspace fiction and marketing was paralleled by the North American Free Trade Agreement's promises of open migration and cross-cultural exchange between Mexico and the U.S. Concurrently, media-fueled hostility toward Mexican migrant workers reached a fever pitch, as distressed Californians voted to initiate Proposition 187, denying public services to approximately 1.3 million undocumented people.<sup>34</sup> As scholar and author Lysa Rivera noted, the "schizophrenic moment" of the mid-1990s, a time characterized by a disorienting flood of mixed messaging in mass media, from futurist visions of techno-mediated, borderless utopias, to racist, anti-immigration propaganda catering to white nationalist panic.<sup>35</sup> She gives examples of the incongruous messages one might have received watching broadcast television at the time. First, one might see a commercial for the now-defunct telecommunications company, MCI, naively declaring the internet to be a post-identity, post-corporeal, technological dreamscape: "There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Utopia? No, Internet."<sup>36</sup> The advertisement might then have been followed by the campaign advertisement of California governor and Prop 187 proponent Pete Wilson, in which throngs of immigrants storm over the southern U.S. border as a voiceover gravely warns, "They keep coming."<sup>37</sup> This was a significant moment for Gómez-Peña, who witnessed firsthand the, "schism between the transnationalist rhetoric of a new borderless society and the vitriolic anti-immigration rhetoric that dominated the airwaves and editorials."<sup>38</sup> In response, the artist organized a live television intervention called, *El Naftazteca: Cyber-Aztec TV for 2000 A.D.* (1994). It was the culmination of Gómez-Peña's post-NAFTA *techno-rasquache*. The broadcast—subsequently edited for distribution and screened internationally—was an interactive performance in which "Cyber-Aztec pirates" addressed television audiences, "from their underground vato-bunker."<sup>39</sup> "El Cyber Vato" (Roberto Sifuentes) from the *Trading Post* returned alongside "El Naftazteca" (Guillermo Gómez-Peña), who is described as an apocalyptic disc-jockey and cross-cultural salesman, also known as, the Information Superhighway Bandido. (Figure 3) El Naftazteca greets "Post-NAFTA America" from inside a set similar to La Pocha Nostra's living dioramas in its controlled chaos. Various electronic props are stacked on top of each other, including glitching black and white monitors, flashing bulbs, and machines covered in dials and buttons, which the characters intermittently use. Sombreros and traditional northern Mexican Saltillo blankets are hung on the walls and a fake chicken is suspended over El Naftazteca's news desk, which is laden with bright, kitschy sculptures of cacti and parrots, votive candles, alcohol, and more mechanical props, including a keyboard and two large dials.



Figure 3.

*El Naftazteca: Cyber-Aztec TV for 2000 A.D.*  
1994.

El Naftazteca speaks to the viewers.

Video Still.

Border Art Clásicos (1990-2005) [Videorecording] : An Anthology of Collaborative Video Works. 2007. Chicago, ILL: Video Data Bank.

Like previous performances, the work featured technology-mediated interactivity; viewers were invited to respond to questions—about their real desired age, race and gender, their cultural fears, etc.—throughout the broadcast by telephone or the internet. The work was an assemblage of reality and fantasy, alternate histories and individual memories. Gómez-Peña's past works feature prominently, introduced by "El Naftazteca" as an archive of memory that traces the history of his performances through brief video clips. The first clip is from a performance featuring Gómez-Peña as the "Border Brujo" and Coco Fusco as "Miss Discovery" from their collaborations during *The Year of the White Bear*. Between clips of Gómez-Peña's past performances, callers chime in, and collaborators, including the director of "El Naftazteca," Adriene Jenik, wear Mexican wrestling masks and work in the background, typing on keyboards or holding video cameras. Soon, "El Naftazteca" introduces viewers to the main attraction, the *Technopal 2000*, a "Mexicano Memory Retrieval System." During a trial run of the virtual reality simulator, "El Cyber Vato" dons the VR headset and is immersed in a series of nightmares where memories and fears blur within cyberspace. His memories become fodder for the *Technopal 2000*'s personalized scenarios, which

includes the ethno-techno being arrested and assaulted.

In one scenario, called *Borderscape 2000*, he is transported to the U.S./Mexico border, which at first seems to “El Cyber Vato” to be peaceful and picturesque but descends into chaos as he suddenly realizes he is being hunted by immigration officers. The scenario is “way too real” according to “El Cyber Vato,” who begs for the program to be changed as he falls to the floor, doubled over in fear. From the back of a police vehicle to the fraught U.S./Mexico border, the virtual setting remains tethered to the physical body and spaces, which “El Cyber Vato” is unable to transcend, failing to achieve the freedom in cyberspace promised by commercial, political, and pop cultural testaments. This is a significant failure; unable to overcome technological oppression, “El Cyber Vato’s” suffering re-introduces the stakes of Gómez-Peña’s initial intervention. That *El Naftazteca* successfully aired might be construed as possible proof of technology’s role as a platform in which all messages and ideas, even an act of pirate television, can be freely expressed and shared. In her publication, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours: And Other Writings* (2013), Coco Fusco cautioned that, along with other successful subaltern appropriations of technology, this narrative might sterilize the self-reflexive criticality of similar appropriations and interventions, as they ultimately, “enhance rather than disrupt [technology’s] emancipatory script,” given that:

to focus solely on these apparent electronic victories misleadingly constructs the thrust of technological development as benevolent and economically disinterested. It also occludes the ways in which the industries that underpin the digital revolution contain information about their own undemocratic, if not inhumane practices.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, it has become necessary to embed within these victories reminders of their ultimately provisional and finite potential. Despite their power and boldness, ethno-techno beings still face obstacles and quagmires, symbolized by the nightmare scenarios of the *Technopal 2000*, which continue to pervade the digital realm, including hate speech, threats of violence, white supremacist rhetoric, and other forms of cyber-racism. In *El Naftazteca*, “El Cyber Vato” remained imprisoned by the worldly limitations of his body, his nationality, and his own memory. Even in the midst of a successful cable broadcast takeover, the *Technopal 2000* reminds viewers that the borders used to keep “Barriopunks” at bay cannot be surmounted by any singular act of transgression and consequently, that the fight for a techno-revolution must continue.

### **Drafting a Postcolonial Future**

In the 1995 article, “Postcolonial Cyborgs: Subjectivity in the Age of Cybernetic Reproduction,” published less than a year after *El Naftazteca* first aired, Joseba

Gabilondo defined cyberspace as an, “interface between the cyborg and the ghost/monster” in which, “everything left outside, repressed, comes back...as exterior ghosts/monsters that haunt the interior and its cyborgs: computer-hackers, gangs, drug dealers, serial killers, serial rapists, homeless armies, illegal immigrants, mad third-world leaders.”<sup>41</sup> Gabilondo describes “two utopian paradoxes” that pervaded cyberspace in the 1980s and early 1990s: the cyber-world as, “a virtual democracy in which cultural differences become invisible and thus do not serve as bases for discrimination and oppression,” as in typical 90s cyberspace discourse, and the cyber-world as, “the final frontier for hacking, terrorism against the system, etc.,” as was the basis for cinematic cyberpunk stories.<sup>42</sup> By way of Gómez-Peña’s *technorasquachismo*, both utopias are critiqued from the outside: the former, by the “exterior ghosts/monster” in the form of racialized ethno-technos, and the latter, by their rejection of what Fusco has referred to as, “a rather convenient masquerade of diversity” starring cyberpunk’s faux rebels and outcasts.<sup>43</sup> In his 2014 presentation at the *Platform Summit*, science fiction filmmaker, Alex Rivera, noted that Latinx immigrants who travel north of the U.S.-Mexico border, “are travelling a great distance, taking great risks,” and, as a result, are, “pursued and criminalized,” while, “[fictional] characters who were doing the same things—travelling great distances, taking great risks, doing something to pursue their dreams—were not being criminalized, those were our heroes.”<sup>44</sup> The ethno-techno ghosts/monsters of “La Pocha Nostra” problematized this ideological selectivity by haunting the ostensibly open utopias and revolutionary dystopias that cyberspace and cyberpunk represented in the United States toward the turn of the century. They critiqued and co-opted imperious and centralized techno-scientific developments, as well as their fictional derivatives in mass culture, to explore different but overlapping inter-American issues including, colonial legacies, neoliberalism, and economic exploitation. Gómez-Peña worked with and against the scientific and technological commodities, not just withheld from marginal communities, but actively deployed against them and often used to justify imperialism or foment fear and hostility.

Media and culture scholar John Rieder argues that science fiction can be a self-reflexive tool for exposing colonial frameworks and defying their logic since it, “pictures a possible future instead of the past.”<sup>45</sup> Gómez-Peña and “La Pocha Nostra” adopted strategies of imagining in defiance of technocratic colonial impulses in science fiction and its subgenres, critiquing its construction of history, as well as maintaining an invested critical engagement with the present. At the same time, as Malisa Kurtz noted in her 2016 dissertation, *Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Science Fiction: Nomadic Transgressions*, the postcolonial lens is attentive to the way a focus on future risks erases, “the historical context of the past and recurring cycles of violence that are perpetuated against specific groups of people,” thus problematizing farsightedness and what it, “reveals about contemporary fascinations with techno-utopian possibility.”<sup>46</sup> In “Barriopunk,” there exists neither the false

utopias of cyber-heroism nor the hollow rebellions of cyberpunk. Instead, *cyber-rasquache* “Barriopunk” invaders of the virtual frontier reject superficial cyber-cultural insurgencies and pollute, both, the digital utopias and dystopias popular in U.S. science fiction. Gómez-Peña’s appropriation of U.S. media from cyberculture to stereotyping constitutes the kind of radical futurity and fabulation that exemplify postcolonial science fiction practices.<sup>47</sup>

Questions and visions for the future in science fiction and fantasy are often inspired by the imagined potential of science and technology; at the same time, science fiction in literature and cinema has inspired a myriad of technological developments. H.G. Wells’ writing alone, inspired both the submarine and the fission reactor that preceded the atomic bomb.<sup>48</sup> Radical imagining and speculation can catalyze the materialization of these visions, which in turn inspires new fantasies and aspirations for the future. As this cycle of fantasy and fabrication recurs, the erosion of political stability, indigenous knowledge and imagination, and migratory freedom throughout the Americas continues to be facilitated by techno-scientific media and culture. By tapping into the critical potential of science fiction, Gómez-Peña has been able to invent and re-tell stories that may be overlooked by, unimaginable within, or antithetical to hegemonic, politically-neutral narratives associated with technoscientific popular culture. Concluding his *Platform Summit* address, Alex Rivera posited that, “fiction is not an escape from reality, it’s the first draft of reality. The battle over real power tomorrow begins with the struggle over who gets to dream today.”<sup>49</sup> Gómez-Peña and “La Pocha Nostra” crafted visual stories that not only offered insights into the past and visions of alternative futures, but also exemplified the practice of radical imagining that today’s dreamers might use to draft tomorrow’s realities.

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## **¡Géntromancer! Battling Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District: An Interview with Josué Rojas**

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### **Introduction**

In September 2016, Josué Rojas exhibited his solo show, ¡Géntromancer! at Acción Latina's Juan R. Fuentes Gallery in the Mission District of San Francisco illustrating the current wave of displacement affecting the neighborhood. The exhibition, which included paintings, drawings, and local poems from the community, responded to the theme of gentrification. Within the last decade, over 8,000 Latinxs have been displaced from the Mission neighborhood, which is over 25% of its community.<sup>1</sup> From 2004–2014, no affordable housing units were built in the district, yet luxury properties sprouted up on every block.<sup>2</sup> As part of the exhibition, a broadsheet was published in *El Tecolote*—a local bilingual newspaper founded in the Mission—which included poems by students, teachers, and poets. In ¡Géntromancer!, Rojas allegorically expressed a visual resistance to gentrification through the use of Mesoamerican imagery referencing the Mayan text, *Popol Vuh*. One of the central themes of ¡Géntromancer! were the dualities that revealed how alternative realities could shed hope on the subject of displacement. Inspired by the stories of Mayan ancestors, Rojas believes that Latinxs carry a “fire within” and have the power to resist gentrification. The art show was a testament to how collectivity, community building, and remembrance of the past can help create a vision of resilience.

A portrait of Alex Nieto was displayed at the center of ¡Géntromancer! in the painting, *Amor: The Perfect Lotus* (2016). (Figure 4) Nieto was 28-years-old when four San Francisco Police Department officers shot and killed him on March 21, 2014 in Bernal Heights, a neighborhood adjacent to the Mission District where he had been raised. Writer and journalist, Rebeca Solnit described Nieto's murder as “Death by Gentrification,” because two white men felt threatened by Nieto's presence in a park that joggers and dog walkers frequent, and that Nieto often also frequented. On the evening that Nieto was killed, he was eating a burrito and chips on a park bench before his job shift as a club bouncer, when a Siberian Husky dog suddenly approached and barked at him, curious about his food. Nieto became agitated and reached for his taser while the inattentive dog owner called from yards away. When the dog did not immediately return, the dog owner exchanged words with Nieto using a racial slur and then left the park.<sup>3</sup> Shortly after, two men walking their dogs in Bernal Height's park called 911 believing that the young Mexican-American man was carrying a gun. When the police arrived, they claimed that Nieto had pointed a taser at them and they mistook its red laser for that of a firearm. Nieto died during an onslaught of fifty-nine bullets, fourteen of which ripped through his head and body.<sup>4</sup>

This event caused outrage among local Latinx residents who saw the incident as an act of excessive police force that could have been avoided. Several factors were at play the day of Nieto's tragic death. For one, the racial profiling of Alex Nieto's body—as he wore a red 49ers jacket, a black 49ers cap, and black trousers—may have caused the police and these two white men to think that he was affiliated with local gangs. Secondly, the man who called the police on Nieto had only lived in San Francisco for one year, an insufficient amount of time to understand the cultural diversity of the neighborhood in which he walked his dog, yet long enough to reaffirm that police forces would protect his sense of privilege in a space where he perceived a threat.<sup>5</sup> Rojas believed it was essential to pay tribute to Nieto and his story within a gentrifying neighborhood after protests and activism emerged in response to the killing of Nieto. As a result, the ¡*Géntromancer!* exhibition became a catalyst to create the first-ever permanent memorial to honor a Latinx victim of police violence in the United States. It is expected to be erected at Bernal Heights Park in 2020.

The Mission District, located in the southeastern region of San Francisco, became known as a predominantly Latinx neighborhood during the 1960s, as chain-migration attracted foreign-born migrants from different parts of Latin America. The large Latinx population of the Mission created a vibrant Latinx visual arts community in the 1970s, which was responding to a new *Raza* consciousness, building alternative institutions that reflected and served the local Latinx community.<sup>6</sup> Shifra Goldman stated the term *Raza* was used in Northern California to refer, “to the mix of peoples from Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Brazil, as well as Mexicans and Chicanos.”<sup>7</sup> The Mission barrio served as the epicenter for the Northern California Latinx visual arts scene and became the birthplace of several art community organizations, such as La Raza Silkscreen Center/La Raza Graphics (1970), Galería de La Raza (1970), El Tecolote newspaper (1970), the Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts (1977), Mission Gráfica Printmaking Studio (1977), and Precita Eyes Muralists (1977). Some of these institutions have recently fought displacement due to non-ownership of the buildings in which they were established, exemplified by the eviction of Galería de La Raza. This 46-year-old institution, deeply rooted in the Mission District's Chicanx and Latinx identities of culture and art, was displaced in 2018 due to the landlord's demand for a 100-percent rent hike and capital improvements to the space, which Galería could not afford.

The Mission neighborhood has undergone multiple waves of gentrification beginning in 1972 when two Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) subway stations were installed at 16<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Streets along Mission Street, increasing rent prices and displacing longtime merchants. From 1974 to 1976, a total of 146 apartment fires occurred in the Mission District within a three-block radius of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street BART station, including 14 that were attributed to arson.<sup>8</sup> The fires represented a violent manifestation of the physical displacement affecting the neighborhood. Then, in the 1990s and early 2000s, the dot-com boom ushered in new tech urbanizers to San

Francisco. Neighborhoods, such as South of Market (SOMA) and the Mission were transformed, as warehouses and factories were converted into tech offices leading to a massive build-out of residential lofts.<sup>9</sup> These new housing structures displaced artists and later attracted workers in the field of technology, commonly referred to as “techies,” to live close to their workplace. This continued as the tech boom of the 2010s ushered in successful tech companies, such as Yelp, Twitter, Airbnb, and Uber. Veteran companies like Facebook, Google, and Apple also set up branches directly in the city of San Francisco. This phenomenon continues to create a substantial wealth gap between high-wage earners and low-wage earners, exponentially increasing real estate value at the expense of its long-term residents.<sup>10</sup> Investment speculators, landlords, and techies saw the Mission District’s relatively low real estate prices as a bargain, making it a desired location for the new urbanizers. A majority of Latinx and working-class residents did not own their homes or apartments, which allowed for landlords to displace their tenants with impunity using the California state law known as the Ellis Act.<sup>11</sup> To this day, tenants continue to face eviction and displacement, as they see the houses and apartments in which they once lived become luxury condos, thus intensifying the economic disparity of the neighborhood.

Rojas’ art is intimately shaped by his upbringing in the Mission neighborhood where he first arrived in 1981, at the age of one-and-a-half years, old when his mother fled the Salvadoran Civil War (1980–1992). His early passion for mural arts inspired Rojas to paint and draw. At the age of fifteen, Rojas was introduced to the Urban Youth Arts program through Precita Eyes Muralists, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing art classes and preserving mural arts in San Francisco. Rojas learned how to create community murals which allowed him to stay away from bad influences and local gangs. Upon graduating high school, he followed his desire to be an artist and went on to receive his BFA in Painting and Drawing from the California College of Arts and Crafts (2004) followed by obtaining his MFA in Painting from Boston University (2015).

