SHOOTING FROM THE WILD ZONE

A Study of the Chicana Art Photographers Laura Aguilar, Celia Álvarez Muñoz, Delilah Montoya, and Kathy Vargas

Asta M. Kuusinen

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
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When I decided to apply to the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, little did I know that about ten years later one of the upshots of that decision would be a doctoral degree in North American Studies at the University of Helsinki. Nothing gives me more pleasure than recollecting the four years in Albuquerque, which changed my life in many ways. My perception of the United States as the home ground for a unified “American culture” was radically changed by the astonishing diversity of New Mexican people and their cultures. Most of all, I cherish the memories of volunteering at the KUNM Public Radio, which taught me not only the ropes of radio production, but also the ideals of community empowerment through the media. My fellow students and the teachers at the UNM College of Fine Arts taught me how to collaborate in building a mutually supportive intellectual and social environment, geared to help each of its members achieve her/his full potential. I wish to thank particularly Geoffrey Batchen, my graduate advisor, whose unflagging enthusiasm, good humor, and commitment to his students guided my first steps toward critical thinking. Both artistically and intellectually, I owe thanks to such inspiring teachers as Lydia Madrid, José Rodríguez, Charlene Villaseñor Black, Holly Barnet, Patrick Nagatani, and Enrique Lamadrid. Over the last three years, the Chicano Studies Research Center at the University of California in Los Angeles and the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin have generously welcomed me to conduct research under their auspices. Without access to their human and library resources, particularly the CSRC Library and Special Collections and the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, this study would never have materialized.

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IN DECEMBER of 1999, I finished a Masters degree at the University of New Mexico. In March, 2001, about nine months after my departure from New Mexico, a friend of mine who was still living in Albuquerque started to send me articles cut out of the leading local newspaper. The articles vividly described how in New Mexico’s capital, Santa Fe, crowds of angry people were marching in protest against the city’s International Folk Art Museum, threatening the museum administration with sanctions, lawsuits, and public scandal. The cries of sacrilege were directed against a c. 30 by 35 centimeter digital image titled Our Lady by Latina artist Alma Lopez. The image was on display in the newly opened exhibition “Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology,” which featured four artists of Latina/Chicana/Hispana origin and was curated by New Mexican art historian Tey Marianna Nunn. Lopez’s depiction of the Virgin of Guadalupe, dressed only in flowers and a bikini, ignited a fierce battle of images between some very influential Santa Fe Catholic leaders and the artist, who defended her legacy on this popular religious symbol and her freedom to endow it with personal meanings relevant to her own experiences. (For a description of the history and meaning of Guadalupe in Mexican American culture, see pages 81-83.)

In June, the battle was drawing to its close. The New Mexico Museum Committee on Sensitive Materials recommended that Alma Lopez’s image stay on exhibit, while the protesters had, for the most part, exhausted their energies. It was a partial victory, though, because something had changed; on a visit to Albuquerque that summer, I met signs of underlying fear and uneasiness throughout the community of local Mexican American professionals and artists. A rift that had emerged became visible in an exhibition titled “Las Malcriadas: Coloring out of the Lines,” organized in support of Alma Lopez by her artist friends in New Mexico. In the closing reception of this exhibition, Alma Lopez and the local female artists were celebrated by their supporters for their courage and endurance, but the unity of the audience was disrupted by the tacit voices that remained absent. Later on, while visiting museums and galleries in New Mexico, I frequently paid attention to ominous notices at exhibition entrances warning viewers about display material that might be sensitive or offensive. It seemed, indeed, that Lopez’s concerns about possible future censorship, including self-censorship, and subtle restrictions on the freedom of speech were not unwarranted after all.1 Guadalupe’s daughters had helped the Virgin run away from the
Church (once again, one could add), but there was no refuge.

Since moving from Albuquerque, I have shelved my printmaker’s profession to follow the winding paths of Chicana artists from Texas to California in an attempt to write down something meaningful about their work, which has engaged my intellectual curiosity for over five years. Inevitably, questions about my own identity have surfaced as happens to any “resident alien” who finds her/himself befuddled by strange encounters with American life. In America (i.e., the United States), they claim I am Caucasian; I used to greatly enjoy causing confusion by insisting that I am Finno-Ugric, in fact, and that the Caucasians for me are just a mountain range over yonder. I am not a U.S. citizen, Catholic, indigenous, or of racially mixed ancestry. I was born on the peninsula of Finland, which lies between Sweden and Russia, to a middle-class, non-religious family of presumably Finnish origin. The 1990s recession in Finland drove me out of the country to study at the University of New Mexico and work in the same lithography shop with Delilah Montoya, one of the subjects of this study. What brought us together was our love of cross-country skiing, and it was during our long skiing trips to the mountains of New Mexico and Colorado that I first learned about Latin cultures in the United States. Subsequently, as Montoya introduced me to her friends and relatives, the Albuquerque Hispanic/Chicano community in a way adopted me, I guess, which was particularly nice for a resident alien student during such family holidays as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

I have to admit, though, that this is not the entire story. Long before I learned what “otherness” meant by reading academic literature, I had numerous disturbing encounters with it, which are documented in my travel journals. In a journal from 1978, for example, there is a drawing of an old Native man in rags somewhere in New York City, reaching out his hand and saying, “Ma’m, give a quarter to a stupid Indian,” and a diary entry about a visit to distant relatives in British Columbia, who drove me in their truck through some dismal Indian reservation in order to prove that real Indians loved to live in squalor and decay. There are diary entries about long journeys on Greyhound busses where tense encounters between passengers without a common language sometimes happen. And there also are entries about dinner parties in affluent homes of doctors, professors, and art collectors, not all of them white Americans. I could make little sense of what I saw around me but often felt alienated, uncomfortable, and fascinated all at the same time. Only several years later I realized that a woman named Gloria Torres, whose friendship had helped me survive a year in Las Vegas, Nevada during the early 1980s, was actually – a Latina. Fluent in both English and Spanish, her home language, she never spoke a word of Spanish in my presence, not even to her Colombian parents. Torres moved from Las Vegas to San Diego, went to college, became emancipated, and one Christmas sent me Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).2 Anzaldúa’s book opened my eyes, and I started to understand a little better what I had seen.

This study, however, is not about a quest for one’s double in the revered tradition of European self-searching narratives, or an inquiry into reverse identification through the “Other,” invoked by postcolonial cultural critics. Rather, I like to refer to some feminist writers, who, instead of identities, use the term affinity in their endeavor to envision some common framework of interaction between disparate people, communities, and nations. By
preferring to use this provisional term, I wish to suggest a mental distance from celebratory configurations of cultural difference that strive to find a common ground of action without recognizing the basic realities of United States socio-political history. Of course, my approach is influenced by geography and other conditionals that situate me in an outsider subject position with its pros and cons. Studying American society from a northern European vantage point yields a different prism than, say, that of the research on Mexican American culture conducted by scholars of Mexican descent at UT at Austin, Texas. For better or worse, however, looking at American society through another society, in many ways polar opposite to it, yields yet another level of difference and interpretation, sometimes revealing subtle ironies, sometimes bordering on the absurd. Described in his essay collection _Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back_ (2000), Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s nightmarish experiences in Finland during his visit at a performance festival in Helsinki in 1999 serve as an acute as well as rather amusing example of the slippery surface of subjectivity. The border artist Gómez-Peña’s astutely self-reflective gaze instantly maps the foreign landscape inside the parameters of his own world view, transforming whiteness at first strange beyond interpretation and then the same – regardless of national geographies. “In my imagination, Finland is a clearly superficial and ‘other’ space than Montana. I don’t have informants there capable of filtering back my memories, I am clearly a colonial anthropologist in reverse,” concludes mystified Gómez-Peña.

Why don’t I, then, feel haunted by the academic code of politically correct inter-racial conduct, which often seems to stifle trans-cultural dissemination in the name of appropriation or touristig? Oddly enough, I do not feel the burden of the privileged subject that recasts difference into sameness. Instead, I feel that this road goes two ways: projecting one’s selfhood against the surface of otherness involves gradual shifts of fixed categories and formerly self-evident distinctions; the change is bilateral and irreversible – the exposure to a foreign tongue, foreign images, and foreign ways cancels out a simple return to the old home that has ceased to even exist. In a similar vein, in his book _Migrancy, Culture, and Identity_ (1994), Iain Chambers discusses the role of the artist in the postmodern world by quoting the Mexican American novelist Arturo Islas:

To live ‘elsewhere’ means to continually find yourselves involved in a conversation, in which identities are recognized, exchanged and mixed, but do not vanish. Here differences function not necessarily as barriers but rather signals of complexity. To be a stranger in a strange land, to be lost, is the condition typical of contemporary life. […] Now that the old house of criticism, historiography, and intellectual certitude is in ruins, we all find ourselves on the road. Faced with the loss of roots, and the subsequent weakening of the grammar of “authenticity,” we move into a vaster landscape. Our sense of belonging, our language and the myths we carry with us remain, but no longer as “origins” or signs of “authenticity” capable of guaranteeing the sense of our lives. They now linger as traces, voices, memories and murmurs that are mixed with other histories, episodes, encounters.
Likewise, through studying and relating to Chicana artists, I inevitably also look at myself by default and trace these voices and murmurs, which become all the more compelling the farther I stray from home. Yet I tend to disagree with most of Islas’ claims: to live “elsewhere” does not \emph{per se} entail participation in the negotiation of identities, nor does it necessarily mean engaging in cultural or academic “touristing,” for that matter; the old house of intellectual certitude still stands up and erect on the mainstay of traditional, discrete academic disciplines; in popular and political discourses, the grammar of “authenticity” is still thriving as strong as ever. What I am interested in, nevertheless, could be called the cracks in the wall, sometimes also referred to as “worm holes,” through which one can see the human landscape colored slightly outside of the lines, slightly off-white, if you will.

\section*{The Topic and Location of the Study}

The primary material of this study consists of the photographic work of the following artists: Laura Aguilar from Los Angeles, California, Celia Álvarez Muñoz from El Paso and Arlington, Texas; Delilah Montoya from Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Kathy Vargas from San Antonio, Texas. All four artists are self-identified Chicanas, and each has, since the 1980s, participated in several major art exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad, and worked as teachers, art curators, and cultural activists in their respective communities. Therefore, the similarities and differences of their lives, careers, and art work also reflect the regional histories of Mexican American dispersal over the Southwest United States. This is one of the areas I am particularly interested in, since regional divides within the Mexican-origin population have only recently appeared as a commonly recognized factor in negotiations of cultural inclusion versus exclusion, which have predominantly concentrated on the issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

My gaze is interdisciplinary, by default, admittedly biased in the sense that I do like the object of my study, and influenced by a desire to make this art more widely acknowledged and understood. Unlike art criticism, on the other hand, this research does not aspire to make qualitative judgments about the aesthetic merits or relevance of Chicana photography in the contemporary art world; yet it tries to say something intelligent about it. Although it applies semiotic tools, among other methods, to achieve this goal, it is not merely a (post)structuralist exercise in turning images into readily readable texts. Unlike mainstream art history, it does not search for evolutionary genealogies, inferred in assertions about style, technique, school, or socio-political progression. Just like art history, however, it focuses on the work and life histories of individual artists of substantial reputation. Although it utilizes some concepts associated with so-called new history, it does not – unlike historiography as a rule – propose to offer any new, ameliorated model of explanation, periodization, or paradigm.

Attentive to the insights of Chicana writer Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, this study aims to be strategically driven, empirically grounded, theoretically sophisticated, contextually defined, and reflexive about its own status. My theoretical approach thus being rather
eclectic, I draw from several critical discourses, such as cultural studies, postmodern and postcolonial criticism, the study of popular culture and regional history, the U.S. border studies, feminist criticism, and ethnic studies. This is certainly not an unproblematic position since it involves a host of inevitable ellipses and paradigmatic clashes, which I do not even try to solve by shadow boxing in the interdisciplinary boxing ring. The crucial question, “Who is the reader?,” poses the hardest challenge to any interdisciplinary writer, and therefore I apologize for failing to keep the level of discourse in every part of the study equally rewarding for all of the readers. For the sake of those readers, particularly in Europe, who are not that familiar with the ethnic makeup of the United States, I try to incorporate an optimal scope of background information about the history of Mexican Americans and their culture in the larger context of U.S. society. Albeit that my present academic affiliation is North American Studies (of somewhat Nordic flavor perhaps), obviously my position is rather marginal within the discipline that continues to be dominated by history and/or literature. Consequently, it is rather challenging to determine in exact terms the disciplinary or theoretical territory of this study, and thus I have to claim a hybrid identity, if not for myself then at least for this research.

Synopsis

Chapter 1, “Introduction” offers a brief overview on the developments of so-called critical theory in cultural studies since the early 1970s, followed by an introduction of Chicano Studies and the controversial issue of race in the United States. The purpose of Chapter 2, “Mythologies and Histories” is to provide the reader with a “road map” through the structures and significations of U.S. social formation and the critical historical events that circumscribe specifically Mexican American cultural production today. Acknowledging the legacy of such myth and symbol school Americanists as Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, Annette Kolodny, Richard Slotkin, and – in photography – Alan Trachtenberg, the chapter aims to juxtapose empirical history and its mediation/construction via popular imagination as well as official policy. The first section, “El Norte, the Southwest, Aztlán,” outlines the narratives, leading symbols, and myths of the nationalistic ideologies in the United States and Mexico. In this interrelated family of ideologies, the Mexican American member – called Aztlán, makes a rare subcategory in itself, representing a nationalistic narrative which overlaps the territories and geographical boundaries of the two nation-states without having sovereignty or a land base of its own. Special attention is given to the heyday of the Mexican American civil rights struggle, the 1960–1970s Chicano movement, fueled by ethnic separatism and intense arousal of cultural nationalism. The second section, “Regional Histories, Borderline Identities,” covers the main aspects of Mexican American history in the U.S. Southwest, focusing on uneven, regionally divergent developments in California, New Mexico, and Texas – the home states of the artists studied. Particular emphasis is given to the discussion of the rather contradictory interpretations of these histories by scholars from different fields, and how these interpretations reflect as well as reconstruct contemporary discourses within/without Mexican American cultural, academic, and local communities.
Since the beginning of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement that started in the early 1960s, Chicana feminists and lesbian activists have challenged the aesthetics, politics, and practices of Mexican American cultural revival, reinterpreting the religious and popular archetypes, symbols, and stereotypes that circumscribe the lives of Mexican American women. In Chapter 3, “Images and Meanings,” the first section, “Reading the Imagery of Chicanidad,” will introduce the strategies characteristic of Chicana expression and Chicana feminists’ commonalities with other feminists of color, who have questioned the “universal sisterhood” advocated by U.S. mainstream feminism. The second section, “Discourses on (Art) Photography,” makes a sudden, yet necessary detour from the preceding text by dwelling on the development of American photography, with special attention given to its controversial social roles, on the one hand, and to its position first in the modernist and then in the postmodernist discourses of art, on the other. This section also includes a concise introduction to semiotics (i.e., the study of signs), which interprets images through the systems of signification, representation, and textual deconstruction.

Part II consists of seven essays, each of which discusses rather independently a particular photographic work or a series of photographic works, formulating and defending arguments about their meaning, their position in the history of photographic genres, and their cultural and socio-political significance. Each of the three chapters focuses on a different aspect of representation, which fall under the titles: “History as the Site of Identification,” “Community as the Site of Identification,” and “The Body Politic of Chicana Representation.” The result is a series of “mini studies” with unexpected revelations and shuttling motions between different positions, rather than a single well-grounded and carefully constructed academic argument. I like to think, however, that this pays homage to Roland Barthes’ understanding of the “polysemic” nature of the still image, the meaning of which is floating and ambiguous, complicating its reading. What is the essence of this meaning? Where does it come from? Is there something beyond? With these questions in mind, Barthes concluded that perhaps each photograph would need its own separate study. I tend to agree.

Anyhow, the final discussion makes an effort to interpret the findings and arguments presented in the essays and pull together their links with the multifarious strands of Chicana identity, subjectivity, and ideology. The section titled “Predicaments of Identity: ¿No está la familia?” first locates the Mexican American identity question in the field of the general controversies about identity politics in the United States recently. Then follows a review of the main arguments, which affirms historian Vicki Ruiz’s assertion that “[t]here is not a single hermetic Mexican or Mexican-American culture, but rather permeable cultures rooted in generation, gender, and region, class, and personal experience.” Taking after Ruiz, I argue that Chicana artists, too, navigate across ethno-racial, cultural, class- and gender-based boundaries and “consciously make decisions with regard to the production of culture.” Yet their choices are not unlimited, but often moderated by expectations from both their own communities and the mainstream art world. Tejana artists Álvarez Muñoz and Vargas, due to the crucial role of historical myths in their home state’s self-image, focus their art works on decolonizing and defamiliarizing Western history by eliciting information from their childhood memories. In Montoya’s and Aguilar’s art works, it is claimed, Chicana/o ideology and identity politics
form a central axis due to their life experiences as working-class *mestizas* with rather complex relationships with their ethno-racial origins. The concluding passage of the study expounds on the notion of the “Wild Zone” (see pages 24-25; endnote 55) as a political/cultural space of gendered and race-specific knowledge, touching upon the troubled relationship between women, feminisms, and nationalisms with some references to Finland, too. Symbolically, the Wild Zone becomes associated with the body of the mother, a recurrent image in Chicana art works under discussion, articulating the parameters of a matrifocal community unified by the proliferation of differences rather than by conformities.

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1 In her article “Silencing Our Lady: La Respuesta de Alma” (*Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 26:2 [Fall 2001] 249-267), Lopez reflects upon the protest against her art work and its implications. She relates the long history of Chicana women who have contested the meaning the Virgin of Guadalupe, particularly in terms of the perception of women’s bodies and sexuality, and who, as a consequence, have been put on trial for treason and blasphemy. As a conclusion, Lopez appeals to the readers to consider the following questions regarding the controversy: “How rare are museum exhibitions by a Latina curator featuring Latina artists? What will be the effects of this controversy on future exhibitions of Latina/o artists? Will artists be censored to avoid any future possible controversies? Will work be removed for any reason if someone doesn’t like it? What happens to the rights of artists and curators to create and exhibit without censorship? Will audiences be accorded intellectual respect to visit museums and make their own conclusions?” (page 265).


3 Among other cultural critics, for example Minoo Moallem and Iain Boal renounce multiculturalism and liberal policies because of their narrowly culturalist definition of pluralism which mystifies the underside of social reality still marked by discrimination, inequality, and injustice. See “Multicultural Nationalism and the Poetics of Inauguration,” in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalism, Transnational Feminism, and the State*, ed. by Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoo Moallem (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999) 243-263.

4 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers: the Artist Talks Back* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 132. Charismatic as a performance artist, Gómez-Peña’s cultural criticism and social satire sometimes turns trite due to his obsessive (self-)othering, so ingrained that it seems to motivate his artistic agenda and mission during his tours around the world, notwithstanding historical and local contingencies. When the contemporary postcolonial paradigm gradually evolves toward its post-postcolonial phase, interesting encounters can emerge between former colonial citizens and “new others,” no less abjected than the “old others.” Literary critic Mita Banerjee, for example, has claimed that post-Communist populations represent these new others in Europe. Banerjee, “Postethnicity and Post-Communism in Hanif Kureishi’s *Gabriel’s Gift* and Salman Rushdie’s *Fury,*” Contemporary Cultural Hybridities: An International Symposium at the University of Joensuu, Finland, August 2005.


6 Political geographer Pauliina Raento, while talking about the influx of Asians into the metropolitan areas of the United States, refers to their initially marginal but gradually increasing visibility in the urban landscape as “worm holes.” Lecture at the University of Helsinki, fall 2001.


PART 1 : CONTEXTS
1. INTRODUCTION

Critical Theory, Chicano Studies

(Translation of an excerpt from a quote by Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg (2002):)

The making of critical research is an interactive process, where national, ethnic, regional, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries are acknowledged, challenged, redefined, or transcended.

Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg (2002)

BEFORE EMBARKING upon the actual location and topic of this study, i.e., Chicano Studies and Chicana photography, I begin by briefly looking at some of the influential critical trends of the late twentieth century. In cultural studies and related fields, this period marked a rather tortuous shift of paradigm often referred to as the linguistic turn, which was accompanied by the decline of Marxism and structuralism, challenged for example by poststructuralist, postmodern, and feminist theories. Since then, cultural studies have been dominated by issues related to gender, race, ethnicity, and identity. These issues will be brought up in the following sections, which form the groundwork for the forthcoming discussion on the seldom unanimous responses of Mexican American literati to such topics as racial mix, identity politics, the U.S.-Mexico border predicament, and their theoretical conceptualizations. Since Chicana/o cultural practices – with their specific problems and complexities – relate closely to all of the aforementioned developments, the introduction aims to be concise but comprehensive enough to sufficiently ground the visual analysis of Chicana photography presented in the essays in Part II.

This study contextualizes the investigation of photographic art work within the analytical frame of reference of both socio-historical research and cultural studies. The former provides a specific, concrete, and tangible point of departure, which nevertheless yields meager interpretative power without help from the rather controversial but also ground-breaking theoretical discourses that have grown out of the intellectual endeavors associated with cultural studies. The emergence of cultural studies first in Britain and later in other countries, including the United States, gave rise to a shift of paradigm from scientifically based modes of empirical research toward the exploration of discursive practices, contextual meanings, and human subjectivity in the formation of society and various social identities. Two fundamental arguments propelled this conceptual transformation: one had to do with the impossibility of scientific objectivity in the study of society and human affairs, and the other with the culturally constructed nature and historical specificity of the explanatory categories which in mainstream academic discourses had been understood as natural, universal, and empirically verifiable.