Since 2017, Rojas has served as the executive director of Acción Latina, a non-profit organization that promotes cultural arts and houses the Spanish bilingual newspaper, El Tecolote. Before coming to Acción Latina, Rojas had been a multimedia journalist and videographer for the former non-profit organization New America Media where he reported on the child migration of Central Americans arriving to the United States. In 2008, he created a short documentary entitled *Los Disappeared*, that followed seven Salvadorans adapting to their new identities after being deported to El Salvador by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Rojas painted a series of portraits based on *Los Disappeared* that detailed the deportees coping with their new lives in El Salvador. His personal experiences as a journalist fueled the creation of one of his most recognized murals, *Enrique’s Journey* (2009) located in Balmy Alley, which depicts the journey of a Honduran boy who migrated across Mexico by train in search for his mother in the United States, based on the award-winning book by

journalist Sonia Nazario. The following is an interview that took place in Rojas' studio in San Francisco on October 2017 where we discussed the impact that his exhibition had on his personal life and how it led to the establishment of a permanent Alex Nieto memorial.

**Mauricio E. Ramírez (MER):** Let's start with a question I've been curious about since the inception of your exhibition: what made you decide to name the exhibition, ¡*Géntromancer!*?

**Josué Rojas (JR):** My art is deeply influenced by literature. In some cases, I refer to living poets like friends of mine. I wanted a literary reference, and even though it's only in the title of this exhibition ¡*Géntromancer!* refers to the novel *Neuromancer* by William Gibson which influenced what is now called the cyberpunk genre. I wanted to take an approach that personified the spirit of gentrification and to speak to it. To be able to speak to neurology, right? To be able to speak to your body and technology, and of course, the book is about that. Even the name *Neuromancer* borrows from "necromancer". Necromancy is the practice in spirituality, in speaking to the dead, so I used that title to reference the idea of a *Neuromancer* using the word "-mancer", at the end of the title. ¡*Géntromancer!* is speaking to the spirit of gentrification. It's fearlessly speaking to gentrification and taking a stand. I wanted to do this exhibition with other writers, so I enlisted the help of seventeen local poets whose poems were included in the broadside of El Tecolote newspaper that accompanied the exhibition.

**MER:** How does your exhibition ¡*Géntromancer!* speak to the broader Latinx community of San Francisco?

**JR:** I believe people will always respond to events that they participate in. My show ¡*Géntromancer!* was very well attended, I think less so because it was like this cool art thing or whatever it was. I think it was more so because everyone knew that they had participated in it through their poetry. Also, one message that the exhibition meant to communicate to the Latino community was that you don't need to fear gentrification. Right around 2015–2016, when I first moved back from Boston, I realized that a lot of buildings were burning. I remember this huge fire one Saturday night, it was this massive fire over by the Ace Hardware store near 30<sup>th</sup> Street and Mission Street. It happened to burn one of my mom's favorite's Central American restaurants, *El Paisa*, a Honduran food restaurant. I remember being so sad that day and thinking of all these buildings that had burned very conveniently in the last months. And I was thinking of that fear that Latinos might feel; what happens if my house burns down? What do I do? Where do I go? It felt like violence against our community. And I just wanted us to know, don't be afraid. I wanted to silence that fear and speak to it openly. So to me ¡*Géntromancer!*, even visually, you see that there's a Victorian house on fire in the painting *Two Fires* (2016). From that fire

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there is a tomb of smoke and there's a monster with a mouth open being formed from the smoke. Conversely, I visually wanted to suggest that there's a larger, brighter, stronger fire in the community that isn't literal, but it's the fire that we carry within. And so, as you look at some of the *¡Géntromancer!* imagery you'll see from the fire of a volcano, which represents the people and the land. Particularly Central American communities' connection to the land, so my fellow Central Americans have that point of reference. The volcano smoke symbolically represents the people's power, that is why you see in some of the imagery a Robotech or Voltron image coming from the volcano's fire, as seen in *La Imagen y La Palabra* (2016). What I'm suggesting with that is that the people have the power to resist the fear of gentrification. If there is this looming, scary thing that's trying to push you out of your city, I wanted to offer people at least a vision of resisting and effectively quelling that fire with our own fire, of shutting up that spirit of gentrification with our own needs, and with our own communication. In this case, it's art.



Figure 1, Josué Rojas, *Two Fires*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas (Image Courtesy of Josué Rojas)

**MER:** In that sense, can you elaborate on how this exhibition speaks to the Central American community?

**JR:** Sure. Well, I'm going to always go to my point of reference, and my point of reference has to do with the fact that I am a Salvadoran-born American artist, right? This is where I developed this idea, actually. I went to the Whitney Museum of American Art maybe in the last year and a half before creating *Géntromancer!* They had a collection with all of these "American" artists, but I realized not all of those American artists were born in the U.S. It was interesting for me to see that within the American experience, the Whitney Museum includes immigrants from Europe who were fleeing the persecution of World War II. There were immigrants from other nations that had become U.S. American citizens and so I got this notion. I thought to myself, "What am I? What's it going to say if I ever make it into a museum? What's that plaque going to say? Is it going to say, 'Salvadoran Artist?' Is it going to say, 'American artist?'" Even Albert Einstein, he was born in Germany but died an American citizen. I don't know if he felt that he was an American or if he felt like he was still a German. But there's too much of "America" in me for me to say that I am solely a Salvadoran. That is the truest definition for me to say that I am a Salvadoran-born American artist because I do feel that I am all of the above.

That being said, to answer your question, my point of reference is always going to be that of a Salvadoran-American. So, I have to speak from my experience. I am always going to have that lens, and it's always going to enrich my visual language. In the past, I've used things like kitsch art, folkloric art, or art influenced by *La Palma* art.<sup>12</sup> Of course, there are volcanoes and Mayan imagery. It's all stuff that's in my visual vocabulary, my visual lexicon, and deeply Central American. I also think Central American art as a study is really coming into its own. I believe we've always made some significant contributions to art here in the Mission District, but I think that we do more so when we're able to get particular. We used to be lumped in one big thing called "Latino art." However, we are getting more particular as more young people and the younger generations are out creating art. What are the contributions of U.S. Central Americans to the American art landscape? That being said, there's such a rich lineage of stuff that we can use, right? I am eager to continue to visually explore such a rich cultural heritage that we have.

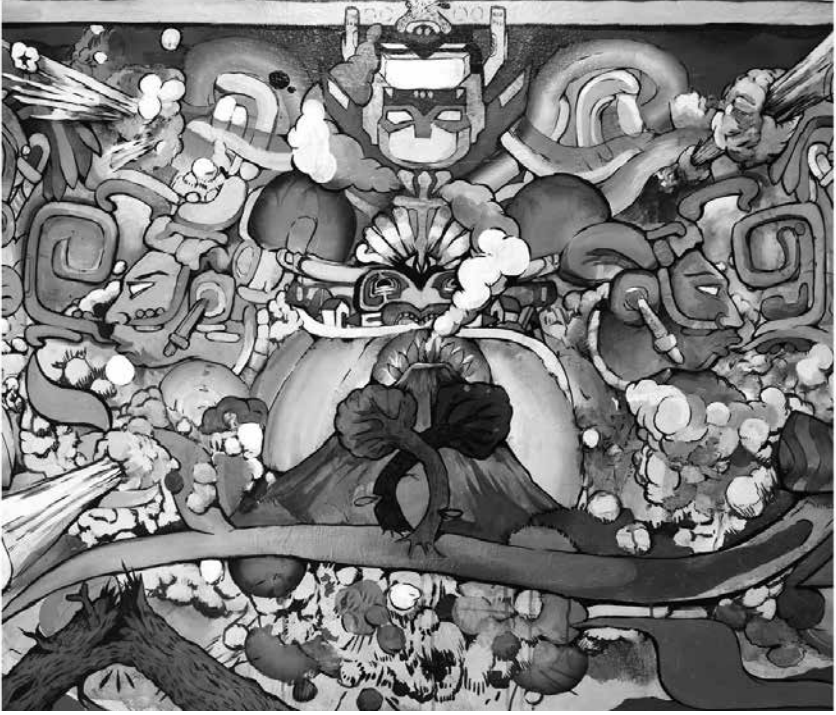


Figure 2, Josué Rojas, *La Palabra y La Imagen*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, (Image Courtesy of Josué Rojas)

**MER:** How does *¡Géntromancer!* represent the current wave of displacement and gentrification affecting the Latinx community in San Francisco's Mission district? I am asking this because looking back at the archives of *El Tecolote* newspaper and researching how Latinxs have been displaced in multiple waves since the 1970s, I see that this current wave is primarily fueled by tech and start-up companies. How does this exhibition speak to the current wave of displacement that is affecting the Latinx community of the Mission District?

**JR:** This is something that isn't new, right? I think gentrification is happening in different communities across the nation. I believe that needs to be addressed and I want to offer an alternative vision to the dominant narrative, which is like, "Oh things got expensive, I have to leave." I think it's important for us to stay and to take a stand and stick with the community. It's hard. It's hard to tell people to stay in San Francisco if the prices are ridiculous and you can't afford it. I've chosen to stay here and pay this ridiculous rent, so it's a real challenge. It is a real-life challenge and so artists are being displaced; the Latino community is being displaced.



I've noticed, there seems to be a renaissance in the Mission District. I believe young people are seeing their contributions as being valuable. I am seeing a lot of different artists, young people particularly, and they know that it's not enough to say, "Hey I'm from San Francisco." You have to create space for artists to continue to do this work here, and the people have taken that responsibility to heart.

That being said, the context of my work, I would sincerely hope that if artists or communities saw the *Géntromancer!* exhibition that they would say, "Hey listen, I want to do something like that. I could probably do that. I could probably respond to gentrification as well in my own way and continue to do these activities that bring people together as a response." I have to say, that is a true scene; when artists of different generations get together and talk to each other, even if we don't live here anymore. When people read El Tecolote newspaper. When people "create" space for discourse, you're really *holding* the space. I think artists have this unique ability to be stewards of our cultural stories, of our cultural patrimony, and of our experience. I believe artists have that spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine of history go down. To be able to understand history in a unique way because artists make it cool to understand history, you know? That being said if you bear witness to a moment you bear witness to the times. Gentrification is one of the main issues of this moment. I would also add institutionalized racism being addressed in the United States and immigration. I think that it's important for us to have hope, and artists are able to provide hope if only because their imagination can go where other fields of study can't. Artists venture and state the things that are "not yet" and create some realities there. So, they create an unseen vision and I hope that I created a vision that other artists would want to emulate -- if not do better than me. I want to hear, "I can do that better. I can do that. I can top that." I hope artists are thinking that, so we can see it build and grow. That's real progress. That's cultural progress, so that is always my aim with the art that I make, I want to inspire.



Figure 3, Oree Originol, *Justice for Alex Nieto*, 2014, Digital print, (Image Courtesy of [www.oreeoriginol.com](http://www.oreeoriginol.com))

**MER:** Let's segue to the Alex Nieto portrait that you painted for the exhibition, *Amor: The Perfect Lotus* (Figure 4). I noticed the portrait is filled with symbolism in the way you portrayed Nieto with various symbols such as the feathers, flowers, the lotus flower at the bottom, and Nieto's face being divided into four quadrants. Could you talk about the meaning behind the portrait and what the portrait represents?

**JR:** I make no bones about it. I was inspired by a political poster that was itself inspired by a very classic photo of Alex Nieto wearing a Giants baseball cap. The artist Oree Original created a vectorized drawing in black and white as part of his "Justice for Our Lives" portrait series. So, I was living in Boston at the time when the Alex Nieto incident happened, and so effectively, this story profoundly impacted me as one of ours was taken; a young Latino male from the Bernal-Mission area. When it came time for me to do this exhibition, I knew that I needed to do something about Alex Nieto. I did it with all the intention that I could and I took the outline from Oree Original. He and I talked about this and I said, "You really inspired my piece." And he said, "Yeah. I know." Back then I was thinking about how I could turn this into a painting. I was thinking about the quadrants that you described, which speaks to the Four Directions. In Native American circles, it's an understanding that it's the sacred Medicine Wheel. The four colors indicate the four directions and each direction has different meanings; they're animal, mental, spiritual, and emotional. All of this. When we do commemorations of Nieto on Bernal Hill, we pay our respects to the four directions. So, I wanted to allude to that and visually give cues that Nieto, even though he's not with us physically in life here anymore, he is with us spiritually and he is also in all these four directions.

The lotus has to do with him being a practicing Buddhist and becoming the perfect lotus. Alex Nieto is heroic to me, and two times over. So, there are two feathers there for him; in life and in death. There is also a disintegrated American flag to show a disintegration within our justice system; there is a Mayan cross and calendar, and I included honeycombs to represent fertility. I threw in flowers as decoration because flowers in the Mayan culture also represent poetry and beauty. Of course, they deliver color, and they deliver delicacy, so I wanted to have all those elements in there. In some cases, the paint is very gruff and driven into the canvas; scraped away. In the case of the flowers, the paint is lush and moist because of the brush kind of hits the surface. I wanted to provide what interests me as a painter, with complexity within the mark making; variety of lines, variety of paints. Little did I know that it would be so meaningful to the Alex Nieto movement, and to the memorial. Particularly the campaign for a permanent memorial and it led to my meeting Alex Nieto's parents.



Figure 4, Josué Rojas, *Amor: The Perfect Lotus*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, (Image Courtesy of Josué Rojas)

**MER:** Can you expand on the memorial of Alex Nieto? I am also curious on how your portrait of Nieto served as the inspiration for the physical memorial that was approved on April 18, 2019, by the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Commission and the City, for a new permanent monument, scheduled for installment in Bernal Heights Park at the site of Alex's final moments.

**JR:** Through the *¡Géntromancer!* exhibition his parents heard there was a piece of art that was made in honor of Alex Nieto. Someone brought them to the closing exhibition, and after the closing of the show, there was a round table conversation about gentrification. At this conversation they [Nieto's parents] let the community know they were frustrated because they had not received any justice in the criminal case against the police, and they had not received any justice in the civil case against the police. The only justice that they really had was art—the *symbolic justice* of having the make-shift memorial at the site where Alex Nieto was killed. The Nietos were worried about the makeshift memorial getting kicked over, turned around, and disrespected. So, they wanted something permanent. They wanted me to be the designer for their memorial, and I agreed to do it. That very night I enlisted as a volunteer-designer. At this same meeting, the Nietos met Carolyn Goosen, a representative of Hilary Ronen's Office of District Nine, which proved to be

instrumental in us helping get the wheel rolling for the creation of a committee. The sole aim of the committee was to fulfill and create the vision that the Nieto family wanted, which was a permanent memorial to commemorate Alex Nieto. The memorial would be built at Bernal Hill, precisely at the spot where he had his final meal, which was a burrito and chips while overlooking the Mission District. So again, the essence of the memorial is deeply influenced by the four directions. If you look directly north from the point where he was eating his last meal, it aligns precisely with the north-facing Mission street, I like to think that today he is overlooking the Mission District.

The memorial became cemented when we formed the committee. I am the creative designer of it. It's going to be essentially a small, permanent plaque on a pedestal that overlooks the Mission neighborhood up on Bernal Hill. As I understand, it is the first, if not one of the first, permanent memorial monuments in honor of a Latino victim of police violence in the United States.

**MER:** I believe there is a Latinx unity that exists in the Mission District. Alex Nieto was Mexican-American and his parents are from Mexico. I find it interesting that as a Salvadoran-American artist you decided to paint a portrait of Nieto. Do you see this portrait as an act of Latinx solidarity?

**JR:** Yeah, absolutely. There are two things that I think are important, and it's about the image that we cast. I think it's uniquely important that we talk about the image that we cast as young, female Latina, as male Latinos, gender-fluid Latinos, however you identify the term Latinx, but the image that we cast is very similar. If you look at someone walking down the street it's hard for you to say, "That guy is Nicaraguan." Or you know, "You have a very Panamanian swag." I think it is fair to say that someone has a pretty thick Salvadoran drawl or a Honduran drawl, which is very similar in speech, but I think other than that we are very similar in the image that we cast. To borrow from President Barack Obama said- I might misquote this- but he said, "If I were Trayvon Martin's age, then he would look a lot like me." The point is that Obama said Trayvon Martin looked a lot like him and I think that is of high importance. So, my solidarity with Alex Nieto is not that he looks like me but he *could have been me*. I could have very easily been the young man minding my own business having a burrito in the Mission. I have been to Bernal Heights. I have worn a Niner's coat. I have done all the things that he's done, and so I feel that he could have been me. I think a lot of other young Latino, Latinx, and Latinas, also probably feel the same way that he's one of ours, but particularly as a young, cis-male Latino man I feel that Alex Nieto exactly fits my profile. That being the case, I felt it hit home in a very particular way. There is this feeling that he is one of ours from the Mission District, that is the case for me at least. It was mandatory for me to create a response. Visual art is the way that I can contribute. Art is what I do, and so art is the way that I responded to Alex Nieto's tragic and unnecessary death.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA), “Collectively Turning the Tide of Displacement in San Francisco’s Mission District,” December 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> According to Rebecca Solnit, the man did not give the precise word he used as a racial slur in “Death by Gentrification: The Killing That Shamed San Francisco” *The Guardian*, March 21, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. For more information on the full-length description of the Alex Nieto story.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. According to Rebecca Solnit, this man only lived in San Francisco for one year prior to the Nieto incident.

<sup>6</sup> See Cary Cordova’s chapter entitled “La Raza Unida: Pan-Latino Art and Culture in 1960’s San Francisco” in *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017, 62-91, for information on *Raza* consciousness in San Francisco’s Latinx Art scene.

<sup>7</sup> Shifra Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 164.

<sup>8</sup> Juan Cruz and G. Roginsky, “Mission Fires: Urban Renewal Made Simple?” *El Tecolote*, April 1977, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Richard A. Walker, *Pictures of a Gone City: Tech and the Dark Side of Prosperity in the San Francisco Bay Area*, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018, 165.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>11</sup> The “Ellis Act” is a 1985 California state law that allows landlords to evict residential tenants in order to get out of the rental business. The use of this act often leads to legal and illegal tactics to forcefully displace long term tenants. Landlords convert their apartments into condos, or sell their entire building, reaping massive financial gains in the process.

<sup>12</sup> La Palma is a municipality in the Chalatenango department of El Salvador. In the late 1970s, artist Fernando Llorc arrived to La Palma and helped establish an artisan and folkloric style of painting that simplifies lines and uses vivid colors to display landscapes, flowers, villagers, animals, and quotidian scenes of El Salvador. Today, the style established at La Palma is recognized as an iconographic aesthetic, reproduced on crafts and souvenirs throughout El Salvador.

## **From Domestic Sphere to Public Space: Patssi Valdez's Bodily Manifestation of the Virgin of Guadalupe**

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### *Walking Mural*

On Christmas Eve of 1972, the Chicana art collective Asco, consisting of artists, Willie Herron, Patssi Valdez, Gronk, and Harry Gamboa Jr., performed *Walking Mural* (1972) on Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles. This performance was a silent procession in which three Asco members wore elaborate costumes and paraded down the boulevard which was, at the time, overcrowded with last-minute Christmas shoppers. That year, the annual procession of Our Lady of Guadalupe in East Los Angeles had been canceled due to rioting. The procession normally took place in early December to commemorate the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Virgin Mary's miraculous apparition to Juan Diego in December of 1531.<sup>1</sup> According to Valdez, "We [Asco] took it upon ourselves to create our own parade."<sup>2</sup> *Walking Mural* was thus in part conceptualized as a stand-in for the annual tradition. Herron positioned himself as the fourth head in a mural that had sprouted legs and removed itself from the wall. Valdez can be seen dressed as the Virgin of Guadalupe, standing next to Gronk, who is dressed as a chiffon Christmas tree, complete with ornaments (Figure 1). Gamboa Jr. photographed the performance. *Walking Mural*, both, brought to life and critiqued the Mexican mural movement's perceived role as the sole artistic practice that defined and represented Mexicans and Chicanas.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the interplay between Valdez and Gronk's costumes interrogates religiosity in both Chicana and American culture, which culminates in the yearly, capitalistic celebration of Christmas. The multi-layered piece, *Walking Mural* continued Asco's tradition of over-the-top and highly critical performances. This paper focuses on the contribution of Patssi Valdez.



Figure 1. Asco, *Walking Mural*, December 24, 1972. Photograph by Harry Gamboa Jr., Collection of Harry Gamboa Jr.

In *Walking Mural*, Valdez paraded in a black crepe and a cardboard halo to become the physical embodiment of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Valdez's interpretation is a critical reproduction of the icon, which was, at the time, without antecedent. Valdez's subversive representation calls into question a Chicana woman's role in the domestic sphere and is an expression of the artist's position as a woman in the borderland of East Los Angeles, caught between Chicana traditionalism and new modes of expression. Furthermore, in *Walking Mural*, Valdez takes the traditionally interior and internalized domestic realm of the home altar and manifests it in the streets of East Los Angeles. Her body becomes the material reality of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is often present in the domestic realm of the home. In doing so, Valdez makes personal histories publicly visible and offers alternative narratives that disrupt the canon of Chicana identities.

### Home Altars and Embodied Spaces

The construction and maintenance of private devotional altars are a common practice in many religions. Chicana and Mexican home altars draw most heavily from Catholic traditions because Spanish colonizers in Mexico forcefully converted many Indigenous communities to Catholicism. However, many Mexican and Chicana people do not practice a strict form of Roman Catholicism, given that Indigenous people continued to practice and incorporate "pagan" traditions under the guise of Catholicism. The *tilma* image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is one of the most prominent

examples. According to certain writers, her Indigenous name is *Coatlatlopeuh*, and while the Catholic Church refuted many of her Indigenous characteristics, her brown skin remained.<sup>4</sup>

Within the Catholic home altar tradition, the maker assembles and arranges an area in a “bricoleur-style,” meaning composed or constructed of diverse and readily available materials, religious and personal images and objects, to create a sacred space within the home.<sup>5</sup> In Chicax culture, altars are a traditionally a feminine space, built and maintained by women. These altars stand as a mediator that allows women to maintain a relationship with God, Jesus, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and saints. Altars provide a space to promote values that privilege social and familial relationships.<sup>6</sup> The making and maintaining of altars is a practice passed down from mother to daughter, as it is the woman’s responsibility to oversee religious affairs within the family and ensure familial welfare.<sup>7</sup> Altars are centers for establishing relational values and for cultivating relationships that link past, present, and future. These relationships are expressed physically, morally, religiously, and aesthetically in home altars, as a means of maintaining a “feminine-based understanding of social harmony” that emphasizes goodness, reproduction, and maternal practice, as discussed in more detail below.<sup>8</sup>

Some Chicax scholars have pointed to altars as both a practice and space that privilege and perpetuate patriarchal ideals of womanhood and feminine values, including feminist, queer, Chicax cultural theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa, whose observations are particularly relevant. Anzaldúa acknowledges the important role the Virgin of Guadalupe plays in Mexican heritage and ideology, as both a figure of solace and solidarity in *mestiza*, or Indigenous-Spanish mixed-race culture. However, she also states that the icon completes and perpetuates the “*virgen/puta* (virgin/whore)” dichotomy.<sup>9</sup> Within the Catholic church, the Virgin of Guadalupe has been used to dispense institutional oppression while placating Chicax and Mexican followers who look to Guadalupe as a symbol of hope, survival, and acceptance.<sup>10</sup> Guadalupe, who is the aspirational virgin, is compared to *la Malinche*, an enslaved Nuhua woman named Malinalli, who acted as an interpreter, advisor, guide, and intermediary for the Spanish conquistador, Hernán Cortés and later gave birth to his first son. Subsequently, she is widely perceived as the raped and maligned whore for acting as his mistress and a traitor to her people. These feminine mediators situated Chicana women in a place of social ambiguity, at once docile and ashamed. This ambiguity reinforces the virgin/whore binary.<sup>11</sup> Anzaldúa claims that such an oppressive binary alienates queer women, career women, and self-autonomous women in Chicax culture.<sup>12</sup> However, such a reductive reading leaves little space for the women who are empowered through their maintenance of altars. Independent scholar and folklorist, Kay Frances Turner acknowledges that Chicax culture is predominantly patriarchal; however, she contends that altars are sites of personal female empowerment that allow women to practice and impart values different from those that may be culturally imposed upon them by men. While the home in its entirety is a traditionally female



sphere, Turner states that altars are a “space apart” that are, “built on the boundaries of patriarchal alienation.”<sup>13</sup> Altars provide a space within the home for women to assert themselves outside the purview of the patriarchy.



Figure 2. Valerie Walawender, *Untitled*, 2012. Photograph. Image courtesy of Valerie Walawender.

Esthetically, altars are performative spaces where relationships are visually rendered through signs and symbols that mark the self, others, the holy, and the divine through common and sacred objects, emphasizing materiality to reach transcendence.<sup>14</sup> All the objects and images promote interconnectedness through accumulation, repetition, and embellishment.<sup>15</sup> This is exceptionally clear when considering the visual components of a typical Mexican home altar. The untitled photograph by Valerie Walawender shows the unremarkable ubiquity of how the altar has been assembled on a table, placed in the corner of a communal living space in the home.<sup>16</sup> (Figure 2) Religious imagery abounds, the largest and most central image is that of the Virgin of Guadalupe, rendered against American and Mexican flags, which, although placed on a Mexican home altar, is indicative of the strong familial ties Mexican and Chicana people must maintain between Mexico and the United States, as both a borderland space and literal border. Below the central image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is a statue of the Virgin Mary, a statue of Christ, and a framed image of the Virgin and Child with a sticker with Christ's image on the upper left corner. Under this framed Virgin and Child is a photograph of an elderly woman, likely a matriarch of the family. The altar-maker has placed a rosary and necklaces on the Christ figure.

To the left of the framed Virgin and Child image are other framed drawings of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the other is obscured by a vase of daisies placed in water. Farther to the left is a card with the Virgin of Guadalupe with the phrase “*Para Mi Mamá*” above the image. A fan is placed behind the prayer card. Other non-religious figurines have been placed on the flowered fabric that lines the table, which has a Mexican flag hanging over the edge. Some notable objects include a pot made of traditional Mexican earthenware, a pink lit candle, three unlit white candles in silver candleholders with bows tied around them, two small donkey figurines—one brown and painted with blue and red, the other made out of colorful braided rope, a blue prism filled with colorful orbs, a small basket, and a framed image of a crucifix with glass flowers along the base. Other objects remain out of the frame of the photograph.

Many of the images and figures featured in the photograph of the home altar have overt devotional purposes, such as images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is often placed as the central figure. The accumulation of images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Virgin and Child likely indicates that this is an altar made to personally engage with the motherly, holy icon. Within the altar space, the photograph of the elderly woman is surrounded by religious images of the Virgin Mary in different forms. Placing the woman's photograph in the center of the altar facilitates relationships between the maker, the woman in the image, and the divine.

The image by Valerie Walawender was included in a blog entry about altar practices surrounding *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), a Mexican holiday that commemorates deceased loved ones and supports them on their spiritual journey.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, the woman in the picture is a family member who has passed on. The proximity and proliferation of images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, complemented by the single image of the woman, signals parallels between the holy figure and the matriarch, who was entreated with watching over the family and household during her lifetime and continues to do so in the afterlife. Similarly, the Virgin of Guadalupe is meant to be watching over the woman and her family. Such a relationship, as cultivated through visual and material culture, exemplifies how altars function as spaces that prioritize maternal practice and familial bonds. While the other objects may appear random, the altar-maker was careful about what was placed in this sacred space, and where those objects were placed. Using objects that were favored by the deceased encourages their spirit to return to the home for Day of the Dead celebrations and carry on in the after-life once they are complete. The blending of the common, such as a toy, with the sacred, for example, religious statues marries objects of personal reference with devotional practice. Altars are cultivated and assembled over time, as indicated by the disparate styles and origins among the objects, which overlap and are carefully curated. Altars accumulate, change, and have the potential to grow in the future.

One cannot know the significance of each object to the altar, without speaking with the altar-maker. Each altar is deeply personal and carries with it meaning and memory for the altar-maker, such as what objects were chosen and why, memories of where and how these objects were found, and the object's connection to loved ones. Additionally, these images and objects continue to accumulate meaning and memory as their relationship with the Virgin is cultivated. The objects and images become imbued with memory, prayers, and pleas to the motherly icon. Jennifer Gonzalez calls altar practice "autotopography," or the physical mapping of ontological qualities that impart material memory and material history.<sup>18</sup> Altars are an extension of the maker, a receptacle of her specific life, where memories and history manifest in material objects. The accumulated artifacts, which make up the altar, are the embodiment of the maker.<sup>19</sup> Setha Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuñiga understood the term embodiment as, "the location where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form."<sup>20</sup> As embodiments of their makers, altars are deeply personal and for this reason unique, ranging drastically from home to home.

### ***Domesticana* and Altars in Chicana Art Practice**

Culturally, the Chicana home altar has become a common motif in feminist Chicana art, perhaps best exemplified by artist and scholar, Amalia Mesa-Bains, whose most well-known altar-installations were made in the late 1980s and 1990s. Her early altars are esthetically inspired by those commonly found in Chicana homes. Her practice was part of the "Cultural Reclamation Project," established by Chicana scholars, including Shifra Goldman, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Victor Zamudio-Taylor, and Mesa-Bains, to stress cultural determinism and the breadth of Chicana identity.<sup>21</sup> These Chicana scholars wanted to determine and share how Chicana culture influences their particular communities and its constituents on an emotional and behavioral level. Re-contextualized outside of the domestic sphere, Mesa-Bains's "excavated altars," a term Chicana scholars used to describe the altar's symbolic removal from the home and repurposing in the museum as an altar-installation, spurred dialogue and informed viewers of Chicana traditional practices. According to Chicana arts and culture scholar, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Mesa-Bain's work is, "one example among innumerable efforts to validate and reinterpret Chicana vernacular traditions adapting them to vital new contexts," namely galleries as public spaces where those who are unfamiliar with Chicana art and culture can engage with it.<sup>22</sup>

Mesa-Bains's work is an example of what she terms *domesticana*, the female counterpart to *rasquache*.<sup>23</sup> Theorized by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, he described *rasquache* as an "underdog" approach in Chicana art that through ingenuity makes a virtue of impoverishment. Artists, such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Asco, David Avalos, Judy Baca, and more, who employ this mentality are able to create the most-from-the-least, an artistic act that is both defiant and inventive. Artists who incorporate *rasquache*, as a formal style, favors elaboration, ornamentation, and

PATSSI VALDEZ'S BODILY MANIFESTATION OF THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE

accumulation, often repurposing discarded materials and breathing new life into them. It is productive to note the similarities with altar practice, including but not limited to, making the most out of common objects. As such, works that are *rasquache*, including *Walking Mural* and *Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, as discussed here, have an ephemeral quality as they are often comprised of obsolescent or discarded materials. (Figure 3) Examples include creative self-fashioning with second-hand clothing, yard decor built out of tires, coffee tins, or broken mirrors. This can be seen in the way altars may include seemingly random yet meaningful trinkets or how the members of Asco used cardboard, tinfoil, tulle, and Christmas ornaments in *Walking Mural*. *Domesticana* adheres to the same sense of ingenuity but incorporates a celebration of the feminine, while resisting patriarchal Chicana culture.



Figure 3. Amalia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, 1984, revised 1991. Mixed-media installation. Image courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Mesa-Bains argues that in light of the 1960s and 1970s Chicano Civil Rights Movement, Chicana artists were compelled to redefine their own roles within Mexican/Chicana culture. To accomplish this, Chicana artists borrowed images, themes, and content from their traditionally constrictive female roles in the domestic realm in an effort to reclaim the past but also, to forge new, innovative futures.<sup>24</sup> Feminist scholar, Laura Gillman states that *domesticana* as a *mestiza* aesthetic is a “cultural repository” that, “critiques existing histories as well as reflects the reconstitution of erased histories,

identities, and modes of inquiry within shifting national and diasporic contexts.”<sup>25</sup> In this sense, *domesticana* is an important theory and artistic practice that pushed against patriarchal constraints and redefined what it meant to be a Chicana.

In Mesa-Bains’s mixed-media installation *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, Mesa-Bains creates an altar-installation for the Mexican actress Dolores del Río, who was the first major cross-over Latina celebrity in Hollywood, and as such is an icon in Mexican and Latinx culture. (Figure 3) The altar-installation to the deceased actress is created in a museum setting. An image of actress Dolores del Río from the movie, *The Fugitive* (1947) is given a place of prominence in the altar. In the photograph, del Río is dressed with a white shroud over her head so that she resembles the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose blue cloak similarly drapes over her head. Placing the image at the top center borrows from the altar practice of having a central icon image, which is commonly the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Around the image, Mesa-Bains placed a figure of the Virgin, more framed images of Dolores del Río, flowers, candles, fabric, glitter are among the various objects arranged in a way that recalls the altar aesthetic of accumulation and excess. Many of the objects are found by the artist to be repurposed for the installation. Mesa-Bains imbues the objects with new meaning by placing them in relationship to one another and exhibiting them in a new context—the museum. The museum is a public space meant to be visited by many people, this is distinct from the private home where only select people may enter. It is within this public, museum context that people can become newly exposed to Chicana culture. Such a public practice enforces the cultural determinism that was pushed in the cultural reclamation project of the Chicano Movement. Mesa-Bains pays homage to Chicana culture, investing in “resistance and affirmation,” the two guiding principles of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Within the new museum context, the repurposed altar-installation resists white hegemony by bringing an artist of color and Chicana practice into a traditionally and majority white museum space. Mesa-Bain’s work affirms altar practice as a unique Chicana tradition that helps women sustain themselves.<sup>26</sup> Her work purposefully draws from the process of altar making. However, unlike the altar which is an embodied space that primarily reflects the maker, Mesa-Bains has placed many mirrors in the installation to reflect the viewers. She invited viewers to see themselves as part of the altar-installation and encouraged them to engage with the devotional practice of altar making. In reference to the altar-installation, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Río*, Mesa-Bains stated:

The development of my work has been rooted in the practice and consciousness of my community. Through the traditions of the home altar and the celebrations of the Day of the Dead I have created a hybrid form of ephemeral installation. Both of these traditions of popular culture represent aspects of a redemptive and resilient struggle to maintain family history and

cultural continuity in the face of colonial domination.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, it is productive to consider *domesticana* itself, and by extension *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*, as rooted in home altar practice. Because of this debt, *domesticana*, and specifically altar practice, is a useful framework for understanding the work and goals of Chicax artists, including Patssi Valdez.

### Patssi Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe

Through a *domesticana* lens, Patssi Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe can be understood as the corporeal reality of Valdez's Chicax experience that is visually manifested and embodied in home altars, which she moves from the domestic sphere to a public space. Traditional renderings of the Virgin of Guadalupe follow standard iconographic cues: she wears a red dress that extends across her body and arms, and a blue cloak that covers her head and drapes over her shoulders down the length of her body. (Figure 4) Her head bows humbly and her eyes are downcast as her hands meet at her breast in prayer. She is surrounded by a mandorla of golden rays, indicating her holiness. She is youthful, divine, modest, feminine, and reverent.



Figure 4. Unidentified Artist, *Tilma Image of The Virgen de Guadalupe* presented by Saint Juan Diego, 1531. Public domain.

In Valdez's fashioning of the Virgin of Guadalupe, she wears a floor-length black dress with a thigh high slit that reveals black lace tights as she walks in black platform shoes. (Figure 1) On the back of her costume is a tinfoil skull attached to her halo. The use of the color black remains one of the significant distinctions between Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe and other, later subversive representations of the Virgin.<sup>28</sup> Valdez also wears a black cloak with silver edges that drapes over her shoulders, drawing directly from the Virgin's blue mantle. A pink boa adorns her neck and she carries a bouquet of red roses.<sup>29</sup> Unlike the youthful, natural appearance common in most depictions of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Valdez has painted her eyebrow-less face white, with black eyelids and lips. She has fashioned a tinfoil silver and gold crown, and created a cardboard mandorla, which was painted black and silver with white rays made of tinfoil. This is an iconographic sign that indicates she is dressed as the Virgin of Guadalupe and would be instantly recognizable to the Chicana community. However, the similarities end there: where the Virgin is modest, demure, cosmetic-free, and pristine, Valdez is revealing, challenging, and wearing excessive make-up.