Although in some form discontent against prevailing academic practices had accompanied the development of modern science for a much longer time, it seems that the 1960s and 1970s marked an eruption of straight out criticism. (French deconstruction theory,
mostly personified in the names of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, functioned as a launching board for postmodernists’ criticism of structuralism and positivism. However, I do not discuss them at this point since their thinking as such does not play a central role in the study.) Historians were among the first ones to face the “assault” on their disciplinary paradigm. Postmodernist critics maintained that all historical texts were basically “poetic” creations of their authors, regardless of their methodology or the persuasiveness of evidence. Feminists and people of color accused historians of forgetting women and minorities while perpetuating the grand narrative focused on white European males. The contestation of the validity of historiography was followed by even more callous criticism from poststructuralist or postmodern philosophers during the 1970s, whose theories questioned the very possibility or even desirability of any objective, freestanding truth. Emphasizing the ethical aspects of the production of scientific knowledge, they further insisted that our perception of reality is so thoroughly permeated by the hierarchies and ideologies embedded in discourses, representations, and language as to reduce all scientific explanation into mere fiction or mythmaking.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the voices of scholars from third world countries grew stronger, and such authors as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha become the leading figures of developing postcolonial discourse. Postcolonialism disrupted the monopoly of Western anthropology and ethnography in explaining human cultures, weakening the traditional epistemological paradigms of knowledge. Postcolonial critics, in general, and women from non-Euro-American countries, in particular, not only criticized the hegemony of disciplinary sciences, but also pointed out the limitations of postmodern arguments about the narrative nature of history and the role of culture as a predominantly symbolic system that constitutes social meanings. The Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, for example, traced the history of Orientalism (Western popular as well as academic discourse about Oriental countries), describing it as a romanticized ideological construction that had contributed to the colonial and imperial endeavors of Europe and America. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a philosopher of Indian descent, has been applying textual analysis in order to question the very premises of Marxism, feminism, and French deconstruction, introducing such contested terms as “subaltern” and “strategic essentialism,” which will be discussed later in this study from the point of view of Chicano Studies.

Like the two aforementioned theorists, Homi Bhabha, whose writings elaborate upon mimicry and performance in colonial relations, also is firmly grounded in American academia, a circumstance noted by many scholars who actually live and work in third world countries. A similar reservation could be extended to Stuart Hall, a British theorist of Jamaican descent, who criticized the cultural turn and the strictly semiotic discursive analysis it propagated. Yet his writings have also made important amendments to the critical theories of society, class, and race by criticizing and expounding upon older conceptualizations (e.g., the term “hegemony” from Italian political activist and Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci [1891–1937]²). Simultaneously pointing out the weaknesses of structuralism for not allowing any room for the “play of difference” (in a postmodern sense) and those of Marxism for underrating such variables as race and gender, Hall proposed a broader approach to the cultural studies of
society without completely discrediting the basic assumptions of these monolithic methodologies of social and political science. Hall’s concepts have encouraged a more strategic interpretation of cultural products as potential catalysts of oppositional narratives, and they have been applied by several Mexican American scholars, too, as an instructive tactic in understanding the ramifications of Euro-American cultural domination over other ethnicities.

My reservations about many postcolonial theorists spring from the fact that while they live and work in the United States, their writings, for the most part, deal with other parts of the world. In contrast, Michael Omi and Howard Winant have successfully described the taunting complexity of racial experiences that structure the “normalized” world view of Americans in America today and link the concept of hegemony to very specific and “real” social, political, and economic conditions and consequences, symbolic as well as material. Yet their thinking does not reflect the kind of totalizing determinism typical of for example Gramsci, Louis Althusser, or Foucault. According to Omi and Winant, hegemony integrates and neutralizes its opposition at both structural and discursive levels. Their theory counteracts the reductive effects of purely structural approaches:

Hegemony operates by simultaneously structuring and signifying. As in the case of racial opposition, gender- or class-based conflict today links structural inequity and injustice on the one hand, and identifies and represents its subjects on the other. The success of modern day feminism, for example, has depended on its ability to reinterpret gender as a matter of both injustice and identity/difference.3

In short, racial hegemony today is “messy,” since the fault lines between races, classes, genders, and sexualities are not as clean cut as they perhaps used to be; instead, they intersect, making amalgamations where causes and effects are hard to separate from each other. The influence of Omi and Winant’s concept “racial formation” and photo-historian John Tagg’s arguments in his classic publication The Burden of Representation (1988) – which analyzes the working of hegemony through photographic representation – can be read throughout this study, particularly in its treatment of social issues.

In my view, the role of racial categories in the process of nation-building has been analyzed most compellingly by David Theo Goldberg, whose recent writings (after volumes of research on the historical traces of racial thinking in Western science and philosophy) have focused more and more on the articulations of race with gender in the formation of the modern nation-state. He asserts that “[i]t is important to recognize here that the racial state trades on gendered determinations, reproducing its racial configurations in gendered terms and its gendered forms racially.” 4 Paradoxically at the same time, the process of state formation is predicated on its need to homogenize internal differences and consolidate conflicting interests in order to gain economic and cultural hegemony.5 Unlike for example the British writer Paul Gilroy who maintains that politics based on racial difference are self-defeating in all circumstances, Goldberg defends the usage of the word “race” in policy making as a way to ensure that inequalities based on skin color will be addressed. I will return to Goldberg’s and
Omi and Winant’s conceptualizations of race later, but at this point it is pertinent to look briefly at the relatedness and divergence of Goldberg’s analytical standpoint compared to that of feminist theory.

In resemblance to the argumentation of one of the most quoted feminist intellectuals, Judith Butler, Goldberg emphasizes the significance of performative cultural and discursive practices in the constitution of common knowledge, which in turn creates sameness and imagined unity within the intrinsically hierarchical order of national communities. Also building on this premise, contemporary feminist thinkers have elaborated on the complexities and contestations of women’s practices within state building projects in a number of volumes, recently perhaps the most sophisticated theoretically being the publication titled *Between Woman and Nation* (1999), edited by Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoo Moallem (the collection also includes several essays of Chicana feminists). While both Goldberg and Butler criticize the cultural/linguistic turn for conceptualizing culture predominantly in terms of rather abstract symbols and meanings, largely overlooking the very concrete effects of race and gender inequity, many feminist intellectuals (for instance in the aforesaid volume) generally do seem to lean quite willingly toward the ideologies of postmodern and postcolonial practitioners. Intensely cross-pollinating each other in spite of their obvious discrepancies, these ideologies, in my view, cannot be discussed in any meaningful way without drawing attention to their equally obvious commonalities. Posed to strike against the weapons of mass delusion hidden behind the vestiges of the positivist paradigm of Western science, the overlapping ranks of feminist, postcolonialist, and postmodernist philosophers have so deeply stirred our world view that it seems all but impossible to avoid noting their criticism of sciences and the counterattacks launched by their foes.

The fact that postmodernism has been defined and practiced by various disciplines in wildly different, at times even contradictory ways makes the controversy around it harder to grasp. By now, heated debates have largely cooled and belligerence has given way to more moderate critical positions along with a gradual incorporation of postmodern concerns and methods into academic practices, even in history and sciences. In art history and sociology, Janet Wolff has astutely discussed the “prospects and problems for a postmodern feminism,” pointing out the complex relationship between modernity, modernism, and postmodernism, and women’s positions therein. While defending a feminist politics of the body, she criticizes homogenizing trends of pitting modernism and postmodernism against each other as polar opposites, and instead brings up both conservative and radical tendencies within each art movement, claiming that

the characteristics of modernism can sound almost identical to those of postmodernism: self-reflexivity, irony, juxtaposition, alienation effects, laying bare the device (making clear the nature of the medium and of representation itself).  

In my view, postmodernism (in general and in the visual arts) can basically be perceived as modernism coming of age, that is, to the awareness of itself, its limitations and exclusions, which has given clout to different perspectives and paradigms, such as feminist theory, queer
theory, postcolonial theory, and, most importantly, an ongoing critical assessment of academic production of knowledge as such. These discourses, in turn, have fragmented and realigned the traditional academic disciplines as well as created new disciplines to accommodate these perspectives (to accommodate studies like the one at hand).

As for the main tenets of postmodernism, I choose to take an eclectic, pragmatic stand in agreement with Keith Jenkins’ statement, “if I were to now try and define postmodernism theoretically, I would argue that it is most plausibly the ‘era of the raising consciousness of the aporia’.” 10 For example, instead of regarding culture as a coherent systemic or linguistic entity, my methodological approach emphasizes aspects of transformation and experience, such as performative practices, narratives, and embodiments as the main targets of investigation. Secondly, as a matter of course, I cannot claim value-free objectivity or privileged subject position, yet that does not automatically lead to trite relativism or the dilution of argumentation into mere intuition. One does not need to know everything to understand something, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) phrases it, and although one might be adrift in an absurd world, that world is by no means devoid of meaning. Moreover, I do not believe that the unfortunate death of the subject, propagated by hard-nose postmodernists and mourned by many others, indiscriminately destined each and every subject into extinction; instead, out of one appeared a multiplicity, as also confirmed by feminist Chicana scholarship.

How has Chicano Studies responded to the developments explained above? Chicano Studies, as one of the outcomes of the 1960s and 70s criticism against white dominance in U.S. academia, has established itself within the larger designation of ethnic studies (or American Studies, in some cases) through a series of internal convulsions and controversies concerning its self-definition, exclusions and inclusions, regional differences, and diverse political agendas. Because these discussions have shaped, in one way or the other, all academic endeavors about and/or by Mexican Americans, my aim, throughout this study, is to embed the discussion first and foremost within this context, yet also juxtaposing it with other relevant discourses from various fields, including American Studies. Since 1970, Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies has been the main forum for Mexican American intellectuals to introduce their studies, discuss their controversies, and disseminate information about issues pertinent to Mexican American communities. To commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of this journal, its editors and contributors compiled an anthology of essays published in Aztlán over the last three decades. I will mainly resort to this collection, titled The Chicano Studies Reader: An Anthology of Aztlán, 11 and the journal itself for deciphering the major developments in Mexican American scholarship and relate these developments to the interpretation of Chicana photography, which will follow in Part II.

**Nomenclature**

The study at hand is mostly about Mexican-origin Americans who live in the U.S. This population, however, is diverse in its ideological, geographical, ethnic, regional, and historical
makeup, and therefore its nomenclature is complex. Historically, different groups of Mexican Americans have used diverse ethnic identifiers for themselves as well as having been categorized in various manners by local or federal authorities. Due to the unfamiliarity of these categorizations to European readers, in particular, it is mandatory here to give sketchy definitions of the terms used. Throughout my writing, I will refine these definitions to clarify for the reader how the labels relate to each other, what kind of symbolic and/or socio-political meanings they carry, and why some people prefer certain ethnic labels over others. Without wishing to exclude women, I do not consistently apply the today commonly used gender biforms of Spanish-origin terms (e.g., Chicana/os). I do so only when I feel that it is contextually necessary. Due to the maze of subjective meanings attached to “ethno-racial” labels, in general, it appears all but impossible to use them in an absolutely consistent manner approved by each and everyone.

The term *Hispanic* was introduced by the U.S. Federal Government for categorizing purposes (such as the U.S. Census) to encompass all people of Latin American descent living in the country. Some find this term to be extraordinarily offensive, as it privileges the European ancestry of Latin peoples and has a certain assimilationist connotation, while others will only be recognized by this term. The latter, mostly living in New Mexico or Arizona, prefer to see themselves as the descendants of Spain rather than Mexico, thus entirely invalidating the *mestizo* (a racial mix of American Indian and European) part of their heritage. A popular joke in New Mexico informs that the Hispanics in northern New Mexico landed by boat from Spain directly at the port of Santa Fe (a town lying hundreds of miles from the sea). Particularly in New Mexico, the term *Hispanic* is associated with upper middle-class Mexican Americans, who, due to historical reasons discussed later, wield considerable political power and cultural prestige in the state. Also the term *Spanish* has been widely used particularly in New Mexico, across all classes.

North of the U.S.-Mexico border, *Latinos* are the people who have arrived from Mexico, Central America, or South America and their children who were born in the United States. South of the border, it is more correct to use national designations, such as Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and so forth. Today some dislike the term *Latino/a* as it tends to hide the distinction between Latin people from different countries of origin, while others favor it as an expression of pan-Latin sentiment and political alliance, which has become a growing trend in recent years. Politically and socially, nevertheless, the term is relatively neutral, often being the only ethnic identifier that can be used without the risk of offending someone, for it does not imply any specific political stand, status, region, or country of origin. It does, on the other hand, infer to European origins in terms of the designation of language.

People of Mexican descent born in the United States are commonly referred as *Mexican Americans*. This can at times also include those born in Mexico but raised from an early age in the United States. This is the biggest Latin group in North America, consisting partly of recent immigrants and partly of Mexican families who already lived in the Southwest at the time when it was the territory called *El Norte* of colonial New Spain. As the term *Mexican American*, firstly, explicitly indicates citizenship and, secondly, prioritizes that over other possible identifying signifiers, such as language, heritage, religion, or geography, it is regarded
as rather neutral; yet at the same time, it carries the connotation of difference implied in the distinction between simply “American” (i.e., white Euro-American) as opposed to so-called hyphenated Americans who almost always are non-white. Particularly in Texas and in the border areas between the two nation-states, Mexican Americans often continue to be called just Mexicans, the practice which tends to erase their status as legitimate U.S. citizens since the Mexican American War in the mid-nineteenth century. The name Mexican in turn carries the negative connotation of an undocumented illegal alien in American mainstream thinking.

The traditionally pejorative term *Chicana/o* emerges as probably the most controversial and politically loaded ethnic identifier on this list, and hence it should only be used when the person addressed has taken the name upon her/himself. The term was first adopted by those radical young Mexican Americans in California who, in step with the black civil rights activists during the 1960s, wanted to demonstrate pride in their Mexican and indigenous heritage and the rejection of Euro-American culture. Chicanos are typically seen as Mexican-origin people “with a non-Anglo image” of themselves (as defined by Chicano journalist Rubén Salazar) although today the national origin may vary. Traditionally, the use of this name has political implications tied to it, including leftist views on farm workers’ issues, immigration rights, bilingual education, affirmative action, and so on. Those who today call themselves Chicanas or Chicanos do not share a uniform political ideology as much as a common concern for cultural preservation, self-determination, and awareness of the historical specificity of their ethnic societies. In California, which was the hotbed of the Chicano civil rights movement, the term continues to be commonly used among working class as well as professional Mexican Americans; whereas in Texas, for example, it is often associated with the ethnic radicalism of the 1960s and ’70s, or simply considered a derogatory label that conjures up gang stereotypes. In places geographically farther from the Southwest, the term seems to lose some of its appeal perhaps partly because the growing population of Mexican Americans who live, say, in the Midwest does not share the same sentiment about belonging to the land as do the inhabitants of the Southwest. Intimidating as all these terms might appear, it is also good to remember historian Juan Gómez-Quiñones’ remark that one should not overemphasize the controversy over nomenclature, or worse, be struck silent for the sake of excessive political correctness.

Reconfiguring History

As many discursive practices with underpinnings in nationalistic ideologies, Chicano Studies in its early stages rested heavily upon its reconceptualization of history. Chicano historians therefore, in line with the new history school, constructed their ideas on the basis of a severe “them-versus-us” dichotomy between the U.S. and Mexico. The Spanish Conquest and the colonial period that followed it became the leading metaphors in Chicano historiography, which circumscribed Mexican American history in terms of postcolonial theories mainly developed by scholars from former British colonies, such as India and some Middle-Eastern countries. In terms of Mexicans then, “colonialism” converted into “internal colonialism” (as part of the U.S. imperial process for incorporation of the Southwest into the capitalist world-
The term was introduced by the Chicano historian Rodolfo Acuña to describe the predicament of Mexicans, who were turned into a cheap labor force for industrial modernization. Acuña’s “internal colonialism” proved inept when applied outside of its original context in radical Chicano nationalism; yet its oppositional spirit echoes still, for instance in David Montejano’s terse assertion that “[i]n the ‘liberated’ and annexed territories, Anglos and Mexicans stood as conquerors and conquered, as victors and vanquished, a distinction as fundamental as any sociological sign of privilege and rank.”

By now, however, the crude dichotomies of internal colonialism (coupled with the theme of victimization) have generally been replaced by approaches that show more sensitivity to variations, discontinuities, and contradictions within and without Mexican American culture. Instead of victimization, contemporary studies tend to foreground agency, activism, and resistance of “minority” groups, which locally may have turned into a majority, in fact, like Latinos in Los Angeles. Consequently, the theories of cultural interaction and change have replaced the absorption on a fixed inferiority status and the absence of self-determination. In his essay in *The Chicano Studies Reader*, Alex Saragoza outlines the following avenues for future Chicano historical research: the ramifications of American culture and ideology; the implications of structural changes in U.S. economy; the effects of recurring immigration, which augment the further differentiation of Mexican American populations. Saragoza also cites gender as the biggest challenge to the interpretation of Mexican American history. The recently published *Las Tejanas: 300 Years of History* (2003) by Teresa Paloma Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten aptly addresses this need in Texas.

To sum up the ongoing self-reevaluation among Chicano scholars, it seems safe to say that the cultural turn with its criticism of methodologies, representations, and discursive practices also has produced a major turn in the way Mexican Americans perceive their culture and interpret their histories. Although standards for cultural unity and demands for “consensus” might still be devised and held up in various contexts, popular and academic alike, the impossibility of “purity” or neatly cut boundaries between and within ethno-racial groups has became part of the paradigm in Chicano Studies, too. It is interesting to examine to what extent and how Chicana/o visual art follow suit. On the road out of parochialism, Chicana/o artists have not only encountered the entrapments of the commercial art market, but also the problems of contested self-representation. The critical question appears to be how to represent a culture that has turned out being not homogeneous at all, but instead loosely integrated, often contradictory, sometimes coercive, fragmented by race, gender, class, and regional differences, and frequently riddled by internal conflicts.

In 1971, Juan Gómez-Quiñones, one of the “fathers” of Chicano history, expressed his vision for an alliance between research and social activism under the domain of Chicano history by linking together history as a discipline and history as “action on behalf of a community in its struggle for survival.” By the same token, Chicana/o artists’ career strategies and self-representations seem to aim at reconciling individual expression with activism; this time, however, activism on behalf of their diverse groups of reference, rather than on behalf of one singular, “imagined” community advocated by cultural nationalism. Looking for a new leading metaphor to describe this shift away from the search for origins,
many Chicano artists and scholars today find the concept of the borderlands, *la frontera*, (geographically delineated by and historically rooted in the reality of the U.S.-Mexico border) the best approach to tackle the complexities of interpretation and representation.

*La Frontera*

The U.S.-Mexico borderlands have been defined and described in countless different fashions, among which the following three, juxtaposed, catch some of the complexity of the issue:

The 2,000-mile-long international boundary between the United States and Mexico gives shape to a unique economic, social, and cultural entity. The [...] border region has the distinction of being the only place in the world where a highly developed country and a developing nation meet and interact. The complex history of the economy and society of the border in the twentieth century makes the region a fascinating area to study.23

The border is drowning in the filth of the putrescent Rio Grande aglow with toxic waste; it is terminally ill with the rampant pox of poverty known as *colonias* [...]; it is a land of social injustice where evil foreign *maquiladoras* unmercifully exploit downtrodden workers for their cheap labor; swarms of huddling illegals poise nightly to pour northward across the border to overwhelm American social services and steal jobs from honest workers while freeloading on the largess of hard-pressed American taxpayers.24

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja
This is my home
This thin edge of
barbwire.

[...]
The U.S. - Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before the scab forms its hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of the two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture.25

Seeking a formula for periodization of Mexican American history, Juan Gómez-Quiñones named the years 1965–1971 as the period of *la reconquista*,26 thus reflecting Patricia Limerick’s reconceptualization of the frontier experience in American history. Limerick’s
study The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (1987) turned around the Turnerian notion – dating back to late nineteenth century – of the frontier experience as basically democratic, egalitarian, and formative to American individualism. In historical writing since then, the West became understood as spatial rather than merely temporal, as a place of boom and bust, of an accelerating competition for legitimacy, property rights, and natural resources. A new discipline called Border Studies grew out of this understanding of the border region as a complex social and cultural space characterized by a massive flux of people, goods, and ideas, by state-run “low-intensity” conflict, militarization, and everyday resistance of border inhabitants. To eschew binary thinking, Border Studies defined the borderlands area and border society as a historical (as well as spatial) whole, emphasizing the cross-boundary economic ties and social interaction between diverse border communities.

In the past decade the terms border and borderlands have become the central components of Chicano Studies, too, with author Gloria Anzaldúa as their powerful personification. Anzaldúa’s contributions to the reformulation of racially mixed identity has been tremendously influential in contemporary Mexican American thinking, but she has also been criticized for creating “unproductive and vacuous abstractions” and disseminating “inexact and uncircumspect [sic] applications” of border theory. While accurately criticizing the absolutism of cultural purity, the intense preoccupation with borderlands among cultural theorists and writers seems to somewhat delocalize the border by creating in its stead a symbolic space, which is entirely constructed through discourses suffused by such terms and metaphors as migrant, nomad, hybrid, diaspora, margin, third space, and so forth. As we will see in the discussion about the Chicano homeland, Aztlan, these concepts are problematic in various ways. On the one hand, their frequently indiscriminate employment indicates the tendency to appropriate, pedestalize, and fetishize the border experience, and thereby overlook other narratives about the border (for example, the narratives of those who live on the Mexican side of it). On the other hand, border cultures and cultural productions are sometimes exoticized as examples of postmodern hyper real simulacra; or they remain superficially contextualized and interpreted because mainly used as illustrations for the support of theoretical formulations about the “border paradigm” and border subjectivities.

When some current formulations of the border furthermore suggest its applicability as a theoretical and methodological model for practicing resistance against United States social hierarchy, there remains a narrow space for artists actually living and working near the border for expressing their views about the borderlands predicament. This appears to betray a kind of infatuation with cultural theory (in this case articulated through geography) that tends to upset the balance between the abstract and the concrete. Moreover, internal colonialism turns into intellectual colonialism if the border binary collapses into oneness represented by the U.S. side of the fence only. Or, even more bizarre, if the U.S.-Mexico border – seen as a master symbol of globalization gone awry – becomes universalized and then applied as paradigmatic for all borders, notwithstanding. It must be noted that outside of the particular logic of the border paradigm under discussion here, a great multitude of artists, both female and male, gay and straight, elsewhere in the world have long and diverse traditions of pushing against borders, whether national, linguistic, gender, or literary. A comparative and broader view
over border matters and encounters would truly open routes to “the ‘worlding’ of American studies” — to quote José Saldivar’s words — and “to instill a new transnational literacy in the U.S. academy.”

Because of these rather disturbing problems, I prefer to keep some distance to the border (at least until the last essay); the artists I study are not exactly border dwellers either. However, my theoretical framework does share a common ground with borderlands theory as it is here described by Saldivar:

If the international cultural studies movement […] is an ongoing discursive formation, with no simple origin, cultural theory in the U.S.-Mexican borderlands has charted itself in the multiple discourses of ethnography, feminist theories of subjectivity and oral history, urban studies and ethno-racial historical becoming, and the politics of postmodernism and postcolonialism.

My examination of border issues in photography draws from a somewhat different source, though. By naming the border an open wound, Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem quoted earlier in the text very concretely reverses the accusations of vacuous abstractions and simultaneously elevates the discourse onto another sphere of consideration, that is, the body. That perspective is most insightfully analyzed in anthropologist Mary Douglas’ classic study *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1969), which regards borders as the limits of the body, border-crossings as the contamination of the communal/national body, and dangerous polluted borders as interfaces between the self and the other, constructed as sites of a permanent crisis. Another significant source of information and inspiration for this study has been Peter Mason’s *Deconstructing America: Representations of the Other* (1990), which explores side by side European texts and images that created the “body language” of the first Indian-European contact. Informed by approaches like these two that merge the abstract and the material, I hope to avoid the textual erasure of the physical border itself, which I know only by way of reading and touristing, without throwing away the interpretive potential embedded in the concept itself. The same kind of tension between the concrete and the abstract, the discursive and the non-discursive also underlies the discussion in the sections that deal with the question of race and ethnic identity.

*Studies on Chicana/o Visual Culture*

During the last ten years, Mexican American scholars, such as Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Karen Mary Davalos, and Chon Noriega, to mention only a few of those writing about visual culture, have given new directions and broader scope to Chicano Studies. Gaspar de Alba’s study *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master’s House: Cultural Politics and CARA Exhibition* (1998), together with her several articles, takes a critical look into the policies, ideologies, inclusions, and exclusions of Mexican American art exhibitions in regard to the way they have constructed narratives about identity, community, and nation, often leaving women out of the
big picture. In a way, Davalos has continued and complemented Gaspar de Alba’s work. Covering a wider scope of Mexican American cultural practice and production, her study Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora (2001) purports a comprehensive survey and analysis of Mexican American/Chicano art practices, past and present. The study effectively dispels the illusion of a unified community cherished by the romanticizing Chicano discourses of the past, which tended to ignore internal conflicts arising from the issues of gender, race, class, and ideological differences.

Since its inception during the late 1960s, the highly politicized, nationalistic agenda of the Chicano cultural movement silenced particularly the voices of women, queer, and “biracial” people with unclear ethno-racial allegiances. Davalos’ publication gives a very incisive look into this troubled history of the Chicano movement accompanied by the Mexican American Art Renaissance, which was created by various, often feuding, artists’ groups, group exhibitions, cultural centers, and museums. Davalos also discusses the policies and representational practices of U.S. public museums, such as the Natural History Museum of the Los Angeles County, which have constructed the myth of a unified nation and citizenship by largely excluding the histories of non-European peoples. Her ultimate aim is to explore the “unacknowledged connections between public museums and so-called minority museums,” which, Davalos asserts, reveal that “all U.S. museums – including Mexican American museums – are shaped by notions of difference, nationalism, and the politics of identity,” thus reinforcing the binary logic of U.S. nationalism.

Davalos’ argument loses some substance as her empirical research focuses almost solely on the analysis of the mission and exhibition policies of one Mexican American museum only, i.e., the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago. While offering a thoroughly investigated and thoughtful criticism of exclusions and ruptures within Mexican American communities, she cannot escape from perpetuating some of those binary oppositions in her own discussion. Her argument for the inclusive mode of the Mexican Fine Art Museum, for example, rests largely on comparing and contrasting it with the hegemonic practices of the Chicano movement shaped by the ideology of cultural nationalism, which is hardly the agenda in the cultural production of all those artists and writers who today choose to call themselves Chicanas or Chicanos. Unlike Davalos, Gaspar de Alba is very critical about the discourses and museum policies that endorse diaspora and mexicanidad, the terms that underscore an othered, “alien” element of Chicano culture at the expense of configuring Mexican Americans as permanent residents, who have shaped the history of the Southwestern parts of the country for centuries.

For the purpose of my research, however, Davalos’ take on the relations between Mexican Americans and mainstream American society turns out more instructive than her criticism of institutional practices. An imagined or actual complicity with the Euro-centric mainstream has been the hotbed of a long-lasting internal conflict, which continues to silence and germinate self-censorship among Mexican American artists and scholars. Chicano media scholar Chon Noriega manages to circumvent both separatist idealism and insinuation of complicity by adopting a very unruffled and practical stand. In his studies about Chicano film and photography, he places them in the context of and relationship with the development and
history of the media itself with its specific styles, techniques, and representational practices. As a result, he changes the paradigmatic questions posed by Chicano Studies from the “either/or” to the “how” mode. Noriega’s expertise in Mexican American film as well as the mainstream mass media and entertainment industry – the image factory par excellence – distances him from binary and mutually exclusive views and thus renders his interpretation comparative rather than contrastive. His interpretation of Chicano photography, for example, builds on the notion of narrative photography, drawing from a number of academic discourses and discussing its characteristics as part of contemporary photography at large.

In the publications introduced above, both Gaspar de Alba and Davalos locate their critical stances in radical/lesbian Chicana feminism (termed thusly by Davalos) – rather than in Chicano Studies as such or in any Euro-centric framework – so as to avoid the impasse of theoretical orthodoxy embedded in academic practice, whether American, Mexican, or Mexican American. This is not untenable. In contemporary Mexican American literature, visual arts, and academic studies, the impact of lesbian activism and theory appears conspicuous, indeed. The persistent efforts of gays and lesbians to furnish Chicana/o politics with a radically inclusive agenda have slowly but surely transformed the makeup of Chicano Studies, too, which had a tendency to fetishize difference and thereby exempt traditional patriarchal Mexican culture from critical scrutiny. As Davalos puts it,

> Working within a radical/lesbian Chicana feminist perspective allows scholars to bring private matters to public discussion; nothing is exempt from analysis and disclosure […] we acknowledge differences within Mexican-origin population, specifically those that result from mestizaje and dispersal.43

As a methodology, according to Davalos, radical/lesbian Chicana feminism is characterized by the following aspects. First, while it shares with other feminisms an analysis of the constructed nature of gender and sexual desire, it embraces the variations of representational practices by “locating their complexity and ambiguity in the experiences of continuous border crossings, multiple forms of social oppression (patriarchy, racism, capitalism, homophobia), and territorial displacement, to name a few.” 44 Second, as implied by its name, the foundation of its critical perspective lies on the resistance against the heterosexual norm, even though all of its practitioners evidently are not necessarily self-identified lesbians. This straightforward acknowledgment of sexual difference seems remarkable indeed, in view of the stigma attached to the word “lesbian” even in feminist circles – regardless of color – and particularly so in patriarchal, Catholic societies. Third, it reaches beyond the politics of identity and difference by examining the “enemy within,” meaning the forces of internalized patriarchal domination in the formation of the modern state and citizenship. Davalos further claims that its episteme relies on and derives from two rather controversial concepts, mestiza and diaspora, that are not predicated on nationalism or imperialism, colonial anthropology or realist/positivist social science.45 Instead, they avoid the containment of representational practices and do not set coherence as a goal. Historically, this perspective is grounded in the development of non-Western feminisms around the world, but
particularly in former colonial countries, as well as in the work of many contemporary Mexican American scholars. It takes after Chela Sandoval’s methodology of the oppressed, for example, and Renato Rosaldo’s native ethnography, José David Saldivar’s interpretation of the U.S.-Mexico border space, and Carla Trujillo’s “living Chicana theory.”

What might look like an overdetermination of a political/theoretical position makes sense in the context of Mexican American women’s emancipation struggle (dating from the heyday of Chicano radicalism and still going on) for getting recognition and voice in their own community as well as on the arena of “mainstream” feminism. For feminists of color, who associated themselves with third world women rather than with white American feminists, the focus of concern was not primarily the confrontations or differences between women and men but those between classes, races, and sexual and political orientations instead. They saw the diversity and differences of women as the major cause for the lack of solidarity and claimed that just being a woman was not enough of a common ground for unified political action. African American writer Adrienne Rich, for example, asserted that the “white solipsism” of white feminism is “not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a tunnel vision which simply does not see non-white experience or existence as precious or significant.” Consequently, women of color and their stories became noteworthy only as decorations or token minority representatives in readings and conferences, or as examples of female victimization. Against this background, it is easy to see why so many Chicana artists (as well as many other American women) have viewed feminism only in terms of the white middle-class feminist movement, and have then disclaimed it. “In my family, women have always been empowered,” says photographer Delilah Montoya in Charlene Villaseñor Black’s interview, and again when interviewed by Natasha Bonille Martinez: “Feminists don’t give us solidarity. As a Chicana my issues are multifaceted, not just gender, but class, race.” Yet, the feminist critique of representation and gender construction has strongly influenced her style, shaped by self-conscious exploration of the artist’s identity and experience within a social, historical, and political context.

My research owes to the contributions of the authors discussed above as well as of many other Mexican American scholars and critics, of whom a growing number is specializing in visual and media culture. I do not aim at enhancing/securing my position as a counter position in order to appear more anti-foundational, theoretically innovative, and critically endowed. Instead, I wish to be able to apply methods of explanation and interpretation from a variety of sources rather liberally, albeit not uncritically, avoiding paradigmatic restraints from Chicano Studies, American Studies, (art) history, or critical theory, whether postmodern, postcolonial, feminist, or any other denomination. I tend to endorse the disclaimer stated by literary critic Tey Diana Rebolledo in her defense of Chicana scholars: “We probably have not produced the ‘definite’ theoretical books on Chicana writing because we remain cautious about majestic declarations and cognizant of the temptations to generalize, define, usurp, or speak for others.” Heeding Rebolledo’s astute words, I propose an analysis of the art work from a particular and rather specific point of view, which excludes any claim to formulate a synthesis or a processual theory about either Chicana photography in general or about any individual artist under scrutiny in particular. I therefore suggest an approach that focuses, first, on the art
work itself, second, on the artists studied (including their personal backgrounds), and, third, on their relationship to a number of visual and other discourses to which they relate.

Since a significant body of research on Mexican American experience and art has already dealt with its various communal or institutional aspects, my study aims to highlight individual artists as authors, their lives and their works, at the expense of artists’ groups, collective art forms and exhibitions, cultural institutions, and curatorial practices. In addition, scholars have until recently mostly been interested in traditional Mexican American religious visual forms, or in Chicano murals, graffiti art, and prints in a rather narrow way – that is, as colorful expressions of ethnic identity, affirmation, and communal resistance. Their emphasis and expertise, accordingly, has emanated from sociology, literary criticism, anthropology, or ethnography, seldom from the field of contemporary arts or visual theory per se. To redress this problem, the UCLA-based Chicano Studies Research Center initiated in 2002 the *A Ver: Revisioning Art History* project, which so far is the only series dedicated to publishing monographs on Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and other Latino artists in the United States.

*About Images and Words*

For authoritative modernist art critics of the twentieth century, art had little to do with everyday life. Its transcendental truth was optical by nature and attainable through the supreme vision of the artist-creator, the exceptional individualist, whose expression was disconnected from all concerns outside art itself. Yet, according to feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, for example, the history of modernism in art needs to be seen against the backdrop of other developments of the era, including the commodification and commercialization of cultural production, which entailed the separation between the privatized sphere of fine art and the public sphere of popular culture. The modernists’ emphasis on formal qualities over communicative, narrative, or figurative concerns (often identified as feminine) further increased the breach. Although mid-twentieth century marked a turning point in this development as pop and feminist art started to break the boundaries between popular and “high” art forms, it did not mean, of course, that cultural production suddenly broke free from its historical conditionals. Nor are artists or writers today free to ignore the modernist evaluations enfolding art work that continues to be stratified along the lines of the “great tradition” rejuvenated by its “innovative others,” i.e., women, gay, and non-white artists. Commenting on this issue, says Pollock:

Any writing about contemporary practices will find itself structurally defined by the conditions of marketable artistic production and the power of the institutions and discourses which define artistic practice’s social spaces and cultural valuations. The important point is that these never exhaust the meanings or effects of any one of culture’s products. […]
To survive in a market economy, artists who are women need publicity and the legitimization of a supportive discourse […] Yet the work in question may in fact propose a critic of social, economic and cultural power vicariously sustained in the symbolic realm of culture by the very practices they need in order to be heard and seen as artists. These artists are engaged in a struggle that has to take place in the arenas of culture determined but never entirely defined by its capitalist economics.52

I wish to emphasize Pollock’s conviction about the capacity of art to overcome the historical circumstances of its own existence without entirely disclaiming these circumstances. In regard to Chicana photographers the same applies: evidently, the artists I study draw influence, visual and intellectual, from modernist as well as popular aesthetics and should be interpreted accordingly. Conversely, their images inflect meaning from various discourses, reconstructing and creating knowledge pertaining to Mexican American communities in particular, yet without being limited to only that. Their personal specificities – race, class, gender, and sexuality – should be rightly addressed, not overstated for any theoretical exigencies, nor repressed for the sake of “universal significance.” Thereby the inevitable tension between the images and the words written about them can function as a catalyst to the effect that, using Pollock’s words, “Collectively we are producing a distinct textuality through which to signify and enunciate a critical, historically self-reflective, feminist subject.” 53 It must be noted though, that the signifying space where the Chicana feminist subject(s) can emerge has already been theorized in many contexts as collective, plural, and contradictory, which challenges the predominantly individualist feminist subject often regarded as a norm.54 This characterizes the Wild Zone of a gendered, raced, and classed space of signification invoked in the title of the research.55

With this starting premise, it is evident that certain analytic caution should be applied in order to capture not only the nuances and ambiguities of the representational arrangements appearing in the images studied, but also the aesthetic inflections that articulate these arrangements. Sweeping lip-service to interdisciplinary ideals is therefore not enough, but each discipline, each theory – their terminological usages in particular – must be viewed critically. In general, I tend to avoid controversial terms from other contexts, such as diaspora, exile, subaltern, or third world commonly used in many fields of cultural studies, simply because I am uncertain of all of their implications. In addition, such historical terms as reconquest, internal colonialism, and labor struggle I deem rather problematic in interpreting contemporary art (even though I use them in describing historical contexts) because they conflate different types of historical moments; instead, the developments of multinational corporate capitalism, racial formation, and global migration certainly bear on today’s cultural production.56 I generally shun the big abstractions of macro-level undifferentiated theoretitization. This is exemplified mostly, but not solely, by economist approaches.57 At every step, I try to adequately localize and historicize the concepts used, keeping focus on the personal narratives embedded in the art work as interdependent articulations of desires and responses prompted by ideological interpellation as well as social contingencies.
In discussing their work, I do not seek to represent Chicanas; they are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves. Although an outsider to Mexican American as well as to mainstream American culture, I am not particularly concerned about epistemic violence since I believe it would be self-defeating to negate Chicana experience as a legitimate academic subject by choosing some other topic. Still, I prefer to keep my argument tentative, incomplete, rather open-ended, and part of the on-going assessment of Chicano Studies as an evolving analytic paradigm, whose turns and tropes I have been charting, too, by default. Leaning on a “European” line of argumentation, I wish to invoke here the TV conversation of Umberto Eco and Stuart Hall (Voices on Channel Four, 1985), which referred to the Italian school of “weak thought” as a more flexible style of reasoning than the authoritarian, “Protestant” modes of traditional academic discourse. Deriving from hermeneutics, this approach seems to be quite commonly – albeit not uncritically – embraced by many feminist theorists as well as by Chicana literary critics Tey Diana Rebolledo and Debra Castillo, among others. Aply, Castillo uses a cooking metaphor to support her call for an eclectic theoretical stance: the recipe, i.e., the theoretical basis underlying the textual analysis, should offer a general model for a cultivated cook, not a prescriptive formula. This, in my view, provides a solid tactic for seriously challenging the boundaries and demarcation lines between academic disciplines, which – to borrow David Theo Goldberg’s interesting observation – “are to the academy, to intellectual pursuit, as borders are more broadly to nation states.”
Race or no Race?

Racist ideology has the hegemonic capacity to define the terms whereby people understand themselves and their world. The project of decolonization thus involves the specification of race in political, economic, and ideological terms, for the meanings of race are necessarily shaped as much in collective and personal practice (identity politics) as by the state (colonial or contemporary capitalist).

Chandra T. Mohanty (2002)  

As a biological or anthropological category of academic discourse, race may have largely died out over the last two decades; as a social and psychological category, it has produced more critical writings since the 1970s than any other major perspective in social science and cultural studies, apart perhaps from gender. Often these two perspectives overlap, since the bulk of recent theories about race has been written by women of color. Unlike the early discussions on “race” and “racism” (that tended to conceive them only in terms of race prejudice as a kind of “false consciousness” with some individuals), today the so-called socio-historical embeddedness and the ideological nature of the issue of race is agreed upon. That accounts for the shifting boundaries of racial definitions evident in their construction and representation through the interplay of social structure, cultural practices, material conditions, and the dispositions of individual people. Racial divisions therefore are not only socially produced and reproduced by the dominant group for the sake of economic and political control (or by minority groups for the sake of recognition), but they are also psychologically constructed and maintained in common popular discourses and institutional practices. As such, they affect the “racially inferior” group by creating what W. E. B. DuBois calls “double consciousness.” As a seminal notion in the development of critical race theories, “double consciousness” involves “a complex and constant play between the exclusionary conditions of social structure marked by race and the psychological and cultural strategies employed by the racially excluded and marginalized to accommodate themselves to everyday indignities as well as to resist them.”

This line of theorizing was further developed by Frantz Fanon, the most venerated voice of postcolonial criticism, who fashioned the term *racialization* (also known as institutionalized racism) in order to inscribe the formative role of ideology in the constitution of unequal social group relations based on the notion of racial difference. A whole range of contemporary dilemmas regarding race and other forms of difference that involve inequalities has been elaborately circumscribed by the concept of *racial formation* generated by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who define it as “the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.” They continue:

[W]e argue that racial formation is a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized. Next we link racial
formation to the evolution of hegemony, the way in which society is organized and ruled. [...] From a racial formation perspective, race is a matter of both social structure and cultural representation. [...] A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. 66

The feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty agrees with Omi and Winant’s argument, pointing out that while racial formation involves the dynamic between individual identities and larger collective structures, it also includes such state policies as citizenship and naturalization laws, social and welfare programs, and legal practices, all of which control and regulate particularly women’s lives. 67 Thus the crucial strength of this theory is its ability to combine the non-discursive, structural aspect of racial inequality with the discursive and representational origins of racial differentiation, the two aspects that together carry out the ideological work in racial projects central in the development of the modern nation-state. For the purpose of my research, this kind of multi-dimensional conceptualization of race offers a means to avoid the shortcomings of theories relying solely on cultural attributes of difference at the expense of other factors. 68 Or conversely, it also evades only structural models of explanation. These rather limited models fail to account for discursive and representational practices, such as stereotypes, symbols, and icons, which not only describe but also constitute and organize social hierarchies and the way people experience their everyday encounters with racial and cultural difference.

The concepts of racialization by Fanon and racial formation by Omi and Winant have recently been elaborated by many historians and social scientists, who have brought new depth and scope to the historical narratives of people of color in California and Texas, for example. The racialization of Texas Mexicans from white (Spanish) Europeans to brown (Indian) half-breeds during the late 1800s serves as a good illustration of the economic and sociopolitical thrust that deprived them of citizenship rights and pushed them to the margins of society. According to historian David Montejano, biological features recognized by the white population were superficial compared to the racial distinctions they saw and believed to exist. Thus the public policy shaped by economic interests together with commonly held and culturally reinforced beliefs by white Texans determined the racial nature of Texas Mexicans, who eventually became defined as a non-white “race” whenever they were subjected to discrimination or control. Along with arguments taken from religion and science, Texas folklore and war memories provided an emotionally loaded well-spring of myths, symbols, and explanations readily available for the creation of racial practices and racially articulated language. As a metaphor of class and race inferiority, the caricature of the “dirty Mexican” joined the ranks of such terms as “white trash” and “filthy niggers” in the imagery of the rural Southeast. 69 Emphasizing the irregularities of racial marking, Montejano concludes that “Mexicans were more of a race in one place and less of a race in another,” depending on the location and “race situation.” 70

Although racial discrimination flourished particularly in remote rural societies, urbanization did not abolish it but only changed its nature. In urban areas of the early twentieth
century, for example, racialization involved the refusal of service to non-whites in public places, real estate restrictions, police brutality, segregated education, employment barriers, and wage stratification. To justify injustice, the naturalization of racial ideas and practices continued well over the turn of the century, as testified by a resident of Ozona in West Texas:

In this town, drugstores were closed to Mexicans until the late 1940s; restaurants and movie houses did not open to Mexicans until the early 1950s; hotels were exclusively reserved for Anglo patrons until about 1958; barber and beauty shops were segregated until 1969; and in the early 1970s, the bowling alley, cemeteries, and swimming pools still remained segregated.71

So as to dissociate themselves from poor migrant workers from Mexican side of the border, Texas Mexicans (like New Mexicans in the neighboring state) started to call themselves Spanish Americans or Latinos and claim white racial identity. For them, official segregation policies like those described above were an insult on top of injury.