Art historian, Terezita Romo provides the most widely accepted reading of Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe. Romo states that Valdez's interpretation challenged portrayals of the feminine icon as an ideal archetype of the passive, submissive, and virginal woman, traditionally revered within Catholic patriarchal Mexican culture. Valdez transformed this untouchable holy figure and created a contemporary persona that was stylish, powerful, and desirable.<sup>30</sup> While Romo's reading of Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe is useful and important, a *domesticana* reading allows us to understand how Valdez engages with altar practice, while a queer reading allows us to understand her subversive and culturally critical act.

Valdez was famous for her ability to create elaborate costumes with very little means, scouring thrift stores and using discarded materials. Her fashioning of the Virgin is no different. The cardboard and tinfoil crown and aura indicate a sense of ingenuity. Valdez fashioned trash and cheap materials into a costume that not only glimmers and is visually stimulating but also mimics holiness. The layers of her outfit and accumulation of fabric, make-up, accessories, and found materials resemble, in practice, the accumulative process by which altars become part of the intimate, personal, and embodied environment of the home. Within the framework of *domesticana*, Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe displays both the mentality of *rasquache* and an engagement with the feminine. However, Valdez's fashioning actively reevaluates and reinterprets the Virgin: it takes advantage of the Virgin of Guadalupe's symbolic force in Chicana culture and its function within the home to produce distinct layers of alternative meanings.

Understanding Valdez's biography allows the viewer to understand why her work questions Chicana traditionalism and seeks alternative modes of being. Born in Los Angeles and raised by her Mexican mother, Valdez was expected to work at her mother's

hair salon and carry on the family business. Instead, much to her mother's dismay, Valdez was drawn to the arts. Rather than turn away from tradition, or inversely, fall in line, Valdez engaged in an act of dis-identification. José Esteban Muñoz's defines his theory of dis-identification as an act in which those outside the mainstream of race, sexuality, or gender, do not simply disavow or align with mainstream practice, but rather reinterpret it for their own purposes.<sup>31</sup> Valdez exemplifies this when she dresses as the Virgin of Guadalupe in a manner that is subversive and outlandish.<sup>32</sup> Her costuming eschews traditional expectations and ideas regarding what it means to be a woman in Chicanx culture.

By extension, Valdez's performance also calls into question and alters through hypersexuality the very altars she references as embodied sites of female values and familial relationships. While Muñoz's theory and terminology are useful for understanding Valdez's act and motivations, it is inadequate in this case. Muñoz's theory is applicable to minority subjects who question white heteronormative society as exclusive and oppressive, not necessarily those who wish to reinterpret and open up new ways of being within their own community, whether this means embracing their sexuality, breaking with tradition, shirking religion, wearing exuberant clothing, or being an artist.

Valdez identifies with the Virgin of Guadalupe and Chicanx culture, and while she may have shirked her mother's wishes, her artistic practices incorporated the cosmetology skills she learned in her mother's beauty salon. This is directly opposed to distancing herself fully or engaging in a separation or rejection of tradition. Instead, Valdez's action is one of alter-identification: she works within Chicanx and familial tradition, but rather than simply repurposing to expose oppressive systems, she creates an alternate persona and, in the process, manifests different aspects of the same identity. Alter-identification, allows for multiple and varied experiences in a manner that embraces those modes of being that may be in conflict or opposition, such as being divine and impoverished, virginal and sexual, traditional and avant-garde. In this case, Valdez uses the Virgin of Guadalupe as a pivotal figure that encompasses many different facets and realizations of Chicanx knowledge and identity.

Sociologist, Laura Gillman states Chicanxs invoke symbolic representations as people who have been displaced and relocated, and whose identities are founded on personal histories manifested in embodied spaces.<sup>33</sup> This is apparent in their use of altars, but Gillman also argues that the body itself is a site of knowledge, a symbolic center of interrelations between people and their environment; the body is an embodied space.<sup>34</sup> It is possible to consider then two embodied spaces: the body as a site of personal and cultural knowledge and the altar as a receptacle for that knowledge. In *Walking Mural*, Valdez's body is the nexus where these two forms of embodied knowledge meet—evoking the deeply personal and the cultural referent. In the act of transforming herself into the Virgin of Guadalupe, and specifically, an



iconography that is particularly common in altars and important in Chicana identity, Valdez becomes the corporal materiality of her Mexican lineage. However, Valdez's performance is also imbued with her intersectional identity as a young Chicana woman and avant-garde artist who is neither dispossessed from her culture nor fully assimilated into the United States. This point is made clear through her act of alter-identification.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is an empowering figure that can be reimagined to encompass new femininities. This includes Valdez's alternative, sexualized, and expressive Virgin as an embodied figure and representation that opens up endless alter-identification potential because she embodies diverse identities that manifest themselves in the many experiences and actions of Chicanas. In this regard, she determines a potential third-form of subjectivity that Chicana scholar and postcolonial feminist theorist, Chela Sandoval defines as an, "anti-colonial, *mestiza*, U.S. feminist of color, queer, and differential conceptualization of the subject."<sup>35</sup> Third-form identities articulate a resistance to dominant society and, as Sandoval claims, constitute a, "place out of which a politicized differential consciousness arises."<sup>36</sup> This differential consciousness enables movement "between and among' ideological positionings" to transform power relations.<sup>37</sup>

Chicana feminist scholar, Emma Pérez states that differential consciousness is a "third space feminist practice" that can only occur within a "decolonial imaginary," which attempts to uncover the relegated, marginalized, erased, or silenced histories of Chicana women. In Pérez's summation, a third space practice is where agency is enacted.<sup>38</sup> Even so, it is important to consider that many Chicanas would feel isolated and apprehensive about Valdez's fashioning of the Virgin of Guadalupe because of their close association with, and affinity for, a more traditional Virgin. This point elicits some of the possible complications that arise from Valdez's act of alter-identification, such as the idea that those women who embrace Chicana traditionalism do not have agency within patriarchal cultural and familial structures. Quite the opposite, alter-identification as a third-form subjectivity and cultural practice can embrace opposing modes of thought simultaneously.

### **From Domestic Sphere to Public Space**

Valdez's performance makes the domestic hyper-visible. Such an act brings attention to Chicana women's need to create. As Kay Turner states, altar practice allows women to create, "spaces apart" from the oppression of patriarchal culture. Valdez's sexualizing of the Virgin of Guadalupe calls into question the patriarchal definition of the Virgin as a symbol of submissive femininity, as Romo pointed out.<sup>39</sup> Valdez's version also confronts Chicana traditionalism for demanding domesticity and encouraging propriety—though certainly not all women feel oppressed by these 'restraints.' Valdez neither disregards nor assimilates rather, she brings attention

to her personal experience as one means of intervention. As material objects are receptacles for values in altars, Valdez's fashioning may be read as a reflection of her own values. By making her own body hyper-visible, as a site of embodied knowledge, she reclaims her position in the public sphere. Her presence asserts that she will not be 'domesticated.'

Valdez's performance in *Walking Mural*, marching down Whittier Boulevard, recalls the annual processions of Our Lady of Guadalupe in East Los Angeles.

The annual procession traditionally includes local Catholic school students and parish communities parading an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe down Whittier Boulevard. The image, known as *la Peregrina*, is a reproduction of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe found on the *tilma* cloak located in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, Mexico. This is a celebration of the miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe appearing to Juan Diego and honors the female icon as the protector of the family.<sup>40</sup> In this regard, the Virgin of Guadalupe does exist in the public sphere through processions. However, public processions are not divorced from the domestic sphere because *domesticana* ruptures binaries that separate the public and the private through the hyper-sexualization of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Valdez's performance.<sup>41</sup> Within this framework, popular sacred ceremonies including communal pageants, parades, and spectacles constitute the domestic because they both cultivate tradition, and pertain to the healing arts, both feminine realms.<sup>42</sup> If processions function as an extension of domestic practice, it is possible to consider that the annual processions of Our Lady of Guadalupe produce an environment in which the values embodied by the Virgin of Guadalupe are publicly manifested, proclaimed, and reinforced. Gillman elaborates on the subversive potential of traditional pageantry,

Within official Christianity, as exercised during the Conquest and colonialism, pageantry and spectacle constituted privileged forms of acculturation of Indigenous peoples and were used as subjugating tools. In the *domesticana* tradition, there is a parodic, subversive element introduced, one that opens up the possibility for the critique of gender, race, and class subjugation that official events aim to produce... [processions] subvert the very institutes that had exploited them. In this way, such processions are transgressive, and have pragmatic ends—to reclaim and reconstitute the paces they have come to inhibit, marking them as their own.<sup>43</sup>

Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe is in dialogue with altar practice and the domestic sphere. Furthermore, Valdez's participation in *Walking Mural*, as a public procession, continues to function within the *domesticana* framework as a highly subversive act. Drawing upon procession traditions, which she would have experienced first-hand in East Los Angeles, makes Valdez's subversive performance legible to her community. Valdez's mirroring of the Virgin of Guadalupe's procession does not deter from her

hyper-visibility by simply reiterating already public displays of the Virgin; rather, because it differs so drastically from traditional renderings of the icon, Valdez's presence is all the more jarring. Additionally, the artist draws on the tradition of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a walking image, an image that brings the altar into the public space of the community to support and publicly sanction the domestic values of the Virgin, whether those empower some women and/or constrain others.<sup>44</sup> As stated in the Gillman quote above, pageantry already functions subversively by reclaiming borderland spaces that have traditionally belonged to Chicax and Latinx transgressors. The alter-identification of Valdez's performance becomes more subversive because she utilizes the power implicit in public processions, but turns those traditional values back in on themselves. However, it is impossible to accomplish a holistic reading of Valdez's Virgin and the *Walking Mural* procession without considering her in collaboration with the other members of Asco who also took part in the performance.

### Turning the Inside Out

In Romo's reading of *Walking Mural*, she claims that as the sole female member of Asco, Valdez had a lasting impact on Chicax art, specifically by making what is considered an untouchable icon within traditional Mexican and Chicax culture subject to interpretation, and offering an empowering mode of female representation in Chicax culture.<sup>45</sup> Not unlike this investigation, Romo focuses on Valdez singularly, and this feminist distinction has lasting implications for the understanding of Chicana art and culture. Yet, it is still important to fully understand the exchange between Valdez and Asco's male members in *Walking Mural*.

Asco member Willie Heron is dressed as the fourth head in the Mexican mural. The other papier-mâché heads hover over Herron's with arms outstretched and face aghast. Herron has also painted his face white to match the ghostly pallor of the other faces. Ostensibly, his character had become so bored with the genre of mural painting and the demands of Chicano nationalism he decided to remove himself from the wall and begin walking.<sup>46</sup> Gronk is dressed as a chiffon Christmas tree with ornaments hanging off the fabric. The area around his face and shoulders is shrouded in red and black chiffon, as well as tinsel around his face, his painted his face painted white with a red star.

*Walking Mural* has been discussed heavily in the Asco literature as a performance that subverts Mexican-American traditionalism and stereotypes. The murals created by *Los Tres Grandes*, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alvaro Siqueiros, who all worked in both the United States and Mexico, often depicted affirmative images of working-class people that spoke to the artists' communist ideals, elevated the Indigenous figure, praised labor, and elicited nationalist sentiments.<sup>47</sup> Mural practice was not confined to Mexico it was also heavily practiced throughout

East Los Angeles as well. In East Los Angeles, many of the murals were executed under the auspices of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement's nationalistic rhetoric, as opposed to their earlier Mexican counterparts that were created in the wake of the Mexican Revolution. Asco's embodied mural, which they imagined as being ripped from the wall and then paraded down the street, calls into question what a "good" Mexican should look like. This is because restrictive representations, however positive, were just as problematic and confining as the negative representations of the violent, gangster Chicano that existed in Hollywood films. Further, orthodox representations of what a Chicano "is" fails to take into consideration the many different, sometimes contradictory, lived experiences of Chicanos.<sup>48</sup> Art historian Ila Sheren considers *Walking Mural* within the framework of "stereotype" as defined by art historian Michael Orwicz. Sheren states that Asco's use of stereotypes point to a lack of innovation in Chicano visual language while simultaneously critiquing *Chicanismo* nationalism, as akin to religious dogma in Chicano culture and points to the performativity of the Chicano identity.<sup>49</sup>

The Virgin of Guadalupe as an icon does have precedent in mural tradition and the representation of religious figures in Mexican and Chicano murals is almost ubiquitous.<sup>50</sup> In this regard, Valdez's presence elaborates Asco's critical attention to artistic representations of Chicanos as singularly devout. Furthermore, her position in the parade next to Gronk creates parallels between the Virgin figure and his Christmas tree. The performance took place on Christmas Eve on Whittier Boulevard, which would have been overrun with Christmas shoppers. The interplay between Valdez and Gronk interrogates religiosity in both Chicano and American culture, which culminates in yearly capitalistic celebrations. In this regard, their presence is a physical intervention that disrupts the flow of consumer culture.

Art critic, John Beagles refers to Asco's subversive exploration of traditional mediums and subjects, such as murals and religiosity as being "doubly dislocated."<sup>51</sup> On the one hand, as Chicanos, they experienced alienation and brutality at the hand of white America, and on the other, as young, queer artists growing up in Mexican-American homes with traditional values, they felt removed from their Mexican heritage. Asco member Harry Gamboa Jr. spoke to this double bind when he stated:

Either the police were going to take care of you or someone in the neighborhood was going to take care of you. So, you met a lot of resistance because it [Chicano culture] was so conservative. And to even stray into the sensitive area of religious icons or even hinting that you might not believe in certain things or might even question what America is all about, again, you were setting yourself up to be someone that's punished.<sup>52</sup>

Gamboa acknowledges that there is aggression coming from both sides: the white police and Asco's conservative Chicano community. As such, Asco's work not only

functioned within the boundaries of what was acceptable and what was not in Chicana visual culture, it existed in the borderland of established Chicana forms and the avant-garde in 1970s United States Art. The performance unfolds as a complex narrative of what it is like to exist in a borderland space. Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe alongside the male Asco members, elaborates on many of the traditional forms and customs established in Chicana culture while simultaneously being critical of them. While this is well established, however, this investigation brings new light to the performance by considering how Valdez's Virgin of Guadalupe gives corporeal materiality to the embodied experiences of Chicanas, present and visible in home altars.

Under the new framework of alter-identification, it is possible to reconsider the entire act of *Walking Mural*. Rather than a static mural that has suddenly decided to leave the wall, this activation cracks open the wall entirely, revealing the interior and exposing it to the public. When we consider this action, *Walking Mural* does not only "break free" of Chicana traditionalism, it turns the entire system inside out and opens it up to new revelations. Walking along Whittier Boulevard, these traditions and histories simultaneously leave the home, which is an act of revolt, and become enveloped in the community, which is an act of embrace. While it is true Asco members feared for their safety, and certainly some members of the community were appalled, other onlookers joined in on the festivities.<sup>53</sup> In this way it is possible to think of *Walking Mural* within the framework of alter-identification; they present a new type of mural, not simply a critical rejection of the practice. There exists in borderland spaces a push and a pull, to be critical is to look in, to be referential is to turn inside out, and here, the two happen simultaneously. The effect is innumerable possible modes of being, experiencing, and representing emerge in the process.

## Conclusion

With her contribution, Valdez assisted Asco in the critique of Chicana religiosity, but her presence brings to light the specific concerns of women in Chicana culture, including her own. In Chicana tradition, altars are embodied spaces, they act as material receptacles for personal and cultural knowledge, histories, and values. However, even though they are important sites of cultural knowledge, as feminine spaces they remain relegated to the interior, with the exception of when made public through yearly processions of the Virgin of Guadalupe that further reinforce the values of maternity, propriety, and domesticity that are advocated in domestic altar spaces. While this may be empowering for many women, at least in Valdez's case, such traditional roles and expectations were and are, both confining and open to critique. Valdez engages in said critique by becoming the corporeal materiality of the altar.

A *domesticana* reading of her self-fashioning allows us to consider how she both recalls, draws from, and questions altar practice as complacent in the patriarchal relegation of women to the home. However, we can also see how her engagement with the practice acknowledges that these spaces are fraught with cultural memory and venerable traditions. Rather than turn away, she performs an act of alter-identification, marshaling Chicax tradition in a way that brings attention to her concerns by imagining an alternative Virgin. She makes the domestic and personal hyper-visible, as an affront to both the perceived constraints of the patriarchy, and her own navigation of life in a borderland space, being neither tied to tradition, nor completely divorced from her roots. Unquestionably, Valdez is a bodily manifestation of the distinctly layered and complicated history of Chicana women who, like herself, inhabit the borderland of East Los Angeles.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Archdiocese of Los Angeles, "Archdiocese honors Our Lady of Guadalupe." Accessed September 6, 2019. <http://www.la-archdiocese.org/events/guadalupe/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Tere Romo, "Conceptually Divine: Patssi Valdez's Virgin de Guadalupe," in *Asco: Elite of the Obscure: A Retrospective, 1972-1987*, ed. C. Ondine Chavoya and Rita Gonzalez (Williamstown, Mass.: Williams College Museum of Art, 2011), 276.

<sup>3</sup> Chicax is a gender-neutral nomenclature for people of Mexican heritage living in the United States; it is inclusive to men, women, and non-binary people. I use the gender specific "Chicana" when referring specifically to women.

An interaction between Asco member Harry Gamboa Jr. and the then curator of LACMA illuminated some of the misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding Chicax as artistic producers. Gamboa, on a visit to LACMA, confronted a curator and asked why there was no Chicax art on display. The curator responded that Chicax do not make art, they make graffiti. While not directly linked to Mexican and Chicano Movement muralism, I believe this interaction is telling and speaks to the proliferation of misconceptions surrounding Chicax art.

Chon A. Noriega, "Your Art Disgusts Me': Early Asco, 1971—75," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* no. 19 (Autumn/Winter, 2008): 109.

<sup>4</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 50-54.

<sup>5</sup> Kay Francis Turner, "Mexican American Women's Home Altars: The Art of Relationship" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 1990), 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-166, 198, 205, 230.

<sup>9</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Turner, "Mexican American Women's Home Altars," 50.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>16</sup> The photograph was taken by "Artist and Creativity Consultant" Valerie Walawender and posted on her personal blog. The blog entry was titled "Mexican Traditions" and can be found at: <https://valeriewalawender.wordpress.com/folk-traditional-arts/mexican-traditions/>. Because of the poor labeling on the site I cannot be certain who the altar belongs to/ who the maker is. I also did not use any of the information on the website to inform my reading as I cannot speak to Walawender's credibility.