As in Texas, the racialization process of Mexicans in California was initially postponed because of the partial integration of the Anglo and Mexican elites through intermarriage, which guaranteed the “white” status to these upper-class Mexicans and facilitated their gradual assimilation to mainstream society. The “darkening” of Mexicans started only at the beginning of the twentieth century when the massive waves of immigrants from rural areas of Mexico entered California. The struggles to define different ethnic groups and their social status in terms of race were largely dependent on the collective power of each group, and along with the weakening of their political standing, Mexicans in California also lost their eligibility for full citizenship. As a “white population,” Euro-Americans secured their superior racial status regardless of their European country of origin, thus ending the racialization of so-called “European ethnics” – such as the Irish and the Jews – and drawing “the color line around rather than within Europe.” 72 This color line cut across the labor market as well, defining the free working class as exclusively “white,” whose interests were institutionally guarded by segregated unions, dual wage system, and discriminatory legislation. Structural racism practiced by legislature and labor organizations was ideologically buttressed by eugenics associations, for example, which popularized the idea that the white “Nordic” race was endangered by the hoards of brown or yellow “mongrel” people surging into the country.73 However, the articulation of race on class, as successfully analyzed by many recent historians, turns out to be insufficient. The following discussion on the controversies around the issue of mestizaje, racial mix, will disclose other intersecting categories, such as gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, which organize the reconfigurations of the politics of difference and its representations. In contemporary critical writing about mestizaje, women of color occupy the center, simultaneously as the subject, the object, and the master symbol of this discourse.
Mestizaje

As noted by David Theo Goldberg, racial theory of late has grown weary, riddled by a clichéd vocabulary that is repeated uncritically in academic and media contexts, by the “infatuation with racial identities” and a “drunken diffusion of racial categories” with vague significations.74 Perhaps the prime example of the latter would be the 2000 U.S. census form, which listed a plethora of race/ethnic/national categories of which one could choose any number or write down her/his own definition under the label “other.” Rather surprisingly, under that self-definition appeared a newcomer, “mestiza,” 75 which in fact has become the conceptual master symbol in recent Chicana critical thinking. Drawing from Homi Bhabha’s formulation of a “third space” – created by cultural hybridity – as a site of resistance against the containment policies of the dominant culture,76 Chicana writers have used such tropes as in-betweenness and Nepantla (an Aztec term indicating a transitional location neither here nor there), whose archetypal inhabitant is the mestiza. But does mestizaje by definition involve hybridity? And what can be made out of the biological and/or class connotations that these terms necessarily summon up in the light of this quote from Goldberg:

In the nineteenth century the concept of hybridity came to represent dominant concerns that white or European-based purity, power, and privilege would be polluted, and in being polluted diluted. […] Hybridity thus assumed the conceptual expression of anxiety, of white people’s paranoia, signaling the ultimate powerlessness of the powerful.77

First, it is wholesome to recall that mestizaje does not mean just any racial mix, any hybridity. There are no “Suomi-mestizas” (translates as a Finnish mestiza), the unfortunate term coined by the border artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña after his encounter with a woman from Lapland in Helsinki.78 According to Karen Mary Davalos, the offspring of the first Spaniards and American Indians made the first mestizaje (i.e., criollos), Mexican nationalists who masterminded the Mexican War of Independence from Spain. These nationalists employed mestizaje as a means of self-legitimation, to assuage cultural, linguistic, and political heterogeneity that might have destabilized the construction of a uniform, coherent national culture.79 About one hundred years later, during the Mexican revolutionary period, this homogenizing practice was resumed. The second mestizaje emerged as a result of intermarriage between Mexican mestizos and Anglo-Americans, a practice which became more common from the early nineteenth century on. Particularly the latter type of mestiza/o turned into a profoundly negative identification, carrying the stigma of “inferior” Indian blood, assumed physical degeneration and cultural degradation. Pocha/o – a derogatory label for those Mexican Americans who embrace American values of consumerist individualism and speak poor Spanish and broken English – continues to carry the stigma of a regressive racial/cultural mix.

During the last three decades, the amelioration of hybridity and mestizaje as a racial self-designation, as a political position, and as a paradigm of intellectual inquiry has also
revealed a vexing ambiguity about this “third space” in Chicana/o critical writing. The romance of hybridity, as David Goldberg puts it, has an uneasy relationship with state power, which creates a peculiar problem (which has been drastically accentuated after 9/11):

As a critical concept, the hybrid thus is supposed to blunt power’s point, to shift power’s oppressive expression. It does so, however, only by assuming some of the hierarchical aspects of power. As some have pointed out, Homi Bhabha’s “hybrid third space” in this respect is tinged with romanticism.80

This contradiction is most insightfully discussed in Juan de Castro’s essay “Richard Rodriguez in ‘Borderland’: The Ambiguity of Hybridity.”81 Two notably influential Mexican American writers, Richard Rodríguez and Gloria Anzaldúa – polar opposites in their political views but united in the struggle for gay rights – provide de Castro’s essay with ideal material for a comparison. De Castro poses some critical questions: Where does the celebration of hybridity and mestizaje lead us? What is “conservative” or “progressive” within the Chicano community? As a “bilingual debunker of bilingual education and a minority critical of affirmative action,”82 journalist-intellectual Richard Rodríguez has for years played the notorious role of the arch-enemy-within for many members of the Mexican American academic community,83 but de Castro’s essay might be the first attempt to seriously deconstruct his philosophy.

De Castro goes back to the Mexican nationalist intellectual tradition, particularly to philosopher José Vasconcelos’ conceptualization of mestizaje as the “cosmic,” “final,” or “inclusive” race – *la raza de pronce* – which would presumably eliminate racial differences altogether. In the same vein with Vasconcelos, Rodríguez speaks for the importance of miscegenation as a force shaping a new, “browning” United States devoid of the white/non-white binary opposition.84 But one might ask whether this amalgamation, *per se*, could collapse racial borders, remove social contradictions, and guarantee a multiplicity of subjectivities or voices, as believed by Rodríguez. Or would it just create a new, seemingly homogeneous society with its insiders and outsiders, whose power hierarchies would articulate markers of difference other than color? Secondly, Rodríguez’s interpretation of colonial history, which emphasizes the positive role of “seduction” personified in La Malinche, Hernán Cortés’ Indian interpreter and mistress, is based on the idea of a physical and cultural absorption or incorporation of the (male) European by the (female) Indian. Yet at the same time, his writings fail to take into consideration the ugly side of the colonial affair: genocide, labor exploitation, and the sexual abuse of Indian women, whose willingness to engage with Spanish men could be taken with a grain of salt.

La Malinche, as the symbol of mestizaje as the symbol of the border, has also been employed by Chicana thinkers, but for a very different ultimate purpose. Without dipping more deeply into the controversies milling around Gloria Anzaldúa’s work, it is enlightening to pay attention to her conceptualization in relation to that of Rodríguez’s, taking into consideration that both writers in fact, from their opposite perspectives, aim at affirming the continuous indigenous presence in America. Anzaldúa’s vision, just like Rodríguez’s, aims to destabilize
the racial hierarchy of the United States and “to deconstruct the dominant culture’s attachment to purity, coherence, and linear causality for understanding,” as interpreted by Davalos. Building on Anzaldúa’s notion of hybridity working against all nationalistic discourses, Davalos asserts that her “use of mestizaje contrasts with the intercultural mixing imagined by liberal multiculturalists who celebrate friendship, intercourse and collaboration between cultures as if these encounters were between equals. Cultural encounters and their mestiza/o products are not harmonious.” Grounded in the specific historical process (the conquest and colonization of America) and specific geography (the U.S.-Mexico border), Anzaldúa’s theory-cum-poetry thus consistently fosters resistance, instead of assimilation, in the form of a new kind of intellectual awareness that sustains difference and accepts contradiction. Hence her new mestiza produces even more heterogeneity, rather than carrying a homogenous American identity enhanced by racial integration. In sum, from Rodriguez’s point of view, the future of America lies in Ex Pluribus Unum, “one out of many”; from Anzaldúa’s point of view, in many within one. Taken to an extreme, both views seem to harbor a paradox, as concluded by de Castro:

If all are, or, more realistically, will become mestizas; if all have, or will have, heterogeneous and multicultural identities; then a new paradoxical kind of “heterogeneous homogeneity” is becoming a norm. And any type of discrete cultural identity is in the process of losing any kind of meaning.

If, however, the main ingredient of Anzaldúa’s new mestiza consciousness is critical tolerance to difference, de Castro pluralistic verdict misses the point. Then what can be made out of all these speculations?

Most interestingly, the Rodriguez-versus-Anzaldúa conundrum seems to draw a genealogical demarcation line between two schools of thinking (or two political positions rather) within the Chicano academic community, which could be described as “biologist” and “mentalist.” The former constructs biology and (interracial, heterosexual) sexuality as formative in Mexican American experience and the driving force of social change in the future. For example, José Limón’s refutation of Rafael Pérez-Torres’ interpretation of mestizaje as disempowered subjectivity in the film Giant (USA, 1956) illustrates well this bias and Limón’s conviction that racial amalgamation will eventually obliterate ethno-racial distinctiveness. The latter, “mentalist” approach, embraced particularly but not exclusively by Chicana lesbian writers, has inspired a rich body of theoretical writing, which link Mexican American experience (that of women in particular) to the postcolonial contestation of Western epistemology and the production of knowledge. La conciencia de la mestiza, in that context, refers not only to a differential consciousness at ease with contradictions, but also to a specific methodology of resistance that it facilitates. This is outlined, say, in the publication titled Living Chicana Theory (1998) edited by Carla Trujillo. This type of theorization follows closely the developments within other ethno-racial communities in the United States, as pointed out by Chela Sandoval in the aforementioned collection, as well as various postcolonial discourses being developed elsewhere.
As eloquently articulated by David Goldberg, hybridity (like race) in its ethno-racial connotations may assume a variety of forms, but its potential as an epistemological strategy of resistance against authoritative practices, albeit seductive, appears also ambivalent:

[I]t remains an open question whether and how race is usable and invokable outside of state force or enforcement, state determination or orchestration. Is it possible to engage racial arrangement, as Foucault suggested in his lectures on racism, sometimes as a counter-history (contre-histoire), a critical counter-history to dominating state formation, a mode of self-determining political and cultural resistance (Stoler 1995: 68-72), or indeed as a creative but non-exclusionary mode of cultural (re)formation? Or is racial arrangement, wherever and whenever, inherently an imposed mode of controlling governance and self-surveillance?90

In all events, highly visible and ineradicable, racial mix makes a salient feature in ethnicity and a source of pride (at least for those individuals empowered by an academic identity boost), which perhaps will prevail over the traps of both mentalism and biologism. Thus, it seems fitting to conclude this discussion about mestizaje with yet another type of expression of resistance, found in “A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People” composed by Maria P. P. Root:

I have the right not to justify my existence in this world
I have the right not to keep the races separate within me
I have the right not to be responsible for people’s discomfort with my physical ambiguity
I have the right not to justify my ethnic legitimacy
I have the right to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify
I have the right to identify myself differently than my parents identify me
I have the right to identify myself differently than my brothers and my sisters
I have the right to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial
I have the right to identify myself differently in different situations
I have the right to change my identity over my lifetime – and more than once
I have the right to have loyalties and identify with more than one group of people
I have the right to freely choose whom I befriend and love.91

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2 Touching upon similar issues as Alexis de Tocqueville’s classic study on 19th-century American democracy, Gramsci argued that economic status quo in modern societies is achieved and maintained by a combination of coercion and consent, which consolidates the interests of different groups in society and legitimizes the authority of the ruling class. A softer version of wielding power than domination by force, hegemony produces and works through “a popular system of ideas and practices – through education, the media,
religion, folk wisdom, etc. – which he [Gramsci] called ‘common sense.’” Culture, in particular, plays a leading role in these social negotiations of power, in which the issues of legitimacy and privilege become resolved. As in many other instances, we can easily replace Gramsci’s “class” with the words “race” or “gender” without disrupting the basic idea of the concept, the fact which demonstrates the common, constructed nature and interconnectedness of these social categories. Antonio Gramsci, _The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935_, ed. by David Forgac (New York: New York University Press, 2000); also _Prison Notebooks_, ed. by Joseph Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).


3. Judith Butler, _Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity_ (New York: Routledge, 1990). Without any intention to elevate Butler over other innovative feminist theorists, I wish to mention her name in order to credit her for introducing performative theory into feminist and lesbian studies. Of course, the origin of the concept lies in pragmatic linguistics (speech act theory in particular), i.e., the study of language as communication, applied for example by Jean-Francois Lyotard.


8. For example David Hollinger uses the term “ethno-racial” instead of “racial” because of the controversial nature of the word “race.” He says, “This phrasing better reflects our understanding of the contingent and instrumental nature of the [ethno-racial] categories, acknowledges that the groups traditionally called racial exist on a blurred continuum with those traditionally called ethnic, […] Racism is real, but races are not.” Hollinger, _Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism_ (New York: BasicBooks, a Division of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995) 39.

9. In an interview on June 4, 2003, Delilah Montoya’s mother Molly García explained that although in her childhood New Mexicans commonly called themselves Spanish, they did not do so in order to claim Spanish roots at the expense of their Indian ancestry, which was recognized as a matter of fact.

10. According to the 2000 U.S. census, the total number of Hispanics in the country was 37.4 million of which 66.9 percent were of Mexican origin. The numbers today are probably much larger. Retrieved on October 7, 2005 from http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/p20-545.pdf.

11. Rubén Salazar was a Chicano reporter for _The Los Angeles Times_ who was shot by the police in Los Angeles during the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War in August 1970. For more information, see http://www.utep.edu/horizons/Oct2003Issue/OCT03pages/SalazarOCT03.html.


16. See _The Chicano Studies Reader_ (2001) section “Decolonizing the Territory,” 3-182. Particularly such historians as Ramón Gutiérrez, Tómas Almaguer, and George Sánchez have critically evaluated the concept of Chicano history as a means of sustaining group solidarity while at the same time closing the eyes to the internal stratification and uneven development of various Mexican American communities in the United States. See, e.g., Ramón Gutiérrez, “Community, Patriarchy, and Individualism,” in _American Quarterly_, vol. 45, no. 1 (March 1993) 44-72, and “Chicano History: Paradigm Shifts and Shifting Boundaries,” in _Voices of a New Chican@ History_, ed. by Refugio I. Rochin and Dennis N. Valdes (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000)


24 Ibid., 5. Lorey quotes this passage from an anonymous observer as an example of the continuing media and popular fascination with negative images of the border.


26 Gómez-Quiñones, 2001, 63.


29 See, e.g., Debra Castillo and Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba, eds., *Border Women: Writing from La Frontera* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). In their introduction, the editors point out the relatively privileged position that U.S. writers enjoy in comparison to their Mexican colleagues cross the border line. Also, it is rather alarming that some scholars, without any qualms, idealize such self-destructive practices as for example glue-sniffing by barrio youngsters and the collaboration of women in military maneuvers as signs of resistance.

30 As an example, José David Saldívar’s important contribution to Chicano cultural and border studies titled *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), while offering an interesting discussion on the historical developments and remappings of cultural studies, leaves the reader with a thin description about the art work under scrutiny. visual art in particular.

31 An example of this would be Chela Sandoval’s theorization in “Mestizaje as Method: Feminists-of-Color Challenge the Canon,” in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley: Third World Woman Press, 1997) 358-359.

32 Debra Castillo and Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba, the editors of *Border Women Writing from La Frontera* (2002), introduce the term “intellectual colonialism” in reference to the exclusion of the Mexican perspective by the majority of Chicano intellectuals who theorize about the border (as opposed to from the border). They also criticize Chicana/o artists who advocate, appropriate, and monopolize the border identity, at the same time silencing local artists.

33 Every border is not one and the same; every colonial history is not alike. This reality escaped many international border artists who, in 1990, were invited to participate in a peace festival in the town of Joensuu in eastern Finland at the Russian border. The festival, named *The Road of Poems and Borders*, featured American, Finnish, and Russian artists (in that hierarchical order), but their collaboration seemed to shamble, perhaps overshadowed by the big woods and the silence of language.

34 Saldívar, 1997, xiii.

35 Ibid., 29.


40 Ibid., 27, 99.

41 Ibid., 6.


43 Davalos, 2001, 83.

44 Ibid., 15.

Reader seem to fall on female religious or historical symbols only, not on actual Latinas. From Selena, a Tejana singer and superstar murdered by one of her fans in 1998, public veneration and celebration seems to be sanctioned mostly in the contexts of such predominantly male spheres as politics and sports. Apart from Selena, a Tejana singer and superstar murdered by one of her fans in 1998, public veneration and celebration seem to fall on female religious or historical symbols only, not on actual Latinas.


Yet in actuality, celebrity worship is far from being alien to Mexican American culture, although it seems to be sanctioned mostly in the contexts of such predominantly male spheres as politics and sports. Apart from Selena, a Tejana singer and superstar murdered by one of her fans in 1998, public veneration and celebration seem to fall on female religious or historical symbols only, not on actual Latinas.


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As an alternative to the individualist feminist subject, women-of-color feminists have theorized (and practiced) a more collectively based, plural subjectivity, which is historically rooted in the experiences and contradictory positions of black as well as Latino women in U.S. society. See, e.g., Norma Alarcón (1990) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987).

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Ibid., 5-7.
66 Ibid., 124-125. It is interesting to notice that the quoted sentence does not lose any of its analytical acumen if one substitutes the word “racial” with the word “gender.”
68 As noted by Linda Martin Alcoff, U.S. Latina/o identity is not spontaneous or originating entirely, or even mostly, from their own communities. “Is Latina/o Identity a Racial Identity?” in *Hispanics/Latinos in the United States: Ethnicity, Race, and Rights*, ed. by Jorge Gracia and Pablo De Greiff (New York and London: Routledge, 2000) 23-44. The representation of Mexican Americans/Latinas/os and other groups is also produced for various purposes by such outside forces as the market and the government, whose practices and policies tend to reduce race as well as ethnicity to their smallest common cultural denominators.
70 Ibid., 4-7.
74 Goldberg, 2002, 1.
75 Julie Dowling, “An(other) Shade of White.” Lecture on the U.S. census at the University of Texas at Austin, April 16, 2003. Interestingly, Dowling pointed out how people were able to express resistance against racial phenotypes by making unexpected choices in the census questionnaire. For example, some considered “American” as a race. Others deemed that there were no other real choices than white.
76 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).
78 Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 124-125. Gómez-Peña’s comments about “tall, blond Finnish girls” in a night club in Helsinki make one wonder whether he confused Finland with some other Nordic county as women in Finland generally are rather petite and not particularly blonde.
79 Ibid., 2002, 28.
81 Ibid., 101.
82 Responses to Rodriguez’s writings have ranged from hate to condescension. For example, Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez in his *Border Visions: Mexican Cultures of the Southwest United States* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, c1996) chooses the latter attitude by naming one of his chapters “Poor Richard.”
84 De Castro, 2001, 29.
85 Ibid., 31.
86 De Castro, 2001, 124.
89 Goldberg, 2002, 29-33, 244.
2. MYTHOLOGIES AND HISTORIES

El Norte, the Southwest, Aztlán

*I say then that national morality never was and never can be preserved without the utmost purity and chastity in women; and without national morality a republican government cannot be maintained.*

President John Adams (1807) ¹

Although it is not uncommon to dismiss the relevance of nationalistic lores, myths, symbols, and slogans as something pertinent only to the early stages of nation-state formation or to minority civic struggles for self-determination, they continue to exercise a formidable influence in the contemporary negotiations of cultural and political power throughout the world. Hence in this study, Chicana photography is viewed at the crossroads of three intersecting political/cultural practices connected to their respective nationalistic ideologies: those of Mexico, the United States, and the Chicano movement. The former ones work in the construction of the two nation-states, political systems, social hierarchies, and geopolitical territories. The third ideology, sometimes referred as *Chicanismo*, lacks a sovereign land-base – instead it rests, first, on the notion of *Aztlán*, the mythical homeland of Mexican American people, and second, on *mestizaje*, the Native American part of their heritage.² Throughout the history of post colonial America, the changes of the political relations and geopolitical boundaries between these nations have drastically affected the lives of thousands of people, mostly of Mexican origin, which will locate this study in the turbulent history of the area called *El Norte* in Mexico, the Southwest in the United States, and Aztlán according to Mexican American cultural nationalism.

Convinced by the insights historian David Montejano expresses in his study *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1936-1986* (1987), I wish to filter theoretical generalizations, mostly derived from discourses related to cultural studies, through historical considerations as well as through the basic existential categories of social life, such as the notions of class, race, gender, religion, and so on. In his study, Montejano emphasizes the meaning of the annexation of the Mexican northern territory by the United States after the Mexican-American War in 1846–1848. Mexicans who remained north of the new border between the two countries became *de facto* U.S. citizens; in social practice and popular culture, however, Mexican Americans were racialized as aliens, subject to discrimination in various forms, and continued to be referred as “Mexicans,” not Americans, until the Chicano civil rights era approximately 1965–1975.³ I will be using Montejano’s study as the major source of Mexican American history in Texas.
But before the introduction of national narratives and regional histories of the Southwest, it is rather instructive to compare his study to the work of another Texan, José Limón, and his publication *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas* (1994). Both writers base their argumentation on two formative processes in Texas history, namely war and domination. Montejano, the historian, describes in a conscientious and detailed manner the economic, political, and social development of the area from the local and Mexican American point of view; Limón, in turn, studies various expressive discourses from an ethnographic perspective so as to elicit from them what Fredric Jameson has termed the “political unconscious.” Jameson’s term refers to “the socially produced, narratively mediated, and relatively unconscious ideological responses of the people – scholars and ‘folk’ – to a history of race and class domination.” The works of these two scholars, their similarities and discrepancies, illustrate well the ultimately subjective nature of both historical and cultural inquiry, which also makes one of the premises and methodological modes of my interpretation of Chicana photography.