<sup>17</sup> Valerie Walawender, "Mexican Traditions," *Valerie Walawender: Art and Psychology, Lessons on Violence, Diversity, Art, Folklore, Cultural events in Chautauqua County, New York* (blog), 2012, <https://valeriewalawender.wordpress.com/folk-traditional-arts/mexican-traditions/>.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer González, "Siting Histories: Material Culture and the Politics of Display in the Work of Fred Wilson, Pepón Osorio, and Amalia Mesa-Bains, 1985-1995" (Ph.D. diss., University of California Santa Cruz, 1996), 340.

<sup>19</sup> Embodiment, for the purpose of this paper, is a term I use to signify the way in which objects, or spaces, are repositories for memory, history, and culture.

<sup>20</sup> Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuñiga, *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Amalia Mesa-Bains, Laura Meyer and Alex Espinoza, *Amalia Mesa-Bains: Geography of Memory*, ed. Laura Meyer (Fresno, CA: Fresno Art Museum, Press at the California State University, 2011), 4.

<sup>22</sup> González, "Siting Histories," 339.

<sup>23</sup> Domesticana marries the words "domestic" and "Chicana." According to Mesa-Bains, "The day-to-day experience of working-class Chicanas is replete with the practices within the domestic space. The sphere of the domestic includes home embellishments, home altar maintenance, healing traditions, and personal feminine pose or style...The phenomenon of the home altar is perhaps the most prolific." She continues, "...the domestic sphere – with all its social roles and practices – culturally remains fixed in patriarchy unless representation of that world calls into question such practices and thereby contributes to its change."

Amalia Mesa-Bains, "'Domesticana': The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* vol. 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 160, 162.

<sup>24</sup> Amalia Mesa-Bains, "El Mundo Feminine: Chicana Artists of the Movement — A Commentary on Development and Production," in *Chicano Art: Resistance and*

*Affirmation, 1965-1985*, ed. Richard Griswold del Castillo, et al. (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, 1991), 140.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Gillman, *Unassimilable Feminisms: Reappraising Feminist, Womanist, and Mestiza Identity Politics* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 176.

<sup>26</sup> bell hooks and Amalia Mesa-Bains, *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 72.

<sup>27</sup> "Amalia Mesa-Bains: Artist Statement, 1995," ZoneZero, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://v1.zonezero.com/magazine/essays/distant/ymesa2.html>.

<sup>28</sup> The proliferation of the color black may be read for its negative connotations; black is the color of mourning in Chicana culture. Additionally, the large skull attached to her back further connotes death and may be an iconographic reference to the folk saint (she is condemned by the Catholic church) Our Lady of the Holy Death, or Santa Muerte and celebrations or parades for Día de Los Muertos.

Later, subversive representations of Guadalupe, by artists such as Yolanda Lopez (in 1978), Ester Hernandez (in 1975), and Alma Lopez (in 1999), re-interpret Guadalupe as self-portraits, *abuelas*, seamstresses, athletes, or queer, but none of these use the color black to the extent Valdez does.

<sup>29</sup> Our Lady of Guadalupe is associated with a "miracle of the roses," a miracle in which roses manifest as the result of holy intervention. In 1531, the Virgin chose Indigenous man Juan Diego to convey a message to an unwilling bishop, and builds a temple in her honor. After three failed attempts, the Virgin of Guadalupe directed Diego towards roses that were growing unceremoniously in winter, which he picked and brought to the Virgin. She then arranged the roses and gave them to Diego hide in his cloak and bring to show the bishop. When Diego opened his cloak (or *tilma*), the roses fell and revealed an image of the Virgin. After this miracle, the bishop was convinced. The original *tilma* with the image of the Virgin remains preserved and hangs over the altar of the Guadalupe Basilica and is the archetypal representation of the Virgin commonly found throughout Mexican and Chicana culture.

It is possible that in referencing the roses Valdez gives special emphasis to the role of the Mexican native. In this case, we can elaborate our understanding of Valdez's Virgin as placing some emphasis on the importance of the native in Mexican culture and Catholic tradition. Further, we may be able to understand Valdez acting in part as Juan Diego, becoming both male and female.

<sup>30</sup> Romo, "Conceptually Divine," 280-282.

<sup>31</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, Cultural Studies of the Americas*, vol. 2. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>32</sup> The pilgrimage to the Virgen de Guadalupe attracts about 2 million people a year, almost as much or more than the Hajj in Mecca.

<sup>33</sup> Gillman, *Unassimilable Feminisms*, 135.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>38</sup> Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), xvi.

<sup>39</sup> Romo, *Conceptually Divine*, 276-282.



<sup>40</sup> Archdiocese of Los Angeles, "Archdiocese honors Our Lady of Guadalupe."

<sup>41</sup> Gillman, *Unassimilable Feminisms*, 174.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> We can also think of Valdez's performance as in-line with the growing tradition of performance art throughout the Feminist Movement of the 1970s. However, it is also important to acknowledge the racial biases that played out in this first and second wave of feminism by excluding the experiences and concerns of women of color. As a young Chicana woman Valdez felt excluded from this growing (art) movement and has verbally repudiated feminism.

Patssi Valdez, "Asco and Beyond: A Talk by Patssi Valdez," YouTube video, 1:15:00, Posted by "UC Berkeley Events," March 26, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TldwMT4zyOY>.

<sup>45</sup> Romo, *Conceptually Divine*, 282.

The Virgin as motif would be adopted by many Chicana artists. Ester Hernández images of the Virgin are devotional as she attempts to layer traditional meaning with the modern while speaking to her own experiences. Hernández's paintings of the Virgin are imbued with a militant energy and actively work against gender and social roles. Yolanda López, who is most well-known for *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*, from her *Guadalupe* series, 1978, use the Virgin to deconstruct the figure as a tool for social control and recasts the Virgin as the everyday woman. Other contemporary artists who have reimagined this sacred icon include Santa Barraza, Alma Lopez, Delilah Montoya and Ana de Obregoso among others. It is widely regarded within the scholarship (by Amalia Messa-Bains, Tere Romo, and Laura Perez) that Valdez was the first to revise the Virgin icon Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarno, "Remapping America in Ester Hernández's *Libertad* and Yolanda López's *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?*" in *Born of Resistance: Cara a Cara Encounters with Chicana/o Visual Culture*, ed. Scott L. Baugh and Víctor A. Sorell (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 55-59.

<sup>46</sup> Nicholas Lambert, *A People's Art History of the United States: 250 Years of Activist Art and Artists Working in Social Justice Movements* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2013), 243.

<sup>47</sup> Lambert, *A People's Art History of the United States*, 246-247.

<sup>48</sup> Chon Noriega, "'Your Art Disgusts Me': Early Asco, 1971-75," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 19 (Autumn/Winter 2008): 114-115.

<sup>49</sup> Ila Nicole Sheren, *Portable Borders: Performance Art and Politics on the U.S. Frontera Since 1984* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015), 45-46.

<sup>50</sup> Such motifs are notably present in Mexican Muralism's early phase, including Diego Rivera's *Creation* (1922-23). *Creation* was Rivera's first government commission, a wall fresco painted at San Ildefonso College, Mexico City, Mexico. Among other things the mural includes the divine trinity, depictions of Adam and Eve, and the personifications of Christian values. While many of the murals Asco would have experienced in their day-to-day lives no longer exist, the tradition of religious imagery can still be observed throughout East Los Angeles, from Juan Ordunez's *Where Heroes Are Born* (1981) to Paul Botello's *Virgin's Seed* (1991) to George Yepes's *Mujer Del Este De Los Angeles* (1989). Each of these murals makes overt (figural) reference to the Virgin and/or other religious figures.

<sup>51</sup> John Beagles, "Artmoreorless," *Sight & Sound Magazine* (January 2014): 58-61.

<sup>52</sup> Lambert, *A People's Art History of the United States*, 246-247.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

## ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

MARTÍN WANNAM, M.F.A. PHOTOGRAPHY  
UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

My current work addresses, among other things, the standards of beauty imposed by “Western” culture around the world. It is intended to challenge the structures that uphold a white Eurocentric cultural ideal, which certain queer bodies fail to reflect, and also, comments on the ideologies that perpetuate violent attacks on queer bodies everywhere and, specifically, in Central America. Using photography, sculpture, and video, I started thinking about and exploring the struggle to break away from hegemonic heterosexuality and whitewashed beauty standards, which I, as a queer brown person, do not uphold. With this work, I dissect and examine my cultural background and my gender identity, which, in their own way, make my existence and my movements in the world an act of resistance.

I utilize and manipulate materials, such as wax, liquid foam, paint, condoms, and concrete blocks to construct and interrupt my own narratives, based as they are on ideals imposed by state, religion, and society. I use and repurpose these materials, much as I do Christian iconography and its symbolism, as tools to critique and destabilize the patriarchal, heteronormative system that has structured my life primarily through the imposition of a strict and suffocating religious dogma. I’m interested in deconstructing, demanding, and creating visibility for bodies that lie outside the norm and thus, have been rendered invisible or hidden. I want to question and explore the full potential of how a queer, brown/black body “should” be or act in a society shaped by homophobic, heteronormative, colonial ideologies. I look to create my own space and to cultivate my voice via artistic political resistance by refusing to follow or perpetuate a “Westernized,” heteronormative, racist, classist culture, much of which is reflected in the images around us.

In addition to promoting these ideas, my hope is that through my work, viewers will perceive and empathize with these motives, and act. For example, for the works, “Selvin Andrés García, Colonia el Esfuerzo, 4 de noviembre 2009, Guatemala” (2018) and “Paulina Marrot, Zona 1 Centro, 15 de febrero 2006” (2018), I conducted research into specific instances of hate crimes that were documented in Guatemala. I, then, produced these installation pieces in which I reconstructed gestures and objects that reference the events that took place during each of those assaults. My intent here is to give voice to those who have been lost in countries like my own, where such cases normally are deemed unimportant and are then ignored or abandoned.

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Martín Wannam, "God Ezra" (2017), photograph, digital inkjet print

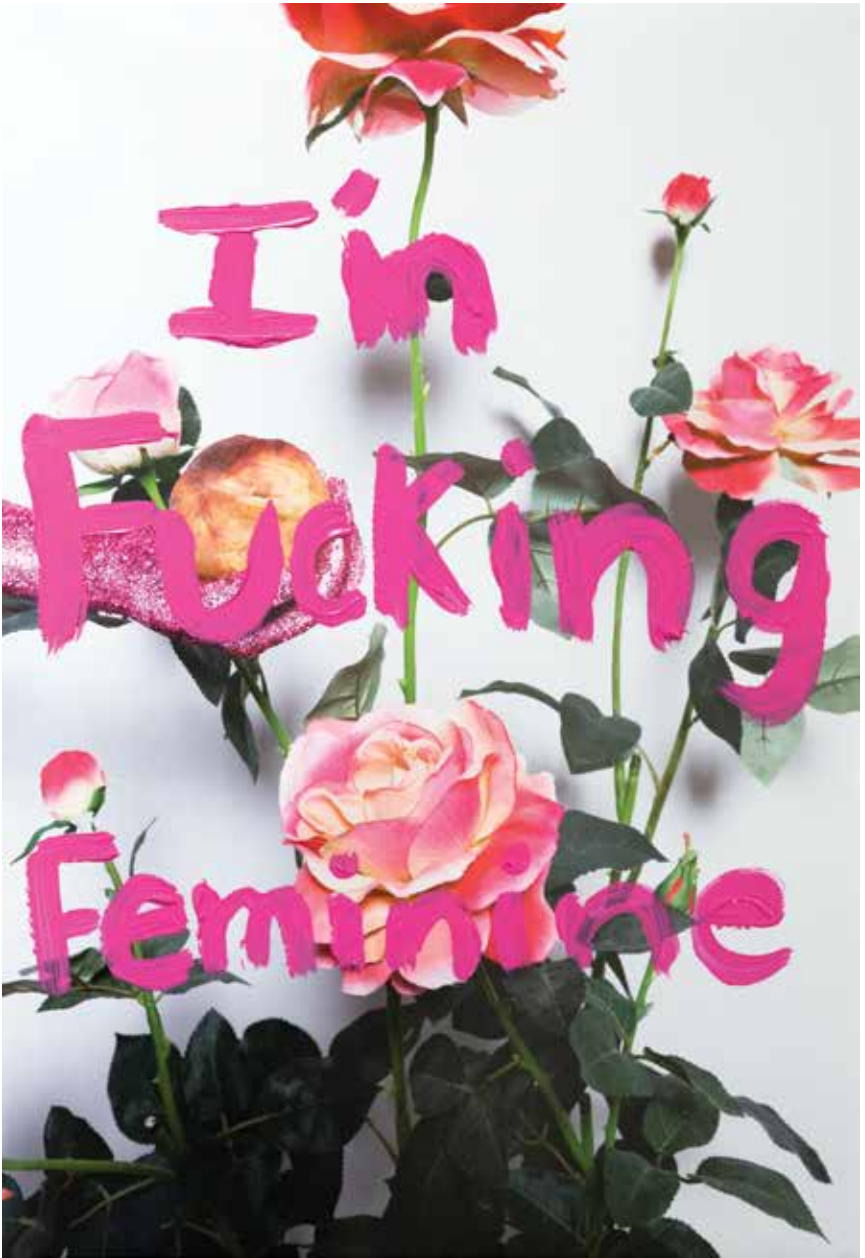


Martín Wannam, "Selvin Andrés García, Colonia el Esfuerzo, 4 de noviembre 2009, Guatemala" (2018), multi-media installation



Martín Wannam, "Paulina Marrot, Zona 1 Centro, 15 de febrero 2006, Guatemala" (2018), photograph, digital inkjet print





Martín Wannam, "I'm Fucking Feminine!" (2017), photographic intervention, digital inkjet print

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Martín Wannam,  
“Santuario” (2017),  
photograph, digital  
inkjet print



Martín Wannam, “Ser  
Hueco en Mi País”  
(2019), video still of a  
performance recorded  
at the Plaza de la  
Constitución, Zona 1,  
Ciudad de Guatemala

## **Panel Discussion: “*Artistas del Pueblo: In Conversation with the History of New Mexican Chicanx Art*”**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The panel, held at the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, April 3–6, 2019, was co-moderated by Ray Hernández Durán, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Irene Vásquez, Ph.D., Chair of the Department of Chicana/Chicano Studies and Director of the Southwest Hispanic Research Institute, both, faculty members at the University of New Mexico. The panel’s objective was to address the seminal impact that *Nuevomexicano* artists, who formed part of the *Levantamiento Chicano* or “Chicano Uprising” had on the development of the Chicano movement in New Mexico and also, nationally.

The decade framed by the years, 1968 and 1978, marks a decisive period in the formative development of the Chicana/o movement in New Mexico, as evidenced by forms of community empowerment that brought about social change throughout the state. *Nuevomexicano* artists were central to the movement during this period. Artists from Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Las Vegas, Taos, Artesia, and other regions of New Mexico played a pivotal role in the developing political discourse, image production, and organized actions that influenced the tone and shape of the *movimiento* in the region. The diverse and vibrant forms of art they created not only spoke to, both, local and global conditions of the times, but also animated activism, social protest, and civil disobedience.

Although New Mexico is recognized in publications on Chicanx history and the Chicano Movement, in Chicanx art history, key artists and events in New Mexico continue to be left out or underplayed. This panel discussion aimed to redress this lacuna by focusing on a group of four *Nuevo Mexicano* Chicanx artists who were active from the late 1960’s through the early 1980’s and contributed to social and political advocacy through their work with community-based organizations, art spaces, and educational centers. These artists were also part of extensive transborder networks that fostered dialogues, exchanges, and collaborative creative expressions with artists from California, Texas, and Mexico. Many of these individuals continue to work as artists, educators, journalists, social activists, and community organizers.

The four invited panelists—Juanita L. Jaramillo, Francisco LeFebre, Noël Márquez, and Adelita Medina—spoke on a range of issues impacting the development of their art practices, including their early college experiences, study abroad experiences in Mexico, social and human rights struggles, and the importance of the living environment in New Mexico. The roundtable was initially structured around five questions, which included the following: 1. Can you tell us about your background,



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where you grew up, and how you became an artist? 2. Can you talk about the development of the Chicano movement in New Mexico and how you got involved? 3. How did the movement inspire, change, or shape your art making and your ideas about art? 4. What is the relationship between art and social activism, and do you think art still has a place in the political movement? 5. What are your thoughts about the Chicana/o movement today and what advice would you have for young Chicana/o artists and activists? The moderators were able to pose three of the five questions in the allotted time for the roundtable session.<sup>1</sup>

**Subject Areas:** New Mexico Art History, Chicax Art History, Latinx Art History, U.S. Art History, Southwest Studies, Mexican American Studies, Chicax Studies, Feminist Studies, Queer Studies, Studio Art, Visual Culture, activism, education

### PANEL DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

**Ray Hernández-Durán:** Good morning and thank you for joining us today. My name is Ray Hernández-Durán and I am an Associate Professor of Art History in the Department of Art at the University of New Mexico. My esteemed colleague, Irene Vásquez, Chair of the Department of Chicana/o Studies and Director of the Southwest Hispanic Research Institute, and I are honored to have with us four artists who belong to the first generation of Chicana/o activists in New Mexico. We have generated a list of questions we will take turns posing to our panelists and Irene will start.

**Irene Vásquez:** Good morning to everyone and thank you for coming. Can you tell us about your background, where you grew up, and how you became an artist?

**Juanita L. Jaramillo:** I am from Taos in Northern New Mexico. My mother's side, the Trujillos, is from La Loma de Taos, just west of Taos Plaza. It's an old neighborhood where I grew up. On my father's side, I am from the other side of the gorge of the Río Grande, the family of the Jaquez-Chacón-Jaramillo ranchers. On my mother's side, there are five generations of teachers and six generations of weavers, including the Montoya family from El Valle with the Vallero star weavings.<sup>2</sup> My work is a bit of testimony to my land-based culture. My dad was my first teacher. He was a storyteller and also an educator. At the end of the school year, he gathered all of the discarded crayons. When I was about four or five, if it was raining outside, he would sit with me and we would cover the refrigerator with crayon drawings. I met my *compadrazco de artistas* at Highlands at the beginning of the Chicano movement with Pedro Rodríguez from San Antonio, Texas.<sup>3</sup> He introduced us to the concept of, not only

Chicano art but also, *muralismo*. Pedro provided us with opportunities to study in Mexico City with Ramiro Romo-Estrada.