Together Montejano and Limón provide the reader with an interesting double exposure to the predicament of Mexicans Americans, a double exposure which, nevertheless, leaves the ultimate question open. Do contemporary Mexican-Anglo relations, as Montejano suggests, represent a form of political integration where Texas Mexicans have been included as U.S. citizens and accepted as legitimate political actors now that “the politics of negotiation and compromise have replaced the politics of conflict and control”? Or, do prevailing class and gender differences within the Mexican community undermine Montejano’s optimistic view, locking the majority of Mexicans inside a cage of poverty and political disempowerment that in places rivals the “third world,” as Limón suggests? After residing a year in East Austin, Texas, on the edge of the African American neighborhood and the Mexican *barrio,* as much as I would like to count on Montejano’s assessment, I tend to lean toward Limón’s more pessimistic view, which also is supported by the recent conservative trends in politics throughout the country. It remains to be seen how Chicano literati will respond to the recent election of two Mexican Americans to high political positions. Antonio Villaraigosa’s landslide victory in the race for Los Angeles mayor has been shadowed by the mixed feelings stirred up by attorney general Alberto Gonzales, a White House favorite whose infamous human rights record has tainted his political career. This said, it is not surprising that Chicano cultural practices, too, continue to have a strong political bend, although today this must be understood in a rather broad sense and with respect to those artists who prefer to focus on the art market or entirely disclaim politics based on ethnic difference.

Then how is the complex and controversial socio-political history of Mexican Americans interpreted and transformed in their expressive cultural practices, such as theatre, the visual arts, music, and literature? In his study of South Texas folklore, Limón makes use of the metaphor of the Devil in order to elucidate the complex and often contradictory nature of responses among Texas Mexicans to the history of being dispossessed of their lands, racialized as inferiors, and reduced to a cheap labor force for Euro-American agribusiness. The bedevilment of Limón’s subjects involves social alienation, ambivalence about
allegiances between the two cultures, contradictory or anachronistic positions in terms of race, class and gender, and dissolution of cultural meanings. Just as the trickster in Native American tradition, the devil in Limón’s stories assumes animal guises – a coyote, a goat, a cow, or a chicken – to articulate the paradoxes of the occupied America, the term used by historian Rodolfo Acuña.8 As a signifier of the irrational, unconscious, and repressed, Limón’s devil is also haunted by double consciousness, the concept introduced by African American writer W. E. B. DuBois.

Double consciousness develops out of the situation when one is forced to view him or herself as an object, as if through somebody else’s vision. In DuBois words, a black person sees “himself through the revelation of the other world” and thereby recognizes her or his difference.9 This effect of alienation also resonates with the experiences of women, in general, who learn to look at themselves through the male gaze, and thus become objects of their own divided consciousness.10 Certainly these metaphors of ambiguity seem helpful in figuring out the complexities of Mexican American art; yet I am wary of employing Fredric Jameson’s notion of political unconscious11 in my study of Chicana photography for the dangers of over-interpreting and/or imposing incongruent elements on the material under scrutiny. Likewise, the rigid divorce between “fact” and “fiction,” between empirical evidence and theoretical speculation do not serve well this study. Thus I will be pacing gingerly about the borderlands of the intellectual exercise called cultural studies and traditional historiography, suspicious of the both, seeking to relate them to the specific context of art discourses which take place in contemporary Mexican American communities, and to the artists and their work that are the primary concerns of this study.

Fabulous Stories of Nation-Building

As Benedict Anderson’s by now classic Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983) argues, the nation is a construction of lived experiences subordinated into a singular, masculinized ideal. This construction involves the suppression of differences in the name of national unity, achieved through the dissemination of narratives, myths, and symbols, which together give shape to the nationalistic ideology of the nation-state.12 Due to its turbulent history of colonization and immigration, the United States in particular relies heavily on its nation-building mythology – from the Puritan fathers’ image of the City on the Hill to the current mission to save Iraq, the “Kingdom of Evil.” Among other national mythologies are figured, for example, the notions of the Promised Land, Pilgrim’s Progress, the White Man’s Burden, Manifest Destiny, the Frontier, and the Melting Pot, each of which has profoundly influenced the way Americans see themselves and their nation – its origins, destiny, economy, and governance. Of these narratives, particularly the last three carry a crucial role as the main instruments of segregation (and its flipside, assimilation), subjugation, and disempowerment of Mexican American populations.

Before looking into these homespun American myths, a brief glimpse at the very roots of the U.S.-Mexico conflict serves well to establish the tenor. Among all the historical
representations of this conflict, particularly compelling are the printed images created by northern European artists during the first centuries of the Conquest. These artists’ depictions of the strange landscapes of the “New World” and its people were often based on the written descriptions of the conquistadors, thus being imaginary visualizations of America constructed on European epistemology rather than “truthful” representations of their supposed subjects. These representations in turn contributed to the appearance of so-called Black Legend, *la leyenda negra*, which encapsulated the tense relationship between Spaniards and Anglo-Americans during the colonial period. Early English travel writers in North America reveal that in the Anglo perception, “Spaniards were unusually cruel, avaricious, treacherous, fanatical, superstitious, cowardly, corrupt, decadent, indolent, and authoritarian,” which had resulted in centuries of Spanish tyranny and misgovernment in New Spain. Anglo-American settlers, who had legally banned miscegenation since the early eighteenth century, were particularly shocked to find that the population from Texas to California was predominantly *mestizo*, racially mixed. American newcomers, reflecting the racial theories of the time, described mestizos as “half-breeds,” “mongrels,” and “degenerates.”

According to historian David Weber, Hispanophobia appeared most virulent in war-ridden Texas. In appeal to receive help from the U.S. government for the cause of Texas independence from Mexico in 1836, the Anglo leader Stephen Austin characterizes the conflict in Texas as “a war of barbarism and of despotic principles, waged by the mongrel Spanish-Indian and Negro race, against civilization and the Anglo-American race.” In fact, Hispanophobia had deep roots in Medieval European history, which was marked by imperial rivalries and religious feuds between England and Spain. Transported to America, it continued until the second half of the nineteenth century when Hispanics, reduced in number and political status, ceased to pose an obstacle to American ambitions. Then the disdain of Anglo-Americans turned into nostalgia and romantic admiration of the “lost Spanish heritage” of the Southwest. Anti-Hispanic sentiments of past centuries did not altogether vanish, though; along with changing economic situations, they transformed into anti-Mexican sentiments expressed even today in an array of discriminatory social practices and political positions. The rationales of discrimination only have shifted from the domain of class and nationality predominantly to that of race.

**Nationalism in the United States**

Since the early modern era, the cultivation of ideas of difference, uniqueness, and superiority has been at the heart of the nation-state formation of the United States. The term *manifest destiny*, initiated in the media in 1839 and then used by leaders and politicians to justify the aggressive westward expansion, provided Americans with a sense of “mission” and national destiny. The “mission” was to extend the “boundaries of freedom” to “lesser peoples” by imparting American idealism, industry, and belief in democratic institutions. Other, equally pressing forces behind the expansionist thrust were the rapid growth of the U.S. population due to overseas immigration, the increasing land demands of agriculture, the aftermath of the
economic depressions of the early nineteenth century, and the lucrative commercial prospects of the Pacific coast trade. In public discourses, the westward expansion was regarded not only as inevitable but also divinely ordained.

While the United States initiated its quest for manifest destiny, fueled by economic/nationalistic interests, farther south newly independent Mexico was struggling against formidable odds. After gaining independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico was economically ruined and torn between various political factions, each undermining another’s attempts to secure a stable government. The vast northern territories, called El Norte, were poverty-stricken and underdeveloped, mired by constant warfare with Native Americans, chronic economic stagnation, and the lack of communications to unify the region. This remote frontier society was more informal, democratic (in relative terms), and self-reliant than the center of Mexico’s society, but it was also more vulnerable to outside aggression which culminated in the Mexican-American War in the 1840s. As a symbol of progress, manifest destiny formed the core of the rhetoric of U.S. exceptionalism up until the late twentieth century when, among other revisionist theories, Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system model started to question the uniqueness doctrine, placing the United States within the framework of the global history of capitalist agribusiness, accompanied by worldwide labor migrations, social displacements, and reform failures.

In the vein of Wallerstein, numerous other scholars of social and political science, history, and culture have diluted the rhetoric of exceptionalism, which also was embedded in the most cherished myth of American historiography: the Frontier Theory. According to this thesis formulated by the late nineteenth century historian Frederick Jackson Turner, the continuous movement to the West and the perpetuation of the frontier pioneer experience was not only at the heart of the American national character but also at the heart of American democracy and its “perennial rebirth” in the expanding frontier conditions. The new or revisionist Western historians look at the West from a different angle; such writers as Rodolfo Acuña, Patricia Limerick, Roland Takaki, and Richard White perceive it as the perennial site of “boom and bust” extraction, labor and land exploitation, and racial discrimination. Lately these new Western historians, too, have been criticized for committing the very same offenses they themselves criticized in the earlier generations of scholars; that is, for “stealing” the voice and agency of non-European “others” by treating them uniformly as aberrations and problems, or, conversely, as helpless victims. Inevitably this trend of criticism, combined with theoretical academic reconfigurations about the history of “others,” only rearticulates the perennial problem of Western historiography: the lack of primary research sources produced by these “others.” Available in archives are the multitude of stories and landscapes of the West mediated through the eyes of the conqueror only; the voices of the conquered for the most part were not recorded. Moreover, every scholar working within the academic setting is inevitably confined by Western academic discourse, language, and epistemology, regardless of his or her awareness of their inadequacies.

Theoretical aberrations notwithstanding, the frontier – whether conceived as a place or a process, condition or concept – should be studied by paying attention to all of its representations. Of these representations, visual images are among the most direct and
compelling, albeit least researched. In his essay “Many Wests” published in an exhibition catalogue, Chon Noriega points out that Turner’s thesis “assumes that there is one western perspective from which to look and create, and that it leads to the one inner meaning of our national experience,” and continues:

The problem arises when the idea of the West fails to take into account those who came from the West, those who did not build and create from a western perspective but were, rather, conquered and subordinated by that perspective. The idea of the West, then, exists in a double space, oscillating between imagined coherence and actual exclusion.22

Noriega then poses the following questions: “So what has the notion of the West meant for Chicano artists in terms of ways of looking? Implicit in this question is another one about location: Where, or in what contexts, do Chicano artists belong?” I would like to add some other questions to Noriega’s list. For example, how does the notion of the West relate to the notion of Aztlan in Chicana/o artwork? What do the mythologies of the frontier mean to women artists and how do these stories relate to their lived experiences and interpretations of history? What are the parameters of their “homeland”? These are some of the questions I will seek to answer in this study through an inquiry of living Chicanas, who fortunately are well equipped to speak for themselves as well as about themselves and their art work.

As cherished as the frontier is the persistent idea of the melting pot, the myth of assimilation that even today betrays towering anxieties about national unity versus internal divisions triggered by the emergence of “alien” cultures and races. First introduced in literature (that is, in the play entitled The Melting-Pot [1914] by Jewish writer Israeli Zangwill), the concept of the melting pot also is most compellingly analyzed by literary critics.23 In Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (1986), Werner Sollors interprets the message of the play as an affirmation of the nationally unified future in the form of a reconciliatory marriage between two absolute “others” – a Jew and a German – in the new country where differences become melted into sameness.24 Sollors also analyzes, from a literary point of view, the blight of Euro-Americans in trying to justify (mainly for themselves) the removal of Native communities and the dispossession of their lands. In the romantic European imagination, unity and reconciliation were achieved, once again, through the sexual union between an Anglo man and a Native woman, from whence sprang the popular Indian princess myth.25 In an obscure manner, the early colonists recognized the sophistication of Native social organizations, and therefore Indians were first considered racially somewhat white and thus assimilable into the developing Euro-American society. After the great Indian wars of the late nineteenth century, this led to the establishment of a boarding school system for Native children in order to “civilize” (meaning Christianize) the savage Indians. The assimilation of Native Americans remained partial, though, and after the low point of the first half of the twentieth century, Indian communities and cultures have recovered mainly due to their civil rights activism and revenue made in casino business since the early 1980s.26
Besides Native Americans, the effects of the melting-pot mentality particularly affected new groups of immigrants. The big waves of immigration from eastern and Mediterranean Europe that arrived during the two first decades of the twentieth century were followed by the twenties’ upsurge of white nativism and the implementation of restrictive immigration laws. The new immigrants were expected to quickly give up their old ways and languages and assimilate in Euro-American way of life for the sake of national unity and democracy. After the Mexican Revolution, the arrival of Mexican refugees to the Southwest posed a new threat since Mexicans were not only culturally different but also non-white. Due to racial discrimination, Latino new-comers (like Asian immigrant populations before them) landed on the lowest rung of American society. Meanwhile the “old racial minorities,” namely the Irish and Jewish, became normalized as white Americans. The era after World War II was the heyday of assimilation pressures.27 Such volumes as Oscar Handlin’s The Uprooted (1973) called for democratic universalism, “consensus” mentality, and the erasure of “non-American” identities by describing immigrants as rootless, alienated, and handicapped by their old cultures. The 1960s’ civil right struggles combined with ethnic revival and escalating problems of “race” and “ethnicity” proved the opposite: the melting pot had never really worked. In effect, immigrants were sustained and empowered by their old homes, as described in John Bodnar’s study The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America (1985).28 In this picture, Mexican immigrants made a special case of their own. They retained close ties to Mexico, often preferred not to learn English, nor adopt middle-class American values, nor apply for American citizenship; they moved frequently between the two countries; their cultural values and practices were regenerated and reinforced by continuous new waves of Mexican immigrants from across the border.

Within the Mexican American academic community, the on-going debate about buying into gringo values makes an interesting addition to the discussion of cultural persistence against the melting-pot pressure. Rafael Pérez-Torres for example claims that besides homophobia, Mexican Americans are also afflicted by a denial of their anglophilia (see page 262). The question of assimilation becomes pitted against the idea of cultural survival and self-determination in Octavio Romano’s criticism of Chicana/o authors:

In short, most of what is today popularly called “Chicano” and “Chicana” literature in the U.S. is general and standard American literature, pure and simple, the Spanish surnames of the authors, and the artificial-superficial “magical-realism” characterizations, notwithstanding. The terms “Chicano” and “magical-realism” in this context are but marketing labels for written works which have been selected, edited, modified, and promoted at will by New York Anglo editors and publishers with an ideological/marketing thrust as their main and only concern. In literary and intellectual structure, the “Chicano-Chicana” popular writing, a by-product of U.S. education, has more in common with the Athens of ancient Greece than with the Teotihuacan and Tenochtitlan of ancient Mexico.29
Romano’s assertion about one nationalist agenda being natural and desired as opposed to another nationalist agenda brings us back to the issue of the homogenizing process of nation-state building.

Nationalism in Mexico

As early American nationalism constructed the nation as a direct heir of European cultures, particularly ancient Greek and Roman, so did the Mexican variant after the 1821 War of Independence while claiming the European as well as Indian heritage. Mexican nationalism, however, did not include these two heritages on an equal basis. From the Indian past, only the Aztec empire was celebrated in museum displays as well as in the names of public places and monuments, which symbolically positioned the first president, Porfirio Díaz, and then el Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) as direct heirs of Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec ruler. Those pre-Columbian Indian tribes that opposed Aztec militarism were left out from the nation-state project as also were the living indigenous Indians, the poorest segment of the population.30 Therefore, while supporting the hegemony of the criollo upper class (the descendants of Spanish conquistadors who were born in New Spain), the official reification of mestizaje, racial mixture, of Mexican nationalism failed to create the kind of national unity it claimed.31 Instead the onset of industrial and global capitalism escalated class and race inequality, which finally culminated in the 1910–1917 revolution, followed by profound political and social turmoil. In the process of social reorganization, the failed land reform displaced thousands of Mexican small farmers and increased immigration north of the border, which in turn coincided with the growing demand of temporary agricultural workers in the U.S. Southwest, particularly in California and Texas.32

The Mexican Revolution of 1910–1917 deposed the dictator Porfirio Díaz and produced such national heroes as Francisco (Pancho) Villa and Emiliano Zapata, whose images are exalted in numerous Chicano murals made during the 1970s and 1980s in California and elsewhere in the Southwest. The early mural painting drew its inspiration directly from the work of the three great Mexican muralists – Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siquieros – whose enormous public murals in Mexico City, for example, forged the imagery of cultural nationalism and national identity founded on indigenismo, indigenous origin of Mexico.33 In spite of the three muralists’ affiliation with the proletarian, radical-socialist tradition and with the revolutionary elite’s pledged commitment to the moral and economic “elevation of the Indian,” the social reform soon corroded into mere nationalistic lip-service. It elevated one single pre-Columbian civilization, which was identified with the militant Aztec empire and presumably retrievable in folk art, traditional crafts, and archeological remains. In effect, the three muralists thus inadvertently aided the construction of a nationalistic ideology, which contributed to the modernization and industrialization of Mexico after the model of the capitalist United States. At the same time in the United States, Mexico became equated with quaint and traditional folk cultures promoted by the central Mexican government agency FONART (Fondo Nacional de Artesanías) in
order to boost American tourism. The Mexican government’s program to modernize Mexico found its artistic articulation in the Mexican Mural Renaissance and the Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers of Mexico, which formed the cultural vanguard of this “institutionalized revolution.”

Two writers in particular were influential in shaping nationalist discourse, namely José Vasconcelos and Octavio Paz. Both writers also significantly influenced Chicano ideology and the development of Mexican American literature by introducing themes and symbols that have continued to produce enthusiasm as well as controversy among Mexican American literati. Equally universalizing and utopian as its U.S. counterparts, the myth of la raza cósmica, the “cosmic race,” formulated by Vasconcelos in the 1920s seems to occupy a permanent position in Chicano discourse of mestizaje. The ethos of racial homogeneity expressed in Vanconcelos’ writing speaks in favor of Latin America’s superiority over the United States as the former supposedly had a greater capacity for incorporating diverse racial groups and thus creating a homogenous superior race. Engaged in the elevation of mestizaje and indigenous heritage, early Chicano ideologists willingly appropriated Vasconcelos’ concept but evidently failed to see its assimilationist, racist undertones not far removed from the melting-pot myth. Although Vanconcelos primarily reflected the objects of Mexican nationalism, his eloquently articulated belief that miscegenation could provide the possibility of eliminating social contradictions haunts the controversies of Mexican American intellectuals even today, revealing interesting fissures in their conceptualization of racial condition. On the other hand, Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, a contemporary of Vanconcelos and one of the internationally best-known Mexican writers, has gained a notorious reputation as a perpetrator of elite supremacy and social inequality, and a supporter of governmental control over working-class Mexicans. His writings use pseudo-psychoanalytic arguments that pathologize Mexican working-class masculinity and sexually stigmatize La Malinche, the symbolic image of the Indian mother of all mestizos. Paz’s writings and their influence on the thinking of Chicana authors will be discussed further in the context of Mexican American female archetypes.

Aztlán

The configurations of the Chicano homeland, Aztlán bring forth the whole complexity of nationalistic identity- and myth-making, entangled in the legacies of two conquests, two narratives of colonization, and the predicament of the U.S.-Mexico border. Aztlán, according to the ancient Aztec myth, is the name of the primordial Mexico homeland, located somewhere to the northwest of present-day Mexico City. From there the Aztec people, led by their war god Huitzilopochtli, started migrating southward in order to establish their empire and fulfill their destiny. The name Aztlán is a synthesis and contraction of the Nahuatl word Aztatlan, meaning a “place near the white herons” or a “place of whiteness.” Beautiful and poetic as it is, the myth has inspired numerous scientific investigations to disclose its real “historical” location, but the most recent resurrection of Aztlán started in the late 1960s when
students of Mexican origin in California named it as their spiritual homeland. Aztlán thus became the Chicano name for the U.S. Southwest.

In order to disclaim Euro-American mainstream society (as well as their own Spanish heritage), Chicano activists romanticized their cultural connections to the pre-Columbian Indian past, on which they constructed an ideological foundation for their militant nationalistic program. This was the beginning of El Movimiento, the Chicano movement, which formed one of the political fronts of the Mexican American civil rights struggle. In fact, Mexican Americans had a long history of resistance even before the Civil Rights Movement, which finally scattered the post-World-War illusion of a unified America. The two strands of this resistance, the political and the cultural, should be seen as parallel and complementary – not as competing and conflicting as often happens, even today. Historians have repeatedly refuted the veracity of the myth of Aztlán, but some of them have, nevertheless, been able to understand it as a powerful means to provide historical unity to distinct experiences of Chicanos as natives rather than immigrants in the Southwest.38

Recognizing the dichotomies set up by people themselves, it seems safe to say that generally for the Chicano political nationalists of the past, the most central precept of liberation was self-determination in the form of political representation. Meanwhile, cultural nationalists have emphasized the significance of self-representation in order to unite regionally and historically disparate Mexican American populations and to fight back incapacitating ethnic stereotypes. For example Rudolfo Anaya, one of the most respected Chicano author and cultural activists, eloquently, albeit somewhat idealistically, conceptualizes the meaning of Aztlán as follows:

For all groups or nations myth offers a core of common meaning and generally accepted values. The element of identity is but a fragment of the totality that permits the experiencing of origins as a comfort zone which enhances our development. Aztlán localizes this process in a particular milieu in relation to a complex network of historical events and happenings. In other words, through Aztlán we come to better understand psychological time (identity), regional makeup (place), and evolution (historical time). [...] Aztlán allows us to come full circle with our communal background as well as to maintain ourselves as fully integrated individuals.39

Anaya’s words distinctly resonate the cultural ethos of the poet Alurista, the “grand old man” of the Chicano cultural revival that began at the Denver Chicano Youth Conference in 1969.40 Fashioned by Alurista, the then published document titled El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán reflected a wide range of Mexican American socio-political concerns; but, most importantly, it addressed the role of culture, education, and art in the recreation of the Chicano homeland, the essence of which was primarily spiritual, not territorial. In detached hindsight, El Plan appears naive and utopian, yet in 1969 its assertions reverberated with a powerful conviction and a call for mass mobilization. As it appears as the most important
document of Chicano ethnic revival of the 1960s, the initial paragraphs of El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán are quoted below:

In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal “gringo” invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny.

We are free and sovereign to determine those tasks which are justly called for by our house, our land, the sweat of our brows, and by our hearts. Aztlán belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops and not to the foreign Europeans. We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the bronze continents.

Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggles against the foreigner “gabacho” who exploits our riches and destroys our culture. With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are Aztlán.

While empowering and momentous, Alurista’s words also solicit the question that has troubled Mexican American ethnic revival since its very beginning. Who are the we Alurista is talking about? Who becomes included in the mestizo nation and who becomes excluded from within its boundaries? Alurista’s text itself establishes a hierarchical genealogy of brotherhood, which inadvertently leaves out, first, women, second, gay people, and third, people of European orientation. In addition, the text rings eerie echoes of European chauvinism embedded in such concepts as proud heritage, soil, heart, and blood. In retrospect, it is evident that the declared unity of the Chicano movement was more or less wishful thinking; ever since its very inception, the voice of civil struggle was fractured by dissenting voices, albeit muted. Over the years, unremitting debates and controversies about the meanings, contents, inclusions, and exclusions of the “Chicano nation” have marked Mexican American political and cultural practices to the extent that it is not a surprise to hear someone sigh, “What’s wrong with us? Why do we always have to undermine each other’s work and efforts?”

Aztlán Contested

As stated above, Chicano politics and cultural renaissance have, since their very beginnings, been criticized internally by those Mexican Americans, who did not comfortably fit within the imaginary boundaries of Aztlán. Of these discontents, particularly women artists have often taken rather individualistic routes in opposition to ethnic separatism and unity.
advocated by cultural nationalists. Karen Mary Davalos summarizes this succinctly by using the standard terminology of postcolonial criticism: “a Chicano nationalist call for liberation and cultural self-determination […] require us to consider the ways authoritative and dominant discourses find root in counter-hegemonic discourse and intra-cultural differences of gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, language, and political affiliation.” 43 An extreme example of the exclusive, monopolizing view of “proper” Chicano art came from San Francisco-based artists Malaquias Montoya and Lezlie Salkowitz-Montoya, who, in 1980, publicly denounced museums, universities, and private galleries as unacceptable sites for Chicano art display and implied that “Chicano artists work, live, and create in Chicano barrios and reject the art market, avoid mediums inaccessible to barrio residents, survive without funds from government agencies and private corporations, and avoid unclear or apolitical messages.” 44

Rephrasing her basic arguments against Chicano Studies, Davalos also echoes the bitter feelings of many academic Chicanas today, whose struggles for greater inclusiveness of Chicano scholarship continue. It is noteworthy that Davalos’ contestation, too, stems from a tradition of internal as well as external negotiations of power and meaning, exactly in the same fashion as Chicano nationalism itself was a product of a long history of Mexican American resistance against oppression. Any attempt to interpret Chicana art without taking into consideration these intersecting and conflicting histories would remain superficial and confined within the realm of disconnected abstractions rather common in cultural criticism. To press the point, I further resort to Davalos by quoting her criticism of the academic policies of Chicano Studies, the direct heir of El Movimiento.

And it is precisely the inward focus of Chicano Studies that explains the romantic and dualistic models popular in Chicano scholarship. For example it is nearly a convention of Chicano Studies to interpret virtually all aspects of “Mexican culture” and “Chicano culture” as the affirmation of difference, as resistance to assimilation, or as the source or the will to struggle. While this image of culture challenges the conventional social science perspective that “traditional cultures” are backward, timeless, apolitical, exotic, or quaint, it also results in an overly celebratory vision of “Mexican” or “Chicano” culture and fails to consider how culture is fluid, dynamic, and contradictory. 45

[…]
A romantic and nostalgic view of Mexican American representational practices can serve as a moral or political strategy for restoring social value and legitimizing the present. It cannot, however, account for divergence and complexity. 46

The narrow definitions of Chicano cultural nationalism and the inward focus of Chicanismo have been challenged by many artists’ collectives around the U.S. by including multiple cultural influences and identities in their agendas. Davalos gives an exhaustive historical account of these fluctuating and often discordant collaborations of artists from California to Texas to Michigan. 47 Conflicting ideas about the proper representation of Aztlan and the politics of visual practices often disbanded these collectives rather rapidly, though.
Among them, a collective called Ariztlán, founded in 1978 in Arizona, is particularly interesting as its exploration of Native roots did not spring from imagined pre-Columbian ancestry (indigenismo) but from the fact that the Native American (mainly Ute and Apache) influence was very real in this group because many of the artists actually were Native Americans or worked and lived with them.48 This kind of close association with traditionally (not presently) nomadic Utes, Apaches, Navajos, or Comanches, who the early Spanish settlers contemptuously called indios bárbaros, was less useful for Chicano nationalist dogma than neo-indigenismo constructed on imagined Aztec heritage. Also Noriega points out the inconsistency of those Chicanos who, on the one hand, differentiate themselves from Euro-Americans as well as from recent Mexican immigrants while claim pride in the indigenous Mexican heritage, on the other hand, thus perpetuating the dominant society’s distortion of native peoples as representatives of a timeless, primordial culture with a “pure” origin unaffected by history.49

The iconography of this double standard became fixed and overwhelmingly conspicuous in the work of hundreds of artists who, during the 1970s, created public murals to support La Causa, the nationalist program of the Chicano movement. Among the multitude of celebratory depictions of Mexican revolutionary heroes – Benito Juárez, Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, and the Aztec Warrior – there also were dissenting images made by such women muralists as Judy Baca and Las Mujeres Muralistas, who combined art and activism that centered on issues affecting minority women and children. Instead of pivoting around hero images, or ethnic identities and allegiances, or idealized notions of the heterosexual patriarchal family, these artists gave public visual representation to the histories of working women, migrant workers, immigrants, and lesbians, and so forth. Through this kind of art work, the utopian narrative of Chicanismo (as it was originally formulated in El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán) was subverted and diverted away from romantic ideals of social resistance as well as from the stereotyped images of Chicana women as passive, submissive, and weak.50 Of course, these alternative visions and visualizations did not occur without backlash, which for Las Mujeres Muralistas meant a partial erasure from Chicano historiography and for Judy Baca, the best-known Chicana/o mural artist, occasional censorship of her art work.

Related by Davalos, the story of Baca’s rejected proposal for a mural at the barrio of Estrada Courts in Los Angeles reflected the internal gender bias disrupting Mexican American communities. Baca’s women-centered design that addressed the pain that women suffer because of male aggression was unwanted because it did not fit into the cultural makeup of the barrio; it was considered alienating for a local youth gang who were to assist in the production of the mural and whose warrior identities depended on the celebration of gang loyalty often reinforced by acts of violence.51 According to Davalos, Baca’s design “explicitly positions women against men and male violence, questioning patriarchal power and control through aggression.”52 Baca’s contestation has reached far beyond such confined locations as the barrio and the border, though, since she also was one of the first Chicana artists to embrace the issues of transnational coalitions and gay rights. Yet even today, discussions of Mexican American scholars who do not specialize in the visual arts tend to see
the mural as a privileged form of “authentic” ethnic cultural expression, romantically rendering symbols of resistance and affirmation over the politics of exclusion.\textsuperscript{53} It seems that while such intimate forms of art as photography and poetry readily carry messages of protest, the communal and public nature of murals somehow disqualifies them as a means of internal contestation.

Interestingly polarized between politically radical and conservative, Chicana/o non-heterosexual people have taken critical roles in transforming Mexican American discourse to include not only women and gays, but also people from different national origins than Mexican; biracial people who might embrace “whiteness” and English over Spanish; and recent immigrants, documented or undocumented. Lesbian and gay writers, in particular, have participated in these discussions, bringing their experiences into the public space of Aztlán and thus including their voices into the historical narratives of Mexican Americans. In the growing corpus of Chicana radical feminist thought, Gloria Anzaldúa’s elaboration on mestiza consciousness stands unsurpassed as the foundational text against which all other formulations of racial mix and borderlands identities must be measured. One of these formulations has lately been launched by Richard Rodriguez, one among the most controversial Mexican American writers, whose conservative views for cultural assimilation and against affirmative action and bilingual education made him famous as the number one internal enemy of the Mexican American cause. Since out of the closet, however, Rodriguez has been publicly arguing for the rights of immigrants and homosexuals, and thereby has started to receive more understanding feedback even from his Mexican American audience with radical views. Rodriguez’s significant role as a debater, commentator, and at times a harsh critic of the politics of ethnicity and race cannot be underestimated. Meanwhile, the battles over representation, meaning, and the politics of power within Chicano discourses continue, one of the recent examples of which being the story of the artist Alma Lopez’s digital image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a symbol of lesbian desire, as it was related in the opening of this study.

With its roots in the Enlightenment and the romantic era philosophies, the European ideology of the nation-state relies on the beliefs of common ancestry of the people who share a common sovereign territory and are unified by a nationalistic ideology. Aztlán’s existence as a nation hence goes against “reason”: it has no geopolitical territory, no authorization, no military force, nor citizenship, and its signification is a fiction. Thus its raison d’être could not be the maintenance of social and economic hierarchy for the benefit of the power elite. Yet, just like “legitimate” nation-states, it was founded on imagined unity and coherence safeguarded and reproduced by women’s assumed moral superiority and willingness to take responsibility of the family, the master symbol of the nation-state. Not surprisingly then, after the publication of El Plan Espirituál de Atzlán at the National Chicano Liberation Conference in Denver in 1969, the Chicana Caucus announced that it was the consensus of the group that the Chicana woman does not want to be liberated. Even then, of course, this did not hold true as soon as women realized that their privileged roles in the social, ideological, and demographic reproduction of the Chicano nation meant, on the other hand, invisibility, male control, and a limited access to power. Women who did not fit the bill as wives, mothers, or
workers for the “common cause” set out to construct their own narratives through cultural practices that included not only misfitting women, las malcriadas, but also those men who were excluded from preferred sexual, racial, or ideological categories.

Of course, this is not to claim that all Mexican American women back in the 1970s (or thereafter) were radicals or even liberals. On the contrary, within a movement that unproblematically defined itself as oppressed, the acknowledgement of dissenting voices (that betrayed a tension between marginality and privilege within) was likely to be perceived particularly disconcerting even by Chicana activists. Common concerns about women’s sexuality, morality, and solidarity thus reflected the ethnic containment policies within Chicano community, which aimed to foreclose the formation of alternative female identities and subjectivities. The symbolic representations of the female body, which occupied the center of nationalistic discourse and visual language, reinforced the status quo of the patriarchal social order influenced by both the U.S. and Mexican nationalistic ideologies. Whether Mexican, American, or Mexican American, the territory between woman and nation continues to be densely submersed with stereotypical female images and symbols through which Chicana artists have negotiated new meanings and positions, as wives, mothers, professionals, and members of Latina/o community. The following section will give an overview of the historical odds that underlie the cultural narratives of Chicana/Hispana/Mexican American women artists empowered as well as occasionally constrained by their spiritual homeland, Aztlán.
Regional Histories, Borderline Identities

Indeed, I went to Mexico with yearning, desire, and shame: a yearning for the cultural heritage that I felt had been robbed from me, a desire to be recognized as one who belonged to Mexico, and shame for my First World privilege.

Sheila Marie Contreras (1998)  

Rather than relying on theoretical deduction based on assembling applicable evidence, I place this investigation of Chicana photography in the contested borderlands between cultural studies and historiography. Generally based on a careful structural data analysis but often theoretically rather uninteresting, social history nevertheless offers a tangible material foundation for reflecting on cultural production and its connection to particular economic, political, social, and ideological processes. Cultural studies and critical theory, while routinely denigrated for their obfuscating and abstract language, nonetheless seem to better equip the researcher with a critically incisive view and theoretically sophisticated tools to handle the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties facing contemporary academic inquiry of society and culture. Studying Mexican Americans, for example, inevitably entails the crossing of national borders, which only a few decades ago was regularly considered a threat to national unity and identity among historians as well as American Studies scholars, who worried that the inclusion of transnational histories would alienate these disciplines from their audience.

As noted before, there have been conflicting opinions about the definition of Chicano history. Is it synonymous with Mexican history, or Native American history? Where does it begin? What is the role of race as opposed to that of class, and how do they intersect? Does Chicana history need to be written separately? What is the significance of ethnicity and identity in Chicano history? Each answer given to these questions reflects not only different interpretations of historical events and their meanings, but also the diversity of positions and beliefs about the origin, nature, and role of Mexican Americans in U.S. society today. In this section, unlike in the rest of this study and without wishing to erase the pre-Columbian or colonial heritage of Mexican-origin people, I choose to regard them primarily as the outcome of the escalating conflict between Mexico and the United States; this premise marks the early nineteenth century as the beginning of their modern history. As stated by historian David Weber, Mexico is as important to Chicano history as England is to U.S. history; yet the history of Mexican Americans is not simply Mexican history transplanted onto another territory. Nor should we assume that Native American history, as such, could offer us a key to understand Mexican Americans. In spite of their partly common ancestry, it would be erroneous to count very much on that connection either, for the shifting alliances between Mexicans, Native American peoples and Anglo-Americans have proven complex and
irregular, most often dictated by practicality and historical exigencies rather than by the mutual sentiments of blood relations. The ethno-racial configurations have been particularly complex in New Mexico where in the seventeenth century Spanish and Mexican colonists – most of them mestizos – first fought against sedentary Pueblo Indians; later, together with Pueblo people, against the mounted Apache and Comanche raiders; and finally, in the nineteenth century, against Anglo-American intruders. Over the centuries, not only warfare but also intermarriage was common, further blurring socio-racial boundaries. Thus it turns out that the demarcation lines between the colonizer and the colonized were never as fixed and clean cut as many writers like to present them; this is a vital, albeit often strategically bypassed, consideration regarding Mexican Americans, in particular.

More productive than to speculate on essentialized historical liabilities is to take a good look at the map and start tracing Chicano history along the geographical features – national and natural – of the Southwest, *El Norte*. Despite the fact that today one can find a growing presence of Mexican Americans in any large North American city, the majority of them still live close to the border, in the vast region that stretches about two thousand miles from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. From California to Texas, the geography and climate have set the conditions to the historical development of the far-flung parts of the Mexican American homeland. Besides these natural characteristics, which transcend the political border and create a continuous landscape mainly formed by deserts and mountain ranges, the impression of an intimate connection with the past is reinforced by predominantly Spanish place names, adobe architecture, Mexican music, customs, and the flavors of everyday life that continue to be revitalized from across the border. The historical legacy of Spain and Mexico runs deeper still, in agricultural and mining techniques, laws, routes and roads, and, of course, by way of language.

In the nineteenth century, however, the sparse and isolated population of this area knew themselves not as Mexicans or Mexican Americans but by the regional Spanish terms, such as *californios, nuevomexicanos, tejanos*, and *hispanos*, as opposed to *norteamericanos*, i.e., Anglo-Americans. In the following discussion about the colonial and nineteenth-century roots of Chicano history, I will occasionally be using the terms above in order to underscore the divergent developments of the respective regions and how regional differences have shaped the nature of Chicana/o history, culture, and scholarship. In my view, California (while also the home of the farm workers labor movement) epitomizes the issues of urban ethnic identity of Mexican Americans; the early history of New Mexico, then, is crucial for the understanding of mestizaje and mixed racial identity; and lastly, the fate of Mexicans in Texas exemplifies best the Mexican American labor and class struggle. Therefore, my introduction of each region is keyed accordingly. In this age of a growing resentment against wholesale essentializations of ethno-racial identities, I find this kind of regionally demarcated approach more productive than sweeping identifications that circulate under such denominations as the “Greater Mexico” and the “Other Mexico.” Taking after the ethos of cultural nationalism of past decades that polarized Mexican and U.S. cultures and pitted them against each other, these two designations tend to underplay the effects of cultural
transformation that certainly takes place with each new generation of the Mexican American population.

California

In conclusion it should be recognized that although the Mexicans have proved to be efficient laborers in certain industries, and have afforded a cheap and elastic labor supply for the southwestern United States, the evils of the community at large which their presence in large numbers almost inevitably brings may more than overbalance their desirable qualities. Their low standards of living and morals, their utter lack of proper political interest, the retarding effect of their employment upon the wage scale of the more progressive races, and finally their tendency to colonize in urban centers, with evil results, combine to stamp them as a rather undesirable class of residents.

Samuel Bryan, Stanford University (1912) 61

To break from linear chronology, I prefer to approach the past by way of first pointing out some quite recent developments in Chicano history. The Chicano civil rights movement, *El Movimiento*, of the 1960s and 1970s did not spontaneously spring into existence; on the contrary, it was preceded by many historical as well as contemporary civil resistance movements among Mexican American people. In California, for example, the mid-1960s saw the culmination of one hundred years of labor struggle when the National Farm Workers Association, NFWA, was founded by two preeminent Mexican American labor organizers, César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, who lead the agricultural workers to strike against grape growers at Delano, California. The long strike ended in 1970 with a staggering victory aided by a national boycott of non-union grapes. The leaders of the Farm Workers turned their unionizing efforts to other agricultural workers, and on their rallying trips also traveled *El Teatro Campesino*, performing *actos*, short political plays, written for the support of *La Causa*, the Mexican American cause.62

The empowerment generated by the highly successful and well publicized NFWA labor struggle and El Teatro Campesino made a direct impact on the first generation of Mexican American youth entering universities in California. These students then became leaders and activists of the Chicano movement, which, as mentioned earlier, also inherited NFWA’s gender bias. Thus started by students and artists, the Chicano movement had close academic connections since its inception, with strong emphasis on Mexican American educational and cultural issues. Yet it was not only a socio-political movement fashioned and supported by intellectuals, as sometimes insinuated, but it involved and talked to a wide section of working-class Mexican Americans as well.63 (Today, however, the term continues to carry specifically regional, rather radical connotations that seem to put off some Texas
Mexican Americans, in particular, whose construction of Mexican American experience and identity is firmly anchored in their own local history.)

What is the historical narration, then, that culminated in the emergence of the Chicano civil rights struggle in the 1960s? During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Nueva España, the Spanish colonial territory in America, was shaped under the strict regulations and ordinances from the Spanish Crown. Isolated from the affluent heartland on the central plateau of Mexico, the arid northern parts of Nuevo España remained a far-out, dangerous, and sparsely populated periphery. The borderlands, La Frontera, were underdeveloped, educationally backward, and culturally unimpressive. No precious mineral deposits, high Indian civilizations, or golden treasures were found by the conquistadors who first explored these territories. Starting as late as in 1769, when the Franciscan Friar Junípero Serra founded the first mission in order to convert natives, the Spanish colonization process along coastal California advanced at a sluggish pace. Besides missions, some military garrisons, presidios, were also built, but they were few and far between, with the main purpose of defending the province against other European explorers. Small villages, pueblos, and missions came to dominate the life of early colonists and relatively peaceful Indians, who were rounded up by Franciscan friars to live and work at the close quarters of the missions. Crowded living conditions, however, promoted contagious European diseases, which rapidly decimated the Mission Indian population. The first census, taken in 1781, of El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles del Río de Porciúncula (the modern-day L.A.) counted 12 families and the total of 46 inhabitants in the village. On the whole, very few colonists were attracted to settle in California before the nineteenth century, and as late as in 1821 it had a non-native population of only three thousand, most of whom were mestizos of Indian, Spanish, and often also of black ancestry. By 1930, the population of Los Angeles had reached 1.24 million, a number that well captures the enormous scale of change that had happened during just over one hundred years of American occupation.

While Mexican independence from Spain in 1821 did not change much in California or in other northern provinces, the subsequent opening of the borders to foreign trade and settlers did bring along unexpected consequences at an escalating rate. The gradual infiltration of merchants and frontiersmen not only brought the region in contact with American ideas, institutions, and market commodities, but also divided its population. There were those who opposed American influence and others, mostly upper-middle-class Californios, who welcomed lucrative foreign trade and believed that the more progressive U.S. government would economically benefit the region largely ignored by the Mexican government. Eventually a number of American newcomers settled in California permanently, intermarried and merged with the Mexican upper-class, and started to exercise steadily growing power in local politics. These adjustment developments among the power elite went hand in hand with the hardening of racial stereotypes and antagonism among common folk, and together they prepared ground for the U.S. conquest of the Southwest. The American troops that occupied California in 1847 met little resistance; military reinforcement from central Mexico requested by Pío Pico, the last Mexican governor of California, never materialized; and the Californios themselves had mixed feelings about Americans. Rather
mysteriously and without further elaboration, the historian David Weber quotes the reminiscences of Señora Angustias de la Guerra Ord, who stated that the conquest “of California, did not bother the Californians, least of all the women.” President Polk, like a few other U.S. presidents before and after him, resorted to somewhat dubious intelligence reports to justify the military attack. Then, unable to give the American public any rational motive for the conquest, the U.S. officials articulated it as a moral imperative and the mission of the United States to rescue the Mexicans from themselves by introducing American law, democracy, and institutions in California.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 ended the Mexican-American War. It turned almost overnight about 7,500 Californios and 60,000 Nuevomexicanos into American citizens, and thus created a unique new ethnic group in the United States. The number of Tejanos at that time was 7,500. The Treaty was aimed to guarantee all the rights of citizens to the former Mexicans; yet it failed to protect them from losing their lands, civil rights, and political power in the years to come. In the beginning, though, Californios did not fare badly. With no bitter war memories to feed hatred on either side, they were able to retain some local political offices and even participate in the drafting of the state constitution. Conflict and resistance replaced relatively peaceful cooperation only after the gold rush got underway in the 1850s, bringing swelling waves of Anglo settlers and adventurers from around the world to seek fortunes in California. Anglo-American nativists’ wrath, accompanied by escalating conflicts of economic interest, made Californios exceedingly vulnerable to unjust legislation, discrimination, and physical abuse, which eventually left them without any means to protect their lands or civil rights. As a consequence of social degradation and escape from the country, the number of “original” Californios declined rapidly; meanwhile, new immigrants from impoverished Mexican countryside kept crossing the border and found their way to southern California and farther.

After the Civil War of the mid-nineteenth century, the capitalistic social order of the industrialized Northeast was rapidly replacing the older, pre-capitalist systems, such as the southern slave economy and the rancho economy of southern California. Unlike in the South, where the social order rested on the white/black racial binary, the competition for land and other valuable assets in California involved Anglos and Mexicans, as well as Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian immigrant groups. By the end of the nineteenth century, the native Indian population of California had decreased to mere 17,000, and most of the Indians were working as slaves in Spanish ranchos, forming the lowest of the low in the new social hierarchy based on white supremacist ideology. In the post-gold-rush California run by developers and industrialists, not many Indians remained alive to be confined into reservations. Compared to Asian immigrants (whose work opportunities and property acquisition were narrowed down by alien laws and whose access to the U.S. was eventually barred by restrictive immigration acts), the nineteenth-century Californios fared better because of their “white” racial status, Christian faith, a romance language, and a home-based ruling elite.

Nevertheless, racial hatred and discrimination against Californios intensified further in the early twentieth century when the immigration from Mexico peaked in the aftermath of
the turmoil created by the Mexican Revolution. In the United States on the other hand, World War I military industry and an agricultural boom in southern California brought about a continuous demand for cheap labor. Culturally different Mexicans became “darkened,” racialized as non-white, and thereby forced down to the lowest strata of society as migrant farm workers, who provided a handy source of labor for the seasonally fluctuating needs of agribusiness. Better paying, skilled jobs in industry were reserved for white workers only. Typically, Mexicans immigrants were treated as temporary aliens, not permanent residents, susceptible to random deportation, and lacking effective legal protection against nativist coercion and labor exploitation.73

By the 1920s, the accelerated urbanization of southern California gave shape to the modern characteristics of barrios, urban residential areas, which then became the material basis of Mexican American community development. For decades, Mexican barrios not only in Los Angeles but in all major southwestern cities gave a geographical identity, a feeling of belonging and being at home, to the lower-class Mexicans, who were facing marginalization in a rapidly changing society controlled by Anglo-Americans. On the other hand, barrios also segregated and isolated the Mexican population, thus becoming hotbeds of poverty, crime, illness, and alienation from the rest of society.74 Therefore many Chicanos continue to feel ambivalent about the barrio. This ambivalence around ethnic neighborhoods, evident in cultural production, too, filters through social structures and the lives of people of color throughout the country.

Many historians regard World War II as the turning point in Mexican American history. Mexican Americans were proportionally overrepresented in the U.S. military force, and they also suffered a proportionally larger number of casualties than other groups. After the war, the returning veterans, emancipated by the army experience and educated with the help of the G.I. Bill of Rights, created a much needed pool of outspoken community leaders.75 According to the generational model of historical periodization, these veterans prepared the ground for the next generation, who already were relatively well integrated in American society, spoke fluent English, entered universities, and who then launched the Mexican American civil rights struggle in the mid-1960s.76 To this should also be added the role of Mexican American women in the war effort as industrial workers and home front organizers. For many of them, this was the first contact with the Anglo world, and after the war, it helped them to become active in social and political efforts on behalf of their communities.77 Regardless of many victories in education, social issues, political representation, and cultural recognition, Mexican Americans population at large continue to suffer from demoralization and ills caused by poverty, discrimination, and segregation. In California, the 1990s saw a series of backlashes to the civil rights of minority groups with the passing of Proposition 227 (propagated by an English-Only movement) and Proposition 187, which, with support from conservative governor Pete Wilson, aimed at restricting immigration.78 Also affirmative action and bilingual education, the main facilitators of social mobility for minority groups, have frequently been dismantled or under attack, most recently by President George W. Bush, who however lost his suit against the University of Michigan, the admission policies of which favored minority applicants.79 For each generation of
Mexican American young men, the military service – sometimes overseas – still seems to offer the most feasible channel for education and upward social mobility. At this point it is pertinent to recall the Black Legend, the myth of evil Spaniards constructed by early English colonizers, which was discussed in the previous section. After the American conquest of the Southwest, this myth has been employed in a new fashion to create a fictional dichotomy between the adored “fantasy heritage” of the imaginary Spanish “golden age” of “Dons and Doñas” versus simultaneous hash criticism of inept Mexican rule, racial mix, and the “dirty Mexican.” The latter has recently turned into the “lazy, alien, and illegal Mexican,” most notoriously exemplified by drug lords and gang members. Both preeminent Southwest historians Carey McWilliams (who coined the term “fantasy heritage”) and David Weber regard this dichotomy as a tragic delusion, which has deprived Mexican Americans of their rich colonial heritage – Spanish and Mexican. In a commodified form, the fantasy heritage continues to blind people, tourists and locals alike, from the complexities of border history, culture, and life described above. These issues will be discussed in depth later in this study since the appropriation and commodification of history and heritage is one of the major areas of interest (with both positive and negative implications) for southwestern artists, too.

New Mexico

If it is true that the Franciscan padre forced the Eucharist down the Indian’s throat, maybe she forgot to close her mouth. Maybe she swallowed the Franciscan priest.


Perhaps more than any other southwestern state, New Mexico has been wrapped in the narratives of the fantasy heritage, which have bestowed upon it the dubious reputation of one of the largest art markets in the United States. After a long political struggle, New Mexico and Arizona were the last U.S. territories on the mainland (apart from Alaska) to gain statehood status in 1912. Why did it take over half a century for the federal government to acknowledge New Mexico? To find the answer, we have to look back to the mid-1800s. As in California, the American conquest in New Mexico happened without excessive violence. However, several contemporary Mexican American historians have contested the myth of a peaceful annexation of the Southwest. They argue that since history is always written from the victor’s point of view, little critical attention has been granted to revolts and guerilla resistance against Americans that occurred in New Mexico, California, and Texas even before the conquest. Although part of the Mexican population evidently cooperated with Anglo-Americans for economic reasons, in the long run their good will did not help them to retain their holdings. It soon became glaringly obvious that Mexicans of the Southwest would not enjoy full civil rights that were guaranteed to them in the Treaty of Guadalupe
Hidalgo. In New Mexico, however, the cards in the political power game were dealt more squarely than in California or Texas.

In this game, numbers played a decisive role. At the time of the annexation, California and Texas each had about 7,500 former Mexican citizens concentrated around the cities of Los Angeles in southern California, and San Antonio and the Río Bravo Valley in Texas. Meanwhile New Mexico had over 60,000 Spanish speaking Nuevomexicanos, who lived mostly in small towns scattered around northern parts of the territory and in the Río Grande corridor. In addition to nomadic Indians inhabiting in the area, over 7,000 Pueblo Indians lived their ancient villages, and a handful of acculturated Anglos in Spanish towns. Supported by large constituencies, local Spanish leaders succeeded well enough in the political power struggle and were thus able to maintain control over public offices and legislature in the region up until the 1940s when the Anglo population outnumbered the Hispanos. Due to this aberration from the preferred racial order, the American government during the late nineteenth century repeatedly rejected the efforts of Nuevomexicanos to receive recognition through statehood. New Mexico was obviously regarded as too Mexican, too Indian, too mixed-blood, too “foreign.” Till this day, however, the Hispano upper-class wields considerable power in the political scene of New Mexico (the only bilingual state in the Union, whose present governor Bill Richardson grew up in Mexico City), and that influence translates directly into a higher visibility and status of Mexican Americans and their culture in the state. Pueblo Indians, on the other hand, have proven to be the biggest economic asset of the state because of their vital role in the growing tourist, casino, and art industry.

Besides the initial majority status of Nuevomexicanos in the annexed region, several other factors contributed to their success in retaining political power. First, being mostly arid and poor in minerals, New Mexico never experienced such demographic and social shocks as the gold rush that started in California in the late 1840s or the agribusiness revolution in Texas in the early twentieth century, which rapidly flooded these regions with massive waves of Anglo fortune seekers and settlers. Instead, the population growth and modernization process in New Mexico were relatively slow. Secondly, both Mexican and Pueblo settlements prior to and after the annexation had a strong sense of permanence and belonging to the land. A long history of adaptation to harsh conditions and a survival by subsistence farming in their isolated region had taught them to encounter hardships as “one” community. Like the Pueblo Indians, who resisted the Spanish colonizers’ appropriation of their labor and encroachment to their lands, Nuevomexicanos, in the face of the Anglo invasion, also were able to retain the integrity of their traditional culture through their connection to the land.

The persistent battle over land rights culminated during the 1960s in the so-called Tierra Amarilla county land war in northwestern New Mexico. At the same time when the Farm Workers in California were on strike against grape growers, the land rights activist Reis López Tijerina founded an organization called La Alianza Federal de Mercedes, the Federal Alliance of Land Grants, aimed to restore to Hispano ownership the lands that were granted to them during the Spanish and Mexican rule over the region. Tijerina’s militant tactics won national publicity to the case and brought attention to the historical circumstances behind the
problem of poverty in New Mexico’s rural areas. In the end, however, he failed to regain any of the former lands of the Hispanos, was sentenced to jail, and eventually lost his political support. On the one hand, Tijerina’s political ideology and strategy alienated many conservative Hispanos of the privileged class; yet on the other hand, it heightened a sense of ethnic identity and empowerment among young and more radical sectors of Hispano population. (“Tijerina Tantrum” was the name of a hip dance of that time.) It also connected New Mexicans to the common struggle of the Chicano movement throughout the Southwest.

Some Americans (especially in tourist business) maintain that New Mexico is the best kept secret in the United States; others believe that it actually is a foreign country. To find out about the origin of these beliefs, we have to make a more rarely traveled detour to the colonial history of the Southwest, *El Norte*. This tour leads us to venture from the solid “base structure” of politics, economics, and warfare into the obscure and slippery “superstructure” of blood rituals, religious obsessions, and miscegenation. In this section, we are guided by three historians – Ramón Gutiérrez, David Weber, and Richard White – whose interpretations of racial relationships in the West converge, complement, and conflict with each other in a way that offers an interesting vantage point for a cultural-studies researcher. First, however, it is enlightening to make a short review of the seminal study in this area, namely Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Conquest of America* (1984). In this publication, Todorov provides the reader with a profound and compelling analysis of the first European-Indian contact while seeking answers to a host of perplexing questions. How did the Indians see the Spaniards, and why was their resistance so half-hearted? What did the Spanish make of the inhabitants of this utterly alien territory, and how did the contact reconstruct their perception of the world? Todorov’s “psycho-historical” interpretation of the conquest is driven by an ethical ambition to conceive the representatives of other cultures as different, yet equal, and worthy of respect. As such, *The Conquest of America* was one of the landmark studies on the dialectics of the Self and the Other, which today informs all research on race, ethnicities, and colonialism in various ways. (On the other hand, it should be remembered that Todorov based his argument on and thus perpetuated the Black Legend, the old myth about ruthless, cruel, and blood-thirsty Spaniards, which was described earlier in the text.)

Well aware of the false dichotomies constructed by earlier historiography published about the colonial borderlands, David Weber makes a conscientious effort to steer away from the Black Legend as well as from the White Legend (which portrayed the Spanish as hardy and noble pioneers), and thereby to give the reader an unbiased narrative of the Spanish frontier. The detached tone of Weber’s narration still underscores the arenas traditionally regarded as historically valid – institutions, public policies, and ideologies. Weber’s publications, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (1992) and *Foreigners in Their Native Land* (1973), nonetheless manage to convey a carefully balanced and thoughtful overview of the borderlands history, albeit that Weber’s evidently sincere desire to restore to Mexican Americans the missing half of their past does tend to modify his voice. With this in mind, it is interesting to find out that the historian who does not seem to have qualms about shedding harsh light on the social practices of the Spanish pioneers is a Mexican American himself. I
am referring to Ramón Gutiérrez and his study *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (1991). The first part of Gutiérrez’s study focuses on the way Spanish and Indian religion, cosmology, and epistemology interacted and partially merged during the seventeenth century, creating a hybrid cultural system. This focus on metaphysical factors working behind historical events associates Gutiérrez with Todorov; but unlike Todorov, Gutiérrez constructs the Indians as active agents in the bicultural adaptation process, not merely as helpless victims of the rapacious Spanish colonists. Backing his argument with statistical evidence throughout, Gutiérrez looks deep into the configurations of beliefs, rituals, and social practices in the colonial Kingdom of New Mexico in order to connect the reader with a means to comprehend human agency. This is something that Weber as well as Todorov fell short of, namely, interpreting meaning.

With the waning hopes of amassing gold in the famed Seven Cities of Cíbola, the sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors lost interest in New Mexico and any further colonization of the area was suspended. The Spanish Crown allowed the Franciscan friars to stay in their missions, nevertheless, in order to continue the conversion of the Pueblo Indians so as to “pacify” them and turn them into good Christian citizens of Spain. What followed was a century of what Gutiérrez terms a “conquest theater,” a highly dramatized enactment of the defeat, submission, and humiliation of the Indians in the face of the supreme power of the Christian god. Making use of their knowledge about Indian social organization, the friars gradually managed to break the traditional hierarchy of their communities and incorporate themselves into the Pueblo world as “Inside Chiefs,” whose responsibility was to maintain peace and harmony through the administration of the sacred. In the same schemata, the Spanish soldiers were cast in the role of “Outside Chiefs” or warriors, who defended the community against outside enemies by using violence and domination.

Thus paraphrased, Gutiérrez’s argument seems logical and convincing enough, but it is the graphic details presented that made many of his fellow historians recoil. The friars who planted themselves in Pueblo villages were inspired by the Franciscan clerical theories based on the model of mystical marriage with Christ that friars carried in their hearts. Although the friars fantasized about martyrdom and abhorred all worldly carnal pleasures, the sexualized imagery that dominated this mystical union with the body of Christ corresponded with the nexus between sexuality and the sacred fundamental in Indian ideology. In this ideology, women played a vital cultural role as providers of food and sexual intercourse intended to incorporate and domesticate all dangerous outside forces that might threaten the Pueblo life. Just as female rituals included feeding, so too male sexual rituals involved bloodletting to nourish earth, assure fertility, and worship their deities. Thus the emesis and flagellation ceremonies of the Indians recapitulated the symbolism of the purification and atonement rites publicly practiced by the Franciscans friars, who eventually also became incorporated in the sexual economy of the Pueblo world. Gutiérrez succinctly summarizes the intimate correspondences between these two parallel forms of power politics:
Let us push on to tease the political from these descriptions of union with God. Among the Pueblo Indians sexual intercourse was a metaphor for politics. Coitus was the symbol of cosmic harmony created through the union of opposites (male-female, sky-earth, rain-seeds). So with the Franciscans for whom the purified eros of mystical union was the epitome of hierarchy and order in which the higher power took care of the lower, the lower aspired to the perfection of the higher, each according the other the reciprocal care of an ideal family.100

Apparently the recurring tropes and motifs that we will find in Mexican American art today already existed in this symbolic order described by Gutiérrez. Strong kinship and familial bonds articulated through body symbolism, complementary dualism of the opposites, the union of spirituality, earth, and sexuality, and so on, will be in the center of the discussion about Chicana imagery in the following chapter.

The notion of the ideal family also plays the central role in Richard White’s study The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815 (1991), which analyses the development and gradual disintegration of a fairly egalitarian society of the French colonists and Algonquian refugees in the Great Lakes area. The new system of meaning and exchange that emerged was primarily dictated by the traditional gift giving system of the Natives, which placed the father (the French governor) at the apex of the social hierarchy. This mediation between Indian village politics and European imperial power politics in pays d’en haut was eventually disrupted by the French Indian War in 1754–1763, which confirmed the British hegemony in North America. After the American Revolution against the British in the 1770s onward, the influx of American settlers and trappers gave the final blow to the Indian peace diplomacy, and the relations between the Natives and Anglo-Americans rapidly degenerated into violence, corruption, and hatred.101

Both White and Gutiérrez discuss in depth the sophistication of the Indian diplomacy that happened in these two instances of cultural contact and conflict. Contesting popular stereotypes, they also pay attention to instability, change, and adaptation characteristic of Native American communities even before the contact with Europeans. What somewhat undermines White’s argumentation, though, is his insistence to apply the notion of the middle ground even in those historical circumstances when Indian diplomacy clearly failed. In my view, for example, it is questionable whether virulent hatred and murder can be seen as camouflaged attempts to build cultural bridges. Whereas Gutiérrez’s method of interpreting socio-political development from inside out, so to say – by using intercultural relations as they appear through the institution of marriage – underscores the significance of cultural change and adaptation. Regarding the Spanish and Indian cultures in New Mexico in particular, the most powerful force of change was racial mixing, which by the end of the eighteenth century permeated even the most sangre puro, pure blood families of Spanish descent. This leads us back to the historical narrative of New Mexico.

The Franciscan Indian utopia ended abruptly in the 1680s when the Pueblos, also suffering from Apache attacks, diseases, drought, and famine, revolted against their Spanish oppressors. They killed some four hundred colonists, blasphemed and murdered twenty-one
friars, took over Santa Fe (the Spanish capital of New Mexico founded in 1610), and sent the remaining settlers running for their lives toward El Paso del Norte, a bigger Spanish colony down the river. Unable to stay unified due to internal schisms and factionalism, the Pueblos capitulated for the second time to the Spanish invaders, who in 1692 arrived in even bigger numbers and resumed control over New Mexico with royal pomp. This time, however, not the defeated Franciscans but the secular rulers were in the lead, setting the stage for the development of a new social order characterized by even greater cultural mixing and a rigid racial hierarchy. The Pueblo Revolt marked the end of the old *encomienda* system, which had entrusted the Indians as vassals to colonists, who then collected tribute in the form of agricultural products and labor. Yet the exploitation of the Indians did not end but only took new forms, which drastically changed not only the Pueblo social structure but also that of the Spanish towns.

In spite of the weakened status of the Church, the Franciscans continued as before, using Indians for their own needs as field laborers, constructions workers, and personal servants. The Spanish settlers in turn resorted to so-called *repartimiento*, a rotational draft system, which allowed them to force Indians regularly enter into their towns and villages as day laborers. In regard to eighteenth-century New Mexican society, Weber’s historical construction radically departs from Gutiérrez’s rather bleak interpretation, whose deeper implications we will return to later. According to Weber’s view,

> New Mexico, where sixteenth-century customs and language were transmitted most directly from Spain, remained the most “Spanish” of the frontier provinces, but there too, modification of Spanish customs and institutions occurred, and considerable mixture with Indian blood took place. 

[…]

The *encomienda* and *repartimiento* systems, through which Spaniards exploited Indian labor in much of the New World, were used only briefly and unsuccessfully. […] Thus, Mexicans who came to the far north as conquerors remained as colonists, and necessity frequently forced them to work on their own land and raise their own livestock. […] Pueblos had lived in urban structure since before the arrival of Europeans. Hence, the missions there functioned apart from the [Pueblo] villages, which the Franciscans had the good sense to leave intact. […] Thus, although racial prejudice existed in the New Spain’s far northern frontier, discrimination – the frequent result of prejudice – was probably less noticeable than in central Mexico, and certainly less important than in the United States, during that same period.  

This very same frontier society in Gutiérrez’s text appears to us rather like the polar opposite of Weber’s description.

But increasingly after 1693, faced with the realization that there were limits to the exploitation the Pueblo Indians would tolerate, the colonists focused their hatred on a new enemy, the Apaches. “Just war” was waged against the Apaches because they
were infidels. As a result of this status, scores of men, women, and particularly children were brought into Spanish towns enslaved as prisoners of war. [...] In addition to the slaves Spaniards captured in warfare, throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries New Mexico’s slave population was augmented through the purchase of Indian slaves from the Apaches and Comanches.

By using demographic census data, Gutiérrez estimates that by the beginning of the 1800s, one third of New Mexico’s population was mestizo, racially mixed.106 How did that happen? Besides genízaros, who were slaves acquired from the nomadic Indian tribes in warfare or trade, Pueblos – women in particular – also were part of the daily life in Spanish villages and towns because of the repartimiento labor draft system. And they, too, became easy targets of sexual abuse by Spanish males. Often called as hijos de la iglesia, children of the church, the mixed-blood babies born out of these exploits were frequently abandoned by their mothers, given to the church, and then raised up in Spanish households as criados, foundlings. The abused women themselves had to migrate to Spanish villages since they were frequently expelled from the Pueblos, whose sexual norms had turned more restrictive after two hundred years of Christian influence. Although the repartimiento was outlawed by the end of the 1700s, the Spanish Crown’s ordinances were not very well observed in the isolated borderlands. The exploitation of the Indians and their mixed-blood offspring continued, and those racial oppositions that became the foundation of class divisions in Spanish towns were thus regenerated in the everyday life inside Spanish households. In the formation of New Mexico mestizo society, the issue of Indian women was fundamental because their bodies symbolically produced and literally reproduced the highly stratified social structure of race, gender, and class, as explained here by Gutiérrez.