After graduating, I went to Chicago and ended up at Casa Aztlán in the Pilsen neighborhood. I worked with Marcos Raya, an incredible artist, whose work is in the category of post-humanistic murals. I also worked with A.L.B.A., the Association of Latino Brotherhood of Artists, which was not only Chicano, but also Puerto Rican, Latino, and Latin American. In Chicago, we also worked a lot with publications, such as, *Chicano Burqueño*. I also worked with people from M.A.R.C.H., *Movimiento Artístico Chicano*, also in Chicago. *Anishinaabe Waki Aztlán* was one collaboration with Native Americans there. Once I left Chicago, I worked with *La Cofradía de Arte y Artesanía* in Santa Fe, New Mexico along Federico Vigil, Luis Tapia, Wilfredo Miera, Teresa Archuleta Sagel (now Spires), María Wilson, and Benjamin and Irene López. I also became active with *La Academia de la Nueva Raza*, with Tomás Atencio, E. A. Mares, Esteban Arellano, Alejandro López, and many other *paisanos*. I worked with oral history publications and with *La Academia* on publications, events, and ended up at the Rio Grande Institute, which was Native American and Chicanos from the New Mexico and the Rio Grande Valley connection. In Taos, I became involved with *Hembras de Colores*, with Enriqueta Vásquez, Tania Ocanas, Victoria Plata, Estrella Apolonia Delgado, and a number of other women. We sponsored the first fundraiser in Taos for the sanctuary movement. We brought and screened, *El Norte*.<sup>4</sup> We did a lot of things, including bringing *Danza Azteca* into Taos, and of course, my husband was Eduardo Lavadie, co-founder of The Taos Valley Acequia Association, a social advocate. He was a social artist, and through him and working with him, I became very active with the acequia movement, which centers around subsistence farming water rights. The tradition of the acequia, subsistence farming is really important because water is a critical part of the global political and survival scene.

**Francisco LeFebre:** I am from Wagon Mound, New Mexico. I am half *Sierreño* (from the *Sangre de Cristo* mountains) and half *Llanero* (from *El cañon del Rio Colorado*). My father was from the Ocateh Valley. He was a *cuartero* and worked in the logging camps in the Ocateh Valley.<sup>5</sup> My mother was from *Cañon del Rio Colorado* in northeastern New Mexico. My grandfather owned a ranch and he raised cattle and dry farmed. My parents met halfway in Wagon Mound and that's where I grew up. Wagon Mound was a village made up mostly of *Raza* and a handful of White folks. When I grew up, I noticed forms of segregation, but the racism didn't sink in then. The White folk of Wagon Mound had their own churches, their own cemeteries, and they had their own gatherings. They sent their kids to schools outside of Wagon Mound. The *Raza*, we had our culture, which was different. We kept our distance, there was not that much mingling. There were times when we came together; for example, the once-a-year *fiesta* called "Bean Day," because, supposedly, at one time,

Wagon Mound was the bean capital of the world. On Bean Day, everybody would get together and participate in the parade, the rodeo, and the street events. There was always a western dance. I remember one time, Al Hurricane played at the hall, which was packed like if he were Elvis.

I was drafted into the U.S. army right after graduation. I was 19 years old. I was part of that generation that experienced going to South East Asia, what we referred to as the Orient at that time. I remember that, in Wagon Mound, I had never been around Black folk. When I was in the army, I was exposed to more people of color and observed racism. White soldiers referred to African Americans by the “N word.” They also used the word, “wetbacks” for Mexicans. In Vietnam, U.S. soldiers used words like “zips,” “gooks,” and “slant-eyed,” and we mistreated them. I wondered, “what are we doing here? Are we protecting these people from the communists?” I remember how badly we treated these people, and it always stayed in my mind, what was going on here. You know, why? The communists must be really, really bad folk, you know? They must eat children and we mistreat these people to get them ready for the communists, or what? After serving in the military, I attended New Mexico Highlands University in search of enlightenment and education.

I began to study art at Highlands with Elmer Schooley and Frank Walker, and others. They wanted us to be abstract artists, modern artists, conceptual artists, and that’s the direction they took us. I saw this and I dropped out. I went to Los Angeles, California and adventured here and there, and I came back. I came back to visit and was introduced to Pedro Rodríguez, a professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies, who was teaching *Arte Chicano* and Chicano Studies. He told me that I had a gift. He told me, “I want you to come back to college.” So, I did. I went back to New Mexico Highlands. I studied under Pedro. He sent us to Mexico City to study mural art. We spent a summer semester studying under Ramiro Romo Estrada. At the beginning, I had a problem accepting the concepts in Mesoamerican art. He introduced us to Mexican muralism. Prior to my studies in Mexico, I believed that the highest level of art was renaissance art, Michelangelo and those guys. I liked the Impressionists and European artists. He was coming from this other perspective and it was illuminating. I remember he finally told me, “You know what Francisco, if you’d like, why don’t you just sit in the back, don’t make too much noise, and just, you know, like, don’t worry about it, you know you’ll get a good grade.” I sat in the back and I was listening, and little by little, that little spark caught on fire. It finally hit me. I don’t think I slept for a couple of days, just thinking about all that he was saying. Eventually, I became a part the Chicana/o movement.

**Noél Márquez:** I am from southeast, New Mexico, which is so different from the north. I was born in Artesia, New Mexico in 1953. I went to Highlands University

when I was 18 years old. After high school graduation, I went to jail because I was at the wrong place at the wrong time trying to stop a fight. I remember my dad saying afterwards, “You’re going to go to school or you are going to be the local bum.” So, a bad thing turned to a good thing. I went to Highlands University to study Impressionism, like Francisco LeFebre. I didn’t know much about Mexican culture. I was just a skinny little kid from Artesia who liked to paint. I taught myself to paint at a young age. When I was 12 and 13, I would go to the *mercado* in Juárez, Mexico, where I would see the velveteen paintings. We didn’t go to museums. My mother had bought encyclopedias for us and I got to learn about Impressionism and the renaissance artists. They were my first heroes. So, I read a lot and I told my friends, “I am going to study with Elmer Schooley, he’s at Highlands.” But when I got there, I was intercepted by Chicano Studies and I never met Elmer Schooley. I met his son, maybe 30 or forty 40 years later. We became good friends. He lives in Roswell.

Our mentor/art teacher from Chicano Studies, Pedro Rodríguez, said, “You know, you should study a little bit about your own culture, where you come from.” Pedro was an amazing influence on us. After a while, we were on our way to Mexico City. We went to Teotihuacan, Palenque, and Veracruz, and we studied the art of the *Toltecas*, *Olmecas*, *Zapotecas*, and *Mayas*. Pre-Columbian culture was so important because that was part of our root culture and from there, we started flowering. They were putting fertilizer on us and we said, “wow, these are our ancestors.” It influenced our whole concept of why we would make art. I think not only being around my *Chicano/Mexicano* family but being around the ancestors, that whole sacred space, was an amazing inspiration. So, it gave us a purpose to make art, you know, to include our community. And so, when we came back from the first trip to Mexico in 1972, we painted a mural at Highlands University, and that was our first mural. And that was powerful; it reawakened our spirit and we just started thinking, “We’re community artists, we’re activists, and we’re going to use art to activate and inspire, and to connect to our community.” It’s not just about exclusion, inclusion, or racism; it’s also about our natural rights to a safe environment. This shirt I’m wearing today is about that. They’re trying to turn our lands into a radioactive dump.

Mainstream culture is about consuming; it is wasteful. We have to learn to value things and to recycle, just like keeping a friendship, not to throw everything away and not to devalue human life. That’s what we can do as muralists by addressing cultural and environmental issues. We are like weavers. We weave all this fabric together of people and a life that share love and concern. I’m connected not only to Chicano artists but also to people like Janet Greenwald, an anti-nuclear activist from the north. We have been working closely with the Navajo Nation. All of us together, we’re going to fight for this earth but it takes action and precious time. It takes all kinds of working-class backgrounds to make a strong resistance. It’s always been a struggle; I mean it didn’t start with one person. It’s been ongoing and seems to be getting tougher, but we have to continue to unite and be smarter in our actions so that

the next generation can thrive. Activism inspires me to paint and when I go into the studio, I feel like a radio receptor. Where all of the information in my art comes from, I don't know, but education is very important. It helps to get a degree and that's what I tell the youth. I like going into schools and working with children because they listen. They all want to be artists and the first thing they say is, "Well, are you famous?" I say, "No, I'm just an ordinary guy, who likes to draw and if you really like it nothing will stop you. Be creative, be respectful, and elevate, celebrate, but also think about everything you are doing. And get away from the damn T.V." I am lucky to have a 12-year old daughter who keeps me grounded; it is just amazing to be a dad. I didn't want to have a family because I'm an artist so I'm married to the brush but somewhere along the line everything worked out.

**Adelita Medina:** I was born in Española New Mexico, the land of the Low Riders. I grew up on a small farm that my grandfather and his sister had in a village named, *Ranchitos*, New Mexico. They are what they are, little strips of land, that go from the highway to the Río Grande. So, my *tía* Kika had part of the land and my grandpa had the other part, and they both cultivated it.<sup>6</sup> I grew up in a very Catholic family; everybody in *Ranchitos* was Catholic. We were more Catholic than the Pope, I say. I grew up drawing images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and different saints, and that's how I discovered my artistic direction. But then I went to New Mexico Highlands University and I double-majored in English and Art. I studied with Schooley, Leippe, Paul Volckening, and Bob Hill.<sup>7</sup> They are actually very well-known artists in their own right. Schooley was my least favorite because if you didn't paint like him and you didn't design like him then your art was not worth it. I took 3 years of art history and, of course, most of it was European history, right?

Unlike Juanita, Francisco, or Noël, I did not become a muralist. At that time, the Chicano movement hit Las Vegas, New Mexico. We formed, C.A.S.O., the Chicano Associated Student Organization and became involved in fighting discrimination at Highlands. We took photographs during the Chicano movement. I was introduced to *El Grito del Norte*, which was one of the major Chicano newspapers. I was trained in Journalism by "Betita" Martínez in 1968 in Española, New Mexico.<sup>8</sup> In those days, you got trained in proofreading, editing, writing, reporting, photographing, and typesetting. We did everything for *El Grito del Norte*. It was based in my hometown of Española. I learned how to do photography, how to develop photographs in the dark room; we did everything by hand, everything. We used to cut the galleys up and put glue on them to stick the paper. For the headlines, we used to have what was called a Golden Rule. You would put double-sided tape on all these letters and then you would stick them down; those were the newspapers. I recruited Sandra Solís from the Crusade for Justice and brought her to work with *El Grito del Norte*.<sup>9</sup> So, instead of going in the direction of the *muralistas*, like the other folks here, I went

into *periodismo*, or journalism. Then, after I graduated, I went into the non-profit world for 30 years.

I was involved in work around the country, in New Mexico and New York. During many of those years, I didn't have any time to do art work, so I just kind of let it go. A couple of years ago, when number forty-five was elected president, I started feeling anxiety, fear, and anger, all kinds of emotions. I said, I have to sit and write some articles and start producing anti-this and anti-that. I would sit at the computer and there was a blank screen. Nothing would come out, so I said, what the heck am I going to do? I was literally walking around with a weight on my shoulders and feeling frustrated, so, I got the idea to do collages. I did one called, "We the People" and decided that I was going to use the colors and the art and the messages. The second collage I did was for Mother Earth because I knew the administration was going to push back all the regulations against the corporations. You know that the corporations don't care about Mother Earth so that's what I did. I started showing them around to some people here in Albuquerque, and they said, "Oh, Adelita, you should create more and have an exhibit." I didn't want to do my own exhibit, you know? So, I invited several other artists, including Juanita Jaramillo, Francisco LeFebre, Roberta Márquez, and a couple of other people. I challenged them to come up with themes related to, "We the People, *El Pueblo Unido*, for Peace, Justice, and Mother Earth." We put together a nice exhibit at *El Chante*, here in Albuquerque. Later on, some people saw some of my work on Facebook. They invited me to go to New York City and have a little exhibit over there. They couldn't fly everybody else's work over, except mine. The first three pieces I did are more political in content, and then, I started doing more cultural themes, *también*. I am from northern New Mexico. [Pointing to one of her paintings on the wall, "Vatos at *El Santuario*"] So, here, we have the *cholos* and the Low Riders, and *El Santuario*.<sup>10</sup> Chimayó is a very important place in northern New Mexico. People from all over come on pilgrimages during Lent. And then the other one is Quetzalcoatl, showing Mexican influence. I am working with an organization now called, *Alianza Nacional de Campesinas*.<sup>11</sup> I'm doing fundraising for them.

I am inspired by how all of these women, the *campesinas*, who work in the fields, train as organizers and meet and lobby elected officials. The organizers meet with women and they work on women's issues, and also against the use of pesticides. I was inspired so I created a painting for them, and I'm going to donate it to them so that they can raise money and bring visibility to their work. About two weeks ago, the painting was used as a poster for this global event called, "Campesinas Rising," put together by this woman named, Eve Ensler, an activist, author, and artist from New York City. So, that's what I am doing now. I've decided to come out of retirement and become an artist. I have also written several articles and still write for a little newsletter in northern New Mexico.

**Ray Hernández-Durán: Thank you for your thoughtful responses. Could you tell us a bit about the development of the Chicano Movement in New Mexico and how you got involved?**

**Juanita L. Jaramillo:** I got involved at Highlands University with murals. I have been an educator in the classroom for 22 years. My experience as a muralist influenced my understanding of Visual Literacy. I taught 3rd grade, which to me, I love, because the children come in out of primary school still very child-like. When they leave, they are going to 4<sup>th</sup> grade, which is another monumental age because something profound is happening to their brains. My involvement in advocating for the Chicana/o Movement and its impact was through education with children, and also, oral history. I did a lot of oral history and collections. This digressed a little from Chicano graphic art, but it also connected to the Chicana/o Movement because it involved recognizing voices that were not being heard at the time. I was collecting stories from the elders and sharing them with the children.

This trans-generational experience was an important part of our *movimiento*. Some of the people who I interviewed were already in their 90's, including my *tía* Romancita, *que descance en paz*.<sup>12</sup> She broke her hip and being in her late 90s, the doctors didn't want to give her anesthesia because they weren't sure what would happen. She actually went through surgery with minimal anesthesia and, of course, she was really pissed and expressed how she felt in her own language. I mean the doctor's walked into the room and tip-toed. What was interesting, when I was visiting with her and she was talking to me, she would say, "Juanita, Juanita, Juanita." Pretty soon, I'm having a whole conversation. I'm sure this has happened to a lot of caretakers where you are having a conversation and somebody with your name three generations before suddenly becomes part of the conversation. There is a kind of mystical part to this and the research involved in this endeavor influenced my work.

I worked with a lot of people. Enriqueta Vásquez was one of the people who has been a major, major, influence in my life. I consider her more than an older sister, a soul sister. I mean she has just done so much and she, at this moment, is on the other side of this complex with a session that is honoring her. Basically, what I became involved in more was working with women artists, creating voices, and recognizing elders, who are still living and embodying what Tomás Atencio referred to as, "*el oro del barrio*."<sup>13</sup> Here in northern New Mexico, I would say that the biggest collaborative influence for me was *La Academia* and reconnecting with the past but also moving toward the future and being a part of developing a philosophy, you know, "*el oro de barrio*," through the *resolana* and getting involved in capturing the world around us while we could, the gems that were still accessible.<sup>14</sup> So here I am now. I am the elder in my family and I really appreciate being able to get together with these artists

on the panel today because it was such an inspiration.

The first time I went to Mexico to study—I still have sketches from when we first went down to Mexico—I made this one sketch of this head with a volcano. It was recognition of our indigenous *raíces*, something that was always there.<sup>15</sup> But everything was very hush, hush. An example of that kind of thing was when I was asked in 2015—it was the centennial of the Taos revolt—to write an article about that event because I am also a writer. I had to think about it. I couldn't remember the stories, I don't remember the stories, but I remember a lot of influences. With the stories that I pieced together, one of the things that I realized was that when New Mexico became a territory of the United States and the military came in and there was the uprising, the stories were pretty heavy once you started digging for them. The Pueblo people lost a lot of lives and so did the *nuevomexicano* communities, especially in Mora and in Santa Cruz. The military went in and if there was any rumor that anybody had some kind of subversive saying or just saying something that didn't quite fit in, the military went in and they got the men and the young men that were capable of carrying arms and they lynched them. The thing was that you didn't say anything that would put your family in danger and that was something that I kind of grew up with. I think that was part of the thing of the *vergüenza* that Facundo Valdez would talk about.<sup>16</sup> You know, the *vergüenza* that had this influence of submerging our history. I think it was also related by the motivation to preserve your family and so, a lot of people just didn't say things. There was a lot of denial but the denial was based on preserving the family. So, I did write an article but there wasn't much about specific events that I could actually say except ask to focus on why there was such a conspiracy of silence. There are voices and there are subterranean voices, but they were not coming out and speaking. That was one of the things with the Chicano Movement. It was just opening up like a dam, just coming out and saying, "Hey, you know what, historical trauma is a real thing and we're still suffering from it." We just move on from there and not only say or point to a cause but work with children, work with a cure, and that's how I see the Chicano Movement, the *movimiento* and how it influenced me.

**Francisco LeFebre:** I got involved in the Chicana and Chicano Movement because I suppose that after coming back from the war, I still had that element of wanting to be patriotic. I still had that element of wanting to be a G.I. and I wanted to develop and make my name in society. When I came to Highlands, I met people like David Montoya, who had another language and another perspective on life. As I met other people, everything slowly but surely started sinking in. Being an artist, I had something to contribute to the movement. Once I started developing my own philosophy of art, I began to see art as more than just pretty pictures, more than just a decoration. For me, art has to have meaning, it should to speak for those who have been silenced, for the children who are in cages, for the people who live under the bridge, for the



people who don't have access to the big decisions that impact their life. I acquired this philosophy of art from having studied in Mexico and also spending time in Cuba.

Once, I was at a conference against the U.S. blockade and they were looking to paint a mural outside the Karl Marx theater and they were asking for artists. I stepped up and pitched in to the effort. I also met people from Chile and artists from all over the world. It was very interesting because, when they asked, "Where are you from?" and I said I was from the U.S., they said, "Well, you're not a *gringo*, what are you?" So, the only thing I could identify with was being a Chicano because it gave me an identity and a set of politics about international solidarity. Now, I work with the students and faculty at Chicana/Chicano Studies at the University of New Mexico. I work with young people who have given me the title, artist-in-residence. I learn so much from the students all the time, about the struggle in Palestine, in Venezuela, and here, in the U.S., like the struggle that Noël speaks out against, environmental injustice.

I see myself as a Chicano artist who does more than paint pretty decorative pictures, more as somebody who can use their voice for those who have been unjustly treated. I have also gone to the prison to talk to people and I ask them, "Well, what is the problem?" They say, "Poverty is the problem, We are in here because of poverty. We don't have a job and you do what you have to do to eat and have a place to sleep. If I have to sell drugs and get caught, well, there is a prison bed. This is why I'm here, because of poverty." As an artist, I want to speak out against poverty and injustice, and that's what I'm all about. I've been working in the trenches for 50 years as an artist advocating for public art. When I was in Cuba, I met some friends who took me on a tour and I said, "What's this all about?" He said, "Well, we're expecting an invasion from the U.S." I said, "Oh, really? Well, count me in if anything should happen."

**Noél Márquez:** Well, the thing about Chicanismo in New Mexico, it's about passing the baton. This was always the case, if you think about the veterans, there, up ahead of us, and how they passed the baton to us. At the age of 18, we were innocent. We thought we were grown up, but we were children. So, Pedro Rodríguez from Highlands University adopted us and all he had to do was guide us; from there, we read and we researched. He brought Tortilla artists from California who were making prints and tortillas.<sup>17</sup> They also brought *Teatro Campesino* and you know that was so important because they connected the rural with the urban and the fight in the fields.<sup>18</sup> At the time, the local hero was Reies Tijerina López, and he came and gave a talk at Highlands. I had a conversation with him and he signed my draft card, and I just felt empowered. Those kinds of heroes only come at a certain time in your life and they were there to pass the baton so you can keep the fight going.

When I was at U.C.S.D., we got together with other artists, like Mario Torrero and

Victor Ochoa.<sup>19</sup> One of my advisors at U.C.S.D. was Jorge Huerta. He was connected to Luis Valdez, so we studied his plays. His is one of my favorite *teatros* that I've seen; it really is so ridiculous and hilarious. A Mexican American and a Chicano are giving lectures trying to win the audience and each one is an authority on Chicano or Mexican-American culture and then they start competing with each other and before you know it, one has a dagger and the other one pulls a gun out. The scene later escalates with machine guns until they were shooting bazookas and military hardware at each other. There's always gotta be a little controversy when you get people thinking and wanting to activate, you know it is gonna happen like I heard maybe a few days ago with M.E.C.H.A.<sup>20</sup> All that is a healthy discussion, like *Teatro Chicano*. You know the older generation, we had to fight to name ourselves because they called us so many other names. I've heard so many derogatory names, even Hispanic. One of my friends from Venezuela, José Rodríguez, a lithographer, says Hispanic is like scrambled eggs; they put everybody together into a monoculture, as part of an assimilation process. I'm so proud to be Chicano where. along that route, I met Luis Jiménez in Hondo, who later would become my mentor, a teacher, and a big brother. All these people I've mentioned in Chicano History, I'm so glad to have known them because they would give me their blessing. These people passed the baton on to me.

**Adelita Medina:** I have an interesting anecdote to tell about how I became involved in and was introduced to the Chicano Movement. As an art student at New Mexico Highlands, I hung out with art students, known jokingly, as the artsy-fartsy crowd. Many of us were into marijuana, psychedelics, and tripping out. I happened to have an apartment in old town Las Vegas, New Mexico. In my first year, I lived in the dorms and then I moved to Old Town, where it was the in thing to do, to have your own apartment. One day, I heard a lot of racket outside my window in the park, and I looked out the blinds and saw all of these people marching around Old Town Plaza. I said, "What the hell is going on?" And then I looked and saw my brother, my older brother, Benji and Fred Trujillo. I said to myself, "Well, there's Fred and Benji. I wonder what they are doing." So, I got up, I put on my shoes, and I went out and asked what the heck was going on and Benji said, "We are fighting against the discrimination by the *gringos* over there at the university and for other rights." I was an English major and an Art Major, so I wasn't really involved in the struggle until then. That is how I became involved, through my family and friends.

You know within a couple of weeks, I became one of the more radical Chicanas on campus. Students were involved in S.A.S.O., the Spanish American Student Organization because in New Mexico, we grew up thinking we were Spanish American, right? Somebody had finally gone to another campus and said, "Well, they are calling themselves Chicanos now, they're not calling themselves Spanish

American.” Right? So, we changed the name S.A.S.O. to C.A.S.O., the Chicano Associated Student Organization. In those days, there were I think three Chicano professors in the whole university and this was a university that was like 75% or 80% Chicano, about 13% Native American, and a sprinkling of Blacks, but it was in a state that is about 80% Chicano, right? All of the administrators at the university were white and had been from the beginning. We had just a couple of people so that’s what we were fighting against, the exclusion and the discrimination. David and I, Juanita’s sister, and a couple of other students used to put out an underground newspaper called, *El Machete*, and we used to do it with a mimeograph machine.<sup>21</sup> I used to love the smell of that mimeograph. *El Machete* was my first introduction to Journalism and then, I met Betita Martínez and Enriqueta Vásquez, who had a column in *El Grito del Norte*. They were kind of like our mentors and that’s how I became involved in the Chicano Movement.

Like I said, the Chicano organizations were mostly run by the guys. They had what they called the “Triumvirate.” It was three guys, Francisco González, I think, and Al Ortega; I forget who the third one was. I remember telling my friend, Sylvia, who was called, Milli, short for militant, because we used to dress in Army fatigues with our Army jackets and boots up to here. I mean, we were like that image of what we thought then a Chicana activist should be. So, it was my friend Sylvia and I, maybe a few others, a sprinkling of other women who were involved. I told her, if they ask you if you know how to type, say no, because they are going to want us to sit over there in a corner to do all the typing. Our *movimiento* in Las Vegas was very unique because we had a district attorney, believe it or not, in Las Vegas, who was a very proud *Mexicano*, and he actually sued the university for discrimination. His name was Donaldo “Tiny” Martínez, and he and some of the other democratic *políticos* were raised in Vegas and had gone to school at Highlands back in the 1940s, so they were kind of our mentors, *también*. I remember the guys used to make the decisions and relegate us to handing out flyers and typing up the stuff. So, we were in with the *políticos* in the town because my apartment was next to the democratic headquarters for San Miguel County. We got to be friends with them, so they would tell us when they were holding these secret meetings in the community. Before the guys, David Montoya and so, got there, me and Sylvia were already sitting there with the *políticos* where they would be strategizing.

We took over the buildings at Highlands and were pushing for a Chicano president, the first Chicano president of any state university in the country, and our candidate was John Aragon, from here, Albuquerque. Instead, they brought in this guy, Charles Graham, from Wisconsin, and so the demonstrations got really heavy. I don’t know but some people say that they even sent Graham bullets in the mail and stuff like that. I don’t know about that but anyway, he resigned quickly. I think he had just come on campus and saw how unfriendly we were, so he took off. Then they brought in kind of like a compromise candidate, Frank Ángel. He was from there, his family was from

Las Vegas, but he was, as far as we were concerned, kind of wishy washy. He was not really supporting Chicano Studies. There were no Chicano Studies at the time and we were pushing for that so we demonstrated against him, too. We took over the administration building and had sit outs and stuff like that. But we had the *políticos* on our side so even when people were arrested, the charges were dropped. At one point, they wanted to bring in the National Guard.

I later moved to New York and I became involved in the Puerto Rican independence movement and worked for the Center for Constitutional Rights, which was started by Jewish activist lawyers, William Kunstler, Morty Stavis, and others. I also worked for the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. In 1990, my son joined the military. Knowing how much I was opposed to all of this stuff, he goes and signs up for the military and within three months, they had the first so-called Persian Gulf war and there goes my son on the U.S.S. Missouri. I was, back in New Mexico at the time and he joined and went off to the military. I went back to New York City and became the head of a national anti-war movement made up of parents, relatives, and military people. We opposed the war and there he was fighting in the war. I've always maintained my activism, not necessarily in the Chicano Movement because I became an honorary Puerto Rican over there. I was involved and produced newsletters for them. I worked for a radical news weekly called, the *Guardian News Weekly*; I think it was a Maoist paper, but I knew nothing about Maoism. All I know is that it was an opportunity to do journalism and so I came back to New Mexico in 2004 and have been here ever since.

**Irene Vásquez:** Okay, we have time for one more question. All of you have been speaking to the relationship between art and social activism, and so, following up on that, do you think that art has a place in social movements moving forward and if so, how do you see that?

**Juanita L. Jaramillo:** I work a lot with children and I try to nurture children to be able to trust their intuitions and their observation. They know more than they're given credit for. For me, the best application I have is working with children. I mentioned visual literacy but multisensory literacy because you read, you read what's going on, you're in this new environment, a strange environment. You use every cue possible to kind of get yourself grounded. I really believe this as a teacher of children that it is critical for a society, in order to continue to grow, to nurture that kind of capacity with the children and that means creativity, exploration, and cooperation. This is something that children need to be exposed to since toddlerhood. They need to know how to interact with each other and be able to cooperate to troubleshoot and invent

because these are our future leaders. These are our future leaders! They have to know, they have to be familiar with, their internal acknowledgment of the world. Also, there's a familial awareness and then from there, it's a community and the cultural. But if this is not nurtured through art, and by art I'm talking about music, all of it, theater, dance, if this isn't part of their existence as children, then I really believe a society stagnates, it's not going to grow and that, to me, is the critical element of art. It permeates everything.

**Francisco Lefebvre:** Art and social activism are interdependent. I see that now at the University of New Mexico, where Chicana and Chicano Studies is growing and part of that is based on the importance the department places on the Humanities and the Arts. I participate by helping plan events and programs for high school students. I gather a lot of information from the students. I also participate in their classes and give talks. I tell them my story about having been involved in the Chicano Movement. The Chicana and Chicano Movement had connections with other social movements. I remember in 1976 when Angela Davis came to Albuquerque and I had a chance to meet her. She invited a few of us from Albuquerque to go to Oakland and we stayed with her. I remember that was in 1976 during the U.S. presidential election. The communist party had a candidate named Gus Hall and he visited Oakland. We were networking with activists and artists in the Bay Area. The Black Panthers were doing security for Gus Hall and so all these different people were coming in and out. The people from A.I.M., the American Indigenous Movement, came and talked about the "Trail of Broken Treaties." The people from the Philippines were speaking about the tyranny of Fernando Marcos. Having been drafted and oriented toward being critical of socialism and communism, these interactions expanded my political consciousness within the realm of the Left.

I participated in these discussions in my 20s and it opened my eyes to what the struggle of the people is in different parts of the world and in the U.S. I remember walking into a Longshoreman's Union with the Black Berets. The Black Panthers led the march into the hall. People were chanting and affirming each other. I have vivid memories of these experiences that were part of being involved in the Chicano Movement. In a sense, I felt I was part of a pageantry of the people, not in the sense of a church but the kind of pageantry, like being wrapped up in something that is very moving, and very heart felt. I'll never forget when I had the opportunity to talk to Bob Marley. Angela Davis invited us to hear a musician performing in San Francisco. His name was Bob Marley. I didn't even know Bob Marley and she said, "He wants to go have breakfast in San Francisco. Would you guys wanna go?" I said, "Sure." So, the next day, everybody was getting ready to go to San Francisco and then the phone rings. Angela Davis said, "Francisco, can you get the phone?" I said, "Hello?" He says, "This is Bob Marley and I just want to say that last night we went out and I caught a

cold and I'm gonna have to cancel on breakfast." So, I said, "Okay, thank you. I'll give the message to Angela." I hung up and said, "Angela, that guy that we were supposed to go have breakfast with canceled." I didn't even know how to talk to Bob Marley. Being involved in the movement, being part of it for me was like a pageantry and that's why I believe art is instrumental in social movements. For me, it's being able to portray that beautiful human dream of dignity and solidarity on a wall or canvas to broadcast a message and a vision. My hope is to create a visual dialogue so that the next generations can understand the past and where they came from and what blood flows through their veins. That's what I have to share about activism.

**Noél Márquez:** I went to a school in Skowhegan, Maine, where everything is basically old architecture. They have these Thomas Jefferson libraries that don't even have room for books anymore, but the architecture is so important that they limit the knowledge. There is an architecture that's designed to keep us in place. When we went to Mexico, what we saw was that Cortés was not celebrated as a hero. Mexico is an indigenous nation and they depict Cortés as a social disease. Cortés brought more death and destruction and a lack of respect for cultures in Mexico. Every society has its strengths and its weaknesses. What we have to think as New Mexicans is instead of celebrating Oñate, we need more critical thinking. How can we put him in a different context, in art, and in our communities? If you go to the El Paso airport, he's out there, 32 feet high, on a horse, being Mr. Man. And he's in Española. Probably the best thing that happened there was when they cut his leg off. I thought that should be featured as a main piece of art, you know? That's what social activism is all about. If a library, in darkness, there in *gringolandia*, can have Orozco, with powerful murals of indigenous people and the history of America as a capitalistic country, why can't U.N.M. have something like that at Zimmerman Library, instead of you know, that controversial mural that limits our dreams?<sup>22</sup> Does activism have a place in our state? You're damn right! We need to start making avenues and talking to people to change this whole culture so that we're more than just quaint and folkloric. We have a strong culture behind us. That's what I'd like to put in everyone's mind, that there's a lot more to do.

**Adelita Medina:** I don't see anything wrong with using art to portray beautiful landscapes and beautiful people and animals and stuff like that. I do a few landscapes, myself, but I have always been of the belief that we should use our God-given talents and gifts to create a better world. People have been doing this all along like our Native American ancestors here and down in Mexico. They used art way back then on cups, on the walls, and in their tombs. In Europe, we have Picasso and Goya, who were already using their talents. Yes, they painted all kinds of famous pictures but they felt

obliged to make social commentary on what they saw was wrong in society. I think we need to continue to do that. Now, I use a lot of bright colors in my artwork and that attracts people but then I throw in little messages in there. At one of my exhibits, there was this man from Argentina, who wasn't really interested in art, but his wife took him there to the exhibit and I saw he was really looking at the pieces really up close. So, I asked him, "Que te gusta?" and he said, "Los colores, los colores," and then he said, "Y los mensajes." The colors had drawn him in to see the messages. Like I said, we need to use our skills and talents to create a better world.

**Ray Hernández-Durán: I'm afraid we are out of time. I wish we had another hour to continue our conversation. I feel we could keep going and I've already learned so much. I'd like to thank you all for taking the time to participate in this roundtable and for so generously sharing your life and work with us. Please join me in thanking our special guests.**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The panel discussion transcription was edited by Ray Hernández-Durán and Irene Vásquez for clarity and flow.

<sup>2</sup> These elaborate tapestry *fresadas* (blankets), found in many Southwest museum collections, are based on a 4–5, eight-pointed star design with detailed geometric embellishments that include, *palmas*, *culbreías*, *calabrotos* and large concentric diamonds of different colors.

<sup>3</sup> Highlands is a reference to New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Pedro Rodríguez was the first director of Chicano Studies at NMHU, where he taught Chicano art. He was a professor of Chicano Studies at Washington State University and also director of the Guadalupe Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas. See, "Pedro Rodriguez oral history, 2013," *Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections, Washington State University Libraries*, Pullman, Washington (2013).

<sup>4</sup> *El Norte* is a 1983 British-American film directed by Gregory Nava and based on a screenplay by Nava and Anna Thomas about Maya siblings who escape the massacre of their village in Guatemala and find their way to Los Angeles where they face numerous challenges and obstacles.

<sup>5</sup> 'Cuartonero' is Spanish for, 'logger.'

<sup>6</sup> 'Tía' is Spanish for, 'aunt.'

<sup>7</sup> Elmer Schooley, Harry Leippe, Paul Volckening, and Bob Hill were all members of the Art faculty at New Mexico Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico in the 1970s.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Martínez was the co-founder of *El Grito del Norte* newspaper.

<sup>9</sup> 'Crusade for Justice' was a civil rights and educational organization founded in 1966 in Denver, Colorado to address the needs of the city's Chicano youth, among other things. For more information, please see, "The Crusade for Justice" at: <http://www.the1960sbloggu.wordpress.com>.

PANEL DISCUSSION: ARTISTAS DEL PUEBLO

<sup>10</sup> This is a reference to the sanctuary in Chimayó, New Mexico known as, *El Santuario de Chimayó*. Founded in 1816 by Bernardo Abeyta and other residents of *El Portero*, the site is an important pilgrimage destination and is known for its miraculous, healing soil. The sanctuary was later acquired by the Spanish Colonial Arts Society in 1929 and donated to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in Santa Fe. See Irene S. Levine, "A Little Church in New Mexico with Some Big Healing Power," *The Washington Post*, April 10, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the *Alianza Nacional de Campesinas*, please visit: <https://www.alianzanasionaldecampesinas.org/>

<sup>12</sup> 'Que descance en paz' is Spanish for, 'may she rest in peace.'

<sup>13</sup> 'El oro del barrio' is Spanish for, 'the gold of the community,' or 'the gold of the neighborhood.'

<sup>14</sup> 'Resolana' is Spanish for, 'a sunny spot,' also understood, colloquially, as a place where members of the community come together to talk, share stories, and bond.

<sup>15</sup> 'Raíces' is Spanish for, 'roots.'