[Because slave women bore illegitimate children, failed to establish stable unions, were frequently sexually assaulted, and reputedly licentious, to be a Spanish woman, regardless of one’s class, was to be concerned about one’s sexual purity and reputation, to guard one’s virginity, to marry, and to be continent in matrimony. [...] The maintenance of virtue among aristocratic females was possible only because Indian and genízaro women could be forced or persuaded to offer sexual service.107

Also outside of New Mexico, race, and its articulations through gender, functioned as a metalanguage of privilege and social status. For example in nineteenth-century Texas, as we will learn soon, this metalanguage was instrumental in the creation of the landless Mexican labor-class essential for the development of modern political economy of the state. In Texas, although the times had changed and the tables turned, the general scheme of the events had uncanny similarities to what had happened in New Mexico a century before, as described in the following quote.

As Anglos gloated about their own moral and cultural superiority, all the time denigrating the Hispanos and Indians they found in New Mexico, they asserted God-
given rights of conquest. And much as the Spanish conquistadores and Franciscan friars had lambasted the idolatrous ways of their Indian subjects, so too the nineteenth-century Protestant apostles of American democracy found in New Mexico a depraved people who wallowed in promiscuity, whose devilish fandangos corrupted, and whose addiction to vice had created an indolent and mongrel race. […] The arrival of the Anglos in New Mexico initiates an intense cycle of cultural conflict over the very same issues that had pitted the Spanish against the Pueblo Indians – religion, labor, land, and water.¹⁰⁸

In view of this discussion of the socio-political history of colonial New Mexico, Reies López Tijerina’s statements about an Indo-Hispano alliance in present-day New Mexico as a legitimization for his struggle to restore the old Hispano land grants begin to sound somewhat hollow.¹⁰⁹ If there was no love lost between Indians and Spaniards during the colonial period, today’s peaceful ethnic co-existence does not mean that the past wrongs are by and large reconciled and forgotten. Occasionally they still become reenacted like recently in Albuquerque, the biggest city of New Mexico, where the plan to erect a statue to honor Oñate – the Spanish conquistador who first colonized New Mexico – was fiercely opposed by the Acoma Pueblo people. They saw no reason to commemorate a man who ordered his soldiers to cut off the right feet of twenty four Acoma men after the Spaniards defeated the Pueblo in 1599.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the Pueblo Indians, Navajos, Apaches, and the descendants of detribalized genizaros who live in New Mexico today do not regard their land as part of Aztlán, an ancient Aztec homeland evoked by Chicano nationalists.

Texas

*If the Mexicans came in and demanded social equality the case would be entirely different. But the Mexicans have sense, and innate courtesy, and they don’t demand social equality like the Negro. There never will be any race question with the Mexicans.*

A distinguished professional man from Corpus Christi Texas (1930s)¹¹¹

Myths loom large over the lone star state. Released in 1915, the film entitled *Martys of the Alamo, or the Birth of Texas* was the first cinematic representation of the battle of the Alamo, one of the confrontations between Mexican troops and Texans in 1836 that lead to the separation and independence of the Republic of Texas from Mexico. The most recent rendition of the same battle was filmed near San Antonio. In its Saturday issue, January 11, 2003, the *Austin American-Statesman* reported that to the dismay of the director of the film, it had been hard to find extras lean and mean enough to act as Mexican soldiers, since most of the volunteers were overweight.¹¹² From a good number of other productions on the theme, John Wayne’s 1960 multi-million-budget *The Alamo* stands out as the most ambitious.¹¹³
enduring appeal of the Alamo story thus confirms its key role in the construction, maintenance, and regeneration of the “official” historical narrative of the state of Texas, which is retold daily to the visitors browsing the renovated mission of the Alamo, the biggest tourist attraction of San Antonio. Rephrased here by anthropologist Richard Flores, this is how the “official” story goes:

On February 22, “governed by the ruthless will of the dictator, Santa Anna’s cavalry arrived” in Béxar. On arrival, Santa Anna orders the men in the Alamo to surrender. Unwilling to do so, Travis answers with a cannon shot aimed at the Mexican forces. “One hundred fifty valiant volunteers against the dictator’s trained brigades. The siege had begun.”

The men at the Alamo begin the battle alone. The help they requested is not delivered, as the battle continues. Bowie, sick and bedridden, passes the full command of the Alamo forces to Travis. […]

As the Mexicans begin their attack, Travis gives the order, “The Mexicans are upon us. Give them hell!” The Texans fight bravely, pushing back two assaults on the Alamo. The third assault breaks the Texans’ forces and the Mexicans soon reach the inner fortress of the old mission. Travis falls holding his sword, Crockett dies fighting in the plaza, and Bowie, still bedridden, fights with his pistol and knife in his hand. All the defenders are killed.

The battle of the Alamo was not in vain, for Santa Anna’s army is tattered and needs weeks to recuperate from its victory. Less than six weeks later, Sam Houston’s army defeats Santa Anna’s forces at San Jacinto, screaming, “Remember the Alamo! The Alamo! The Alamo!”

Analyzing several films based on the battle, Flores claims that the Alamo – as the master symbol in cultural memory as well as historiography – had a central role in the construction of the twentieth-century social order in Texas through the cinematic production of racial inferiority of Mexicans. What I find particularly interesting in Flores’ interpretation of the 1915 silent motion picture Martyrs of the Alamo is his discussion of gendered and racialized discourses in the general scheme of the film. Before the actual battle, drunken Mexican soldiers are shown making sexual advances on fair Anglo women, the episode that instigates the white heroes to start rebelling against Santa Anna’s orders. Playing on the old fear of miscegenation, the film thus validates the need to control Mexican men’s “savage” sexuality and the construction of the patriarchal, heroic Anglo male. Simultaneously, as Mexican men’s assumed obsession with white women is employed as a way of legitimizing the necessity to protect, that is, to control white women’s sexuality, the bodies of lasciviously dancing Mexican women are used as a means to establish, by inversion, white women’s purity. Just as in colonial New Mexico described by Ramón Gutiérrez, women in twentieth-century Texas became the symbolic arbitrators of racial hierarchy that normalized unequal distribution of privilege, power, and social status. Since Martyrs, the reproduction of white male dominance through racialized and gendered
categories has assumed a less blatantly “black and white” appearance, which has not escaped the attention of a new generation of historians and ethnographers. Besides gender issues, they now also include blacks in the paradigm of Texas historiography, which until quite recently has predominantly viewed class as the crux of Mexican experience in the United States.

Although Texas is often described as part of the Southwest, complete with ranches, cattle, and cowboys, it is important to remember the role of the South in its history. The first American settlers in Texas were Southerners, who imported with them their black slaves, their racial attitudes, and their practices of social control. So the Republic of Texas joined the Union as a slave state in 1845. By that time, the influx of Anglo settlers, virulent racial coercion aggravated by the Texas Revolution, lynchings of Mexicans by the Texas Rangers, and dishonest legal practices had already significantly decimated the original Mexican population of the state.118 An excerpt from the biography of the aristocratic de León family serves well as an example of the bitter fate of the Mexican upper-class landowners as well as small rancheros after the Mexican-American War in 1848:

This family like other loyal Mexican families were driven from their homes, their treasures, their cattle and horses and their lands, by an army of reckless war-crazy people, who overran the town of Victoria. These new people distrusted and hated the Mexicans, simply because they were Mexican, regardless of the fact they were both on the same side of the fighting during the war.119

Then, just as Americans rushed to California to find gold, they rushed to Texas to buy cheap land and cheap labor, bringing with them the “creed of white racial supremacy,” as bluntly stated by Neil Foley in his insightful investigation of racial relationships in central Texas, titled The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture (1997). After the Civil War in 1861–1865, former plantation slaves became sharecroppers, and during the early 1900s, central Texas sharecroppers and wage laborers, black and white alike, were gradually displaced by native Tejanos or Mexican migrant workers, who the cotton-growers deemed cheaper and more manageable than poor whites or former slaves.120 According to Foley, this process in central Texas represents a special case for the study of class formation and white racial ideology because “it brings together two sets of race and class relations – blacks and whites in the South, and Mexicans and Anglos in the Southwest.”

Compared to older award-winning studies of Texas history, such as David Montejano’s Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986 from 1987,122 Foley’s argument is significantly enhanced by his inclusion of one chapter on gender identity and moral code in his class analysis of agricultural proletariat. Regardless of race, a poor farm worker’s wife had to endure a lifetime of grim toil with meager reward, concludes Foley, relying on a host of female historians who have written about women in farming societies. Furthermore, Foley points out the role of intermarriages with Mexican upper-class women as a means for white men, privileged by way of race, to gain access to such local resources as land, water, and social status. Montejano, on the other hand, situates the issue of
intermarriage in the axis of his argument about the “structure of peace” that emerged in South Texas after the 1846–1848 War was over. Says Montejano:

For individual families of the Mexican elite, intermarriage was a convenient way of containing the effects of Anglo military victory on their status, authority, and class position. For the ambiguous Anglo merchant and soldier with little capital, it was an easy way of acquiring land. The social basis for postwar governance, in other words, rested on the class character of the Mexican settlements.123

Centuries earlier in New Mexico, the Indian women who opened their loving arms to Spanish soldier/colonists had failed to incorporate them into Pueblo society, and so did those elite Mexican women in Texas who declared European descent and invited Anglo men into their families through marriage. At least they failed in one respect; along with the loss of land and status, Tejanos also lost their “Spanish whiteness,” regardless of their class. In the process of the “modernization” of the state, their lot was to become lower-class wage laborers, constructing roads and railroads, and working in mines and cotton fields.124 Nonetheless, some scholars have compellingly argued for the meaning of women’s roles as cultural brokers, the deeper implications of which run right up to the present.

In discussing intermarriage and sexual relationships that cross racial lines, many writers tend to look at the personal aspects of these liaisons while overlooking their economic, socio-political underpinnings. Recent studies have shown how, while marrying white men, Indian/Spanish women not only facilitated social mobility on either side of the race line, but they also sometimes acted as astute opportunists, imposing their will to improve their own lives and, in particular, to ensure the survival of their children. The negative connotations frequently attached to miscegenation and racial mix reflect the ingrained fear of the disruption of established social/racial hierarchies; whereas the flipside of the coin displays the very same process as a means of positive acculturation and gradual dilution of racial divisions. To illustrate two very different approaches to the issue of miscegenation as a progressive socio-political force, I will briefly visit Sylvia Van Kirk’s historical study regarding the formation of Canadian fur-trade society and then compare it to José Limón’s analysis of some Hollywood films which reflect the development of interracial erotic relations in the Southwest. Besides expounding on the concept of marriage as a potent socio-political force, the reason for this discussion also is to show how utopian undercurrents continue to inform the discourse of the past, sometimes blurring the demarcation lines of the present.

Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-trade Society, 1670-1870 (1983) by Van Kirk offers an alternative interpretation of the social history of Western Canada over the span of two hundred years of fur-trade industry. The study examines the changes in the lives and roles of the three groups of women involved in fur-trade society: pure-blood Indians, their mixed-blood offspring, and white European women, whose appearance marked the beginning of the decline of this society. What was unusual, according to Van Kirk, about the early familial relationships between Indian women and white men in Western Canada was that they
were true and socially accepted liaisons as opposed to the sexual exploitation of indigenous women rampant in other colonial countries around the world. Van Kirk’s study grows into a compelling homage for these hardy women and the ups and downs of their lives. Her tone is admiring and marked by nostalgia conveyed in the title of the last chapter, “A World We Have Lost.” Yet maybe this world wasn’t so completely lost, after all, since today’s Canadian society, compared to its neighboring country, displays a fairly relaxed attitude in regard to racial mix and multi-lingual education.

Unlike Van Kirk, who analyses gender and race through socio-economic change and its effects on the institution of marriage, José Limón reviews inter-racial liaisons from the perspective of ethnography and popular culture, mainly through the lens of the camera. What emerges from Limón’s intense concern with the eroticized past and sexual stereotypes turns out to be yet another utopian conceptualization of a “marriage made in heaven,” this time inflected with Freudian terms. The films reviewed by Limón (High Noon, 1956; Giant, 1956; and Lone Star, 1996, all produced in the U.S.) each represent some variations of the old theme: the sexual attraction between the white man and the Mexican woman. In spite of perceptively exploring new ways of seeing and interpreting these films as harbingers of more egalitarian and tolerant society (particularly by pointing out the independent roles of women) Limón nevertheless fails to break clear from the trappings of racial stereotypes. In Limón’s discussion, the Mexican woman today may be a successful professional and an intellectual match for her man, but she still has to spit fire all the same, tempt men, and walk on the tight rope in between vice and virtue. In the meantime the prim and proper white woman goes on to work hard to emasculate her husband while affirming his high social status. Hierarchies based on class and gender seem to reign supreme in the imagery of these films, too, which frequently highlight the white man’s privilege and social standing, his ability to “whiten” his family members, and negotiate over racial divides. It remains to be seen what utopian configurations Limón might tease out of cinematic erotic encounters of the white woman and the Mexican man, which traditionally tended to end up disastrously as we remember from the silent film Martyrs of the Alamo.

The Alamo and the Confederacy are remembered today in the state capital Austin, too, where the statues of the heroes of both decorate the Capitol Hill and the University of Texas campus. Besides, several schools in Austin carry the names of these heroes, although most of the students in the Austin public school district are, ironically enough, of Mexican descend. Rigid racial segregation in education and housing remain as conspicuous signs of the persistent legacy of violence and discrimination (largely unredeemed by erotic interracial encounters evoked by Limón). In a darker vein, for example historian Neil Foley claims that

\[\text{while longhorns, Stetson hats, and the romance of ranching have replaced cotton, mules, and overalls in the historical imagination of Anglo Texans today, the fact remains that most Anglo Texans were descended from transplanted Southerners who had fought hard to maintain “the color line” and extend its barriers to Mexicans.}\]
During the 1950s, when McCarthyism flourished in Texas, the preservation of Jim Crow practices against federal legislation appeared in patriotic and religious guises. Nevertheless – for repression is always stalked by resistance – the history of racial oppression in Texas is also the history of Mexican social struggle a long time prior to the civil rights movement. For example, complementing the work of Montejano and Foley, Emilio Zamora’s studies on Mexican labor organizations have proven that Mexican workers, including women, never were as passive and compliant as commonly believed, quite on the contrary. All over in Texas, the Chicano movement was historically preceded by resistance: social banditry recorded in corridos (border ballads), guerilla warfare and armed revolts, national congresses and “mutualista” social organizations, and numerous other attempts by Texas Mexicans to address their needs and aspirations. The increased civil rights activism of the 1960s culminated in El Paso where José Angel Gutiérrez founded La Rasa Unida party, which for a while succeeded to take control over some smaller voting districts in Southwest Texas. Before its disintegration, La Rasa Unida managed to capture the national headlines, making politicians realize the potential power of the Mexican American electorate. President George W. Bush, who likes to mention publicly his Mexican sister-in-law, Columba Bush, may serve as a prime example of this realization.

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3 Ibid., 318-320.

4 José Limón, Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican American South Texas (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

5 Ibid., 14-15.


7 Limón, 1994, 103-105. Yet in his latest publication, American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), José Limón has moderated his views to resemble quite closely those of Montejano. While discussing the politics of sexuality in Mexican American popular culture, he argues rather wishfully that “[f]or economically richer or poorer, in social sickness and in health, and for better or for worse politically, we – Anglos and Mexicans in Texas but also in much of the rest in the United States as well – are in a marriage, one of desire and convenience. Like any marriage, it is not without its ambivalences, suspicions, and occasional fights, […]” (page 161). Limón’s assertions about the developing, yet precarious, rapprochement between Anglos and Mexicans in Texas can perhaps be seen as symptomatic of the common pro-assimilation sentiment among educated middle-class Mexicans Americans. David Montejano, in contrast, has recently expressed a rather pessimistic scenario in his essay “On the Future of Anglo-Mexican Relations,” in Chicano Politics and Society in the Late Twentieth Century, ed. by David Montejano (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999) 234-258, in stating that the present politics of inclusion may easily revert into sentiments of racism and exclusion if economic difficulties in the country further aggravate social tensions.

8 Rodolfo Acuña, Occupied America: The Chicano Struggle toward Liberation (New York: Harper & Row, 1981). According to Acuña’s theory, the history of Mexican Americans should be interpreted through the concept of “internal colonization” within the United States. Many Chicano scholars and artists have employed this concept, but it has also been criticized as outdated and inept in describing the complexities of American society today. See, for example, Tomás Almaguer’s essay “Ideological Distortions in Recent Chicano


11 Fredric Jameson’s theories about postmodernism, the political, the social, and the production of subversive narratives form sweeping visions about the relation between economies and culture today, too sweeping for me to find theoretical grounding for this study. The major work where he develops the notion of the political unconscious is The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).


15 Ibid., 339.

16 Ibid., 343.

17 John L. O'Sullivan, “The Great Nation of Futurity,” in The United States Democratic Review, Volume 6, Issue 23, 1839, 426-430. In fact, the origins of manifest destiny can be traced even farther to the past, to John Winthrop’s vision of “City upon a Hill” from the 17th century.


29 Octavio Romano in Chicle, an extinct mail list on Chicano culture and literature, on December 8, 1996.


The terms reification and to reify will appear often in this study. It is used to indicate a process by which human properties, relations, and actions are objectified and abstracted to serve ideological ends. In the Marxist political thought elaborated by Georg Lukács (1923), reification means trying to turn human beings into
marketable commodities. This study does not refer to the philosophical reification of abstract concepts into concrete things, which is commonly called hypostatization. See Gajo Petrović, http://www.autodidactproject.org/other/reification1.html, visited on March 28, 2006.

34 Davalos, 2001, 142-143.
35 José Vasconcelos (1882-1959), one of the most influential public figures in post-revolutionary Mexico, was a writer, a philosopher, a social reformer, and a minister of education, whose best known publication La raza cósmica: misión de la raza iberoamérica was published in 1925. See http://www.bartleby.com/65/va/Vasconce.html.

37 Octavio Paz’s famous collection El laberinto de la soledad (1950) – The Labyrinth of Solitude (New York : Grove Geidenfeld, 1985) – included an essay “The Sons of La Malinche,” the main argument of which constructs the Mexican male as psychologically handicapped by a national inferiority complex and therefore childish, aggressive, and backward. Similarly, the Indian woman was cast into the stereotype of a raped mother and the traitor of her people. For further discussion, see Limón (1998) 80-92.
39 David Weber, for example, discusses the merits and demerits of Aztlan quite sympathetically in several of his studies, such as The Spanish Frontier in North America (1992) and Foreigners in Their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973). In her essay about teaching Chicana/o history, Yolanda Chávez Leyva describes how “Chicana/o students, whose roots go back in this continent for thousands of years, talk about themselves as ‘newcomers,’ while Euro-American students boast of having ancestors who came over on the Mayflower.” Quoted from “The Revisioning of History es una gran limpia: Teaching and Historical Trauma in Chicana/o History, part ii,” in La Voz de Esperanza, October 2002, 4-6.
42 A discussion with Victor Guerrero (in the fall of 2002), the former publications editor in the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, in reference to the administrative policies of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas. In early 2003, ironically enough, Guerrero himself lost his editor’s position due to a controversial reorganization of the CMAS priorities.
43 Davalos, 2001, 93.
44 Ibid., 80.
46 Ibid., 21.
47 Ibid., 66-78.
48 Ibid., 77.
51 Ibid., 74-75.
52 Ibid., 75.


Ibid., 3-5.

The notion “Greater Mexico” was probably first introduced by the Texas folklorist Américo Paredes to refer to all Mexicans. More lately, José Limón has adapted the term to encompass all Mexicans, either side of the U.S.-Mexico border, which on the one hand alludes quite appropriately to the world system analytic model, but on the other hand, it also reinforces the polarization of the two nation-states. See Juan Alonzo, “Américo Paredes’s The Shadow: Social and Subjective Transformation in Greater Mexico,” in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 27:1 (Spring 2002) 27-57. The term “Other Mexico” was used in the title of the art exhibit “Art of the Other Mexico” organized by the Mexican Fine Arts Museum in Chicago. Anthropologist Karen Mary Davalos interpreted the title as an authentication of the Mexican American experience whereas writer/cultural critic Alicia Gaspar de Alba criticized the Museum policy for the usage that suggests that Chicana/os in the U.S. are alien “others.” Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001) 125; Gaspar de Alba, “From CARA to CACA: The Multiple Anatomies of Chicano/a Art at the Turn of the New Century,” in *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 26:1 (Spring 2001) 218.

Although Dolores Huerta’s leadership and the crucial role of women’s cooperation in organizing the boycott remained unstudied for decades, the NFWA did (its traditional outlook on gender relations notwithstanding) inadvertently advance a greater political participation and awareness of gender issues among Mexicanas and Chicanas. Similarly, women’s contribution to El Teatro Campesino’s success was generally overshadowed by its charismatic leader, Luis Valdez, and has been researched only recently. See Margaret Rose, “The Significant Role of Chicanas in the United Farm Workers’ Boycott,” in *Major Problems in Mexican American History: Documents and Essays*, ed. by Zaragosa Vargas (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999) 404-409. For more information about El Teatro, see Yolanda Boyress-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas press, 1994).

Since its beginning in the late 1960s, the Chicano movement involved entire communities to defend their homes, barrios, and legal rights