<sup>16</sup> 'Vergüenza' is Spanish for, 'shame' or 'embarrassment.' Facundo Valdez was a professor of Social Work at New Mexico Highlands University and also the founder of *La Academia de la Nueva Raza* in Dixon, New Mexico.

<sup>17</sup> Tortilla artists were artists affiliated with a group known as *The Great Tortilla Conspiracy* based in the Mission District in San Francisco, California. Members of this group—Jos Sances, René Yañez, Río Yañez, and Art Hazlewood—used tortillas as their material or canvas. The use of tortillas as a fine art medium was meant to reflect the cultural roots of the artists and the cultural significance of the tortilla. For more information, please see: "Tortilla Art," *Joe Bravo* at: <http://joebravo.net/sample-page/tortilla-art/>

<sup>18</sup> *Teatro Campesino* is a Chicano theatre company founded by Luis Valdez and Agustín Lira in California in 1965 as a cultural branch of the United Farm Workers and Chicano Movements. Originally based in Delano, California, it is currently based in San Juan Bautista, California. Early performances were based on such traditions as, *commedia dell'arte*, colonial mission religious plays, and Mexican folk humor, among other sources. For more information, please see the official site for *Teatro Campesino* at: <http://www.elteatrocampesino.com>.

<sup>19</sup> U.C.S.D., University of California in San Diego

<sup>20</sup> M.E.C.H.A., *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*, is a student organization founded by students from 12 universities in 1969 in Santa Barbara, California and since then, found at U.S. universities around the nation. The organization has been in the news due to a controversial proposal by current group leadership to remove 'Aztlán' from the name. Additionally, the organization opted to change 'Chicano' to 'Chicanx' to promote broader inclusivity and is currently identified as, *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanx de Aztlán*. For more information on this ongoing discussion, please see, "From 'Chicano Blowout' to Blowup: Turmoil over MEChA Name Change," *LATimes* (June 3, 2019) at: <https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-mecha-chicano-controversy-20190603-story.html>

<sup>21</sup> The Las Vegas, New Mexico periodical, *El Machete* shared the activist inclinations of a socialist newspaper of the same name, which was produced in Mexico City from 1924 to 1929 and included editorials and art by prominent artists and labor union organizers, such as Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Xavier Guerrero. The paper was officially launched in 1924 by the *Sindicato de Obreros Tecnicos, Pintores y Escultores* (SOPTE).



## HEMISPHERE

Similarly, political cartoonist and artist, Eric J. García, originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico but currently based in Chicago, openly states that with an interest in continuing the activist legacies of both newspapers, he chose to title his popular cartoon series, *El Machete* after the Mexico City and Las Vegas publications. For more information on the Mexico City periodical, please see: <http://www.elmachete.com>. See also, Eric J. Garcia, *Drawing on Anger: Portraits of U.S. Hypocrisy* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> U.N.M., University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

## Panel Discussion: “Don’t Mess with Tejanas: Texan Feminist Artists and Zine Publishing as Resistance”

CLAUDIA ZAPATA

SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

### INTRODUCTION

The panel discussion, held on April 6, 2019 at the Latino Art Now! 2019 conference at the University of Houston in Houston, Texas, was moderated by Claudia Zapata, Ph.D. Candidate in Art History at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. The panel featured four *Tejana* zine creators: Isabel Ann Castro, Maribel Falcón, Suzy González, and Daisy Salinas. Each panelist discussed their experience as creative entrepreneurs and artists, and their role as part of radical publishing.

Isabel Ann Castro (she/her) is a visual artist from San Antonio, Texas. She received a B.F.A. in Communication Design from Texas State University. Isabel is co-founder and art director of *St. Sucia*, a DIY, international, Latina/x feminist magazine. *St. Sucia* focuses on collecting, curating, and publishing contemporary Latina/x writing and art. Isabel is also an organizer for *San Anto Zine Fest* and zine librarian. She is a 2018 National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures (N.A.L.A.C.) Leadership Institute Fellow.

Maribel Falcón is a *Tejana* creatrix currently based in Austin, Texas. In 2013, she received her B.A. from the University of Texas at Austin in Sociology and Latin American Studies. She is co-founder and collective member of *Colectiva Còsmica*, an art collective made of *mujeres* who teach workshops, make zines, and curate art shows of work by emerging artists. Her art work tends to convey political messaging and Indigenous-based spirituality. She has been featured in *Remezcla* and *Bitch Magazine*.

Suzy González is an artist, curator, zinester, educator, and community organizer living and working in San Antonio, Texas. Giving attention to the origins of, both, food and art materials, she analyzes what it means to decolonize art and art history. She co-publishes, *Yes, Ma'am* zine, co-organizes the *San Anto Zine Fest*, and is half of the collective, *Dos Mestizxs*. She is currently co-curating a contemporary Xicanx art exhibit that will travel from New York to San Antonio in late 2019 and early 2020. She's an alumna of the N.A.L.A.C. Leadership Institute and is now serving as a mentor with the N.Y.F.A. Immigrant Artist Mentoring Program. Suzy holds an M.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design and a B.F.A. from Texas State University.

Daisy Salinas is a San Antonio-based Xicana feminist zinester, punk musician, festival organizer, activist, and poet. She obtained her B.A. in English from Middle Tennessee State University and an M.A. in Multicultural Women's Studies from Texas Woman's

University. Through her independent publication, *Muchacha* Fanzine, Daisy amplifies the voices of marginalized artists of color. Along with zine-making, Daisy also founded the decolonial feminist punk collective, *Xingonas in the Pit*, sings and plays bass with the punk band, *Frijolera Riot*, and performs poetry with the bilingual poetry collective, WAKE-UP (Womxn Artistically Collecting *Experiencias - Unidxs Prosperando*).

**Subject Areas:** Art History, Studio Art, Latinx Studies, Chicax Studies, Feminist Studies, Mexican American Studies, artist books, independent publishing, Visual Culture

## PANEL DISCUSSION TRANSCRIPT

**Claudia Zapata:** What is Texas' unique role in zine history?

**Isabel Ann Castro:** We started organizing, started doing our zines, and found out that Suzy González was doing zines so we started getting together with *La Liga Zine*, and then we were like, "We should have a zine fest." Dr. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto had created the Latino Collection at the San Antonio Public Library. I go there to look at stuff, explore, and be inspired. I've really just realized we are just a continuation of papers and publishing that have been happening since the 1960's. I'm just pulling stuff off the library shelves and just blowing through it and being like, "Ah, this is cool, I really like this," and making scans, taking it home, and reading stuff. We're really a continuation of stuff that has already been created. In San Antonio, there was lots of independent newspapers for neighborhoods. I found out about the Alazán-Apache Courts, where low income people lived. They had their own newspaper. I really feel like we're just a continuation of that, and luckily, we have that resource available to the public; I can just go through and get weird with it. The *San Anto Zine Fest*, it's *St. Sucia*, *Yes Ma'am Zine*, *La Liga Zine*, but we're kind of curating the space. Emma Hernández at the San Antonio library, she's really opened that space to us, making it accessible. We get that space for free so we could host a zine fest. We have money left over to invite all of these people who make zines that we've met along the way, people from, not only our city but people in the Southwest region, *La Horchata Zine* in D.C., people we met in Oakland. We curate these spaces and then collect these zines, like with the zine library, and are continuing what Dr. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto has done. We have social media, so it maybe feels like it's more out there now because we're just Tweeting, Instagramming, and posting and sharing, but this has been happening for a long time. Texas feels like a really awesome hub because we're not on the East coast or the West coast. We're kind of like, "Well, we'll do our own fucking thing," and ignore what's going on over there. It's fun.

**Claudia Zapata: How do zines radicalize the concept of the book?**

**Maribel Falcón:** Well, we don't have to get anybody to approve it to publish it, so I love it because people stress about getting their book published online. I'm like, you could just do it yourself; you could put it into a little booklet. Our zines are archived in the libraries. I know a lot of our zines are purchased by major institutions, and so, what's the difference except that I don't have to get a publisher to approve it or accept what I want to say. We can say whatever we want, we can print whatever we want. I mean it's not extremist or violence-inducing but I think it's just as good as a paperback on the shelf.

**Suzy González:** That's the most empowering part is that you don't need that validation, you only need your own validation and that's what I try to tell other folks, to just do it: you know, that DIY.

**Daisy Salinas:** It's like unlearning what gets to count as knowledge, so I've been unlearning that the whole time I've been publishing zines and not needing validation from publishing companies. Also, not having to censor yourself is really important because even in grad school, I would have to censor myself all the time. It was just like regurgitating a bunch of academic jargon, whereas in a zine, I can talk about what really matters to me without feeling like I have to compromise it.

**Suzy González:** I think whether you're conscious of it or not, it's anti-capitalist, right? And it's like you're creating, we're creating, our own kind of economies. You buy something and then someone buys something from you, and you're like, "Oh, we should just trade." It's that kind of money that's supporting each other in a bunch of ways.

**Audience:** As a bookseller, I have a bookstore in Santa Ana, I know some of you already. Your validation comes from all of the youth that comes looking for your zines. You become relevant role models and inspire other youth to create their own zine. So, I want to applaud all of you for that because I have young *Chicanitas* that are coming in like, "Oh, do you have this person?" And you have to get their zine. There's this mass fanbase for y'all and it's affordable, and that's the best part because a lot of folks cannot afford books, but they can afford the zines.

**Maribel Falcón:** Not to dismiss books or writers because they are just as important; zines aren't better. We are able to do so with less money and more timing.

**Claudia Zapata: Do you identify as a creative entrepreneur?**

**Isabel Ann Castro:** When we were doing the zine we were like, "Oh, shit," we have a lump of money from the zine sales; we need to put it somewhere, so we had to get a bank account and put it there. Then people were like, "Hey, where can I get this," and we're like, "Oh, I guess we'll sell them online." We had to create an online store and a lot of us are figuring stuff out. As an artist, I already had an online store for my posters and stuff. Natasha Hernández is a full-time nurse, so I handle all the store stuff. We just try and make it as accessible as possible, but it's also having to call a bookstore in Austin and saying, "Hey, we've run out of this. Someone's looking for this; do you have it?" And really learning how to talk to other folks, put things online, and then market them with Instagram. I mean, just so you can say, "Hey, this is made, it exists, it's there if you want it," just trying to figure that out. I took one marketing class in college for credit and it helped out, but it's stuff that you could easily go on a marketing 101 and Google it. All of what we do, like book-making, is all googleable now. You just take a YouTube video, watch it, and you're like, "Cool, got it." So, learning how to sell it, that's been pretty easy.

**Claudia Zapata: What roles do zines play in institutional learning?**

**Suzy González:** Well, there have been more and more schools approaching us, like, *St. Lucia*, a whole lot. They approach us and want to do workshops and that kind of thing. Our first thing is asking, "How much are y'all paying us?" And then trying to get them to give us credit and to have that confidence. We're doing a good thing, and this shouldn't be taken advantage of just because it's not like a fancy painting in a white-wall gallery kind of art.

**Daisy Salinas:** Yeah, I think artists of color really need to be compensated for our work as creators of culture. I think it's long overdue, like recognition and reparations, and everything. I feel like we deal with so much and we're not taken seriously a lot of the time, so I think it's really important to compensate artists of color. I feel like it's the definition of entitlement to not to.

**Isabel Ann Castro:** Also, it was teachers of color that put us on their syllabus that got us into an academic realm. We were getting a bunch of orders from the same place in California, and we're like, maybe it's a book club. Then we actually checked our email and it was a professor who had picked up our zine while she was visiting San Antonio and her friend was like, "Hey, you need to read this." So, she went back and was going to teach a Chicana Gender Studies class and was like, "I need to include zines in my syllabus," so she had us with Third Woman Press. We were the cheapest for that semester for any of the students. It was like seven bucks, or, I think Third Woman Press had a PDF download that they were getting. They introduced contemporary women of color artists and zinemaking into their academic realm. When we did a zine tour through California, we got to do a guest lecture and they gave us pizza and lemonade, and we hung out and it was really cool. Now, we're at the space where we're just like, hey, we need to be more compensated. When we went to Texas A&M Corpus Christi a couple of weeks ago, they paid for our hotel, we got a stipend, and we did a whole two-hour workshop. They took us to dinner, and it was like, yes, this is nice. But it started with teachers of color saying, "Hey! Something's missing. I found something so now, let's pay these people to come out here because they're missing work just to be here." It's been a real journey understanding what our worth is, because it was just like, "Oh, I make zines and we fold paper, and it's cool." Now, it's like, "Okay, there's an academic breakdown of this and now they want me to speak on it. Should I charge? How much should I charge?" It's been a whole learning process getting into institutions because I know there's a book institutional fee when you get a book through the library. We've been acquired by some libraries and archives. We're just seven bucks, it's cool, but apparently, there's so much that we don't know that we don't know. So, it's been a whole learning process for everything.

**Audience:** I just wanted to share that I'm so grateful to be here. Thank you for everyone that shared. You know, I'm a librarian at a community college in San Antonio. I introduce information literacy through zines and it's really taken off. I'm collaborating with faculty members by helping them design assignments to use with zines because the thing is that a lot of the intro classes and the instructors will require them to pull five to seven peer-reviewed articles. It's so overwhelming that the students don't see themselves in this work, and so having them create a zine as a reflective piece or a how-to guide, there's so many options, you know, and because of people like everyone on this panel, I'm sharing. I'm sharing it on my campus and it's only been a short time, so if anybody in the audience...because just that spark, just do it. Like you were saying, just do it. I'm doing instructional search strategies, Boolean Operators, stuff like that, like library citations. The students are like, "Ok, I see it because I'm doing it. I'm visually explaining it." I want to prepare them to be better researchers, to evaluate your sources, to do all that good stuff. But I hope to make a zine, *A Day in the Life of a Librarian of Color*.

**Claudia Zapata: What are your hopes for the future of zines?**

**Suzy González:** I hope someone can look back at *Tejana* zinesters like the way that we look back at *Riot Grrls*, that'd be cool, and be like, "That was a movement and it's still happening." I didn't think that that was a thing until, Claudia Zapata, you invited us to this and are validating us as an art form and whoa, art history, that's a part of it. You know, I didn't really consider that before.

**Isabel Ann Castro:** I hope that there's a very accessible, digitized archive like the Latino collections. There are some of our zines that are already barcoded. That was such a big deal to be barcoded in like San Antonio Public Library because me and Natasha Hernández both went as kids and would fill milk crates full of books. Knowing we're barcoded, on a shelf, and really physically taking up space, that there's rows of books, of the weight of all the zines, that's something that's very magical. We're really hoping to expand on that, that people start to, like, if they've never collected zines before that pique their interest. There's something for everyone and people individually building a catalog of their own library. There still will be underrepresented folks in the future. No matter what, somebody's going to get lost there and hopefully, they see zines as a powerful source to tell their own stories. They take up physical space, like in all archives, everywhere, not just specifically Latino archives, but American archives. We're in a zine library in Spain. I've never seen it but I know the name of it from an e-mail. I'm just like, "We're out there with this," and somebody out there knows we exist and that's dope. So, hopefully everybody feels seen and heard. That's what I hope.

**Daisy Salinas:** My hope is that women of color are supported when we are alive because I feel like we're romanticized and worshipped when we're dead. I feel we're hardly supported or archived when we are alive, so I want to change that for the next generation of women of color artists and zinesters.

**Audience:** It is great, everything that you do. I think I'm in one of those zines. It was just amazing to submit and then I realized at one point I started seeing, *La Horchata* zine go all over the different festivals. I was like, "Man, that's really cool that everyone gets to see your work in other places," and you make it go other places. Right, so what you are doing is pretty great, and for artists giving that resource to other people, so thank you.

CLAUDIA ZAPATA is a doctoral candidate in the Rhetorics of Art, Space, and Culture (R.A.S.C./a) Graduate Program in Art History at Southern Methodist University. She received her B.A. and M.A. from the University of Texas in Austin in Art History, specializing in Classic Maya art. Her research interests include curatorial methodologies of identity-based exhibitions, Chicanx and Latinx art, exhibition design/digital humanities, people of color zines, and designer toys. From 2010 to 2014, she served as the Curator of Exhibitions and Programs at the *Mexic-Arte* Museum in Austin, Texas. Zapata has curated over 30 exhibitions at the *Mexic-Arte* Museum and other Texas institutions, including, *A Viva Voz: Carmen Lomas Garza* (2010), *Sam Coronado: A Retrospective* (2011), *Death to Dollars: The Commercialization of Day of the Dead* (2011), and *Fantastic & Grotesque: José Clemente Orozco in Print* (2014). Her recent projects include co-founding the Latinx art collective, *Puro Chingón* Collective in 2012. Within this experimental arts group, she develops art zines, prints, apparel, design, and art toys. Claudia has published articles in *Panhandle-Plains Historical Review*, *Jollas: Journal of Latino/Latin American Studies*, and *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*. She is currently pursuing her dissertation project, “Chicano Art is Not Dead: Politics on Display within Major U.S. Exhibitions.” This year, Claudia is the Latino art curatorial assistant at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in support of the exhibition, *¡Printing the Revolution! Chicano Graphics from the Civil Rights Era to the Present*.

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## HEMISPHERE

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**A call for papers will be issued for Volume XIII at the end of year.**

Completed essays, reviews of recent publications or exhibitions, and interviews are requested from M.A. or Ph.D. students currently enrolled in graduate programs. Submissions are accepted written in English, Spanish, or Portuguese.

Each submission must be accompanied by a cover letter that prominently notes the title of the essay, the area of study to which it pertains, as well as a curriculum vitae that includes the author's status (e.g. M.A. / Ph.D. Student or Ph.D. Candidate), department, and institution name and location.

**Essays, reviews, or interviews, as well as other documents listed above can be submitted as Word documents via e-mail to: *hmsphr@unm.edu***

Journal contributors receive complimentary copies of the journal. Additionally, essay writers selected to publish in *Hemisphere* will be invited to participate in a symposium at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque in fall semester 2020, where they will have the opportunity to speak about the work presented in their essay.

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- Use the Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition
- 10 point font and double spaced, Times New Roman
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- References to centuries: as adjectives = nineteenth-century; as noun = nineteenth century

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- Limit 4 images per essay. Please limit the number of images you include to only those significant to your discussion, and refrain from an excessive number of images simply for the sake of including them.
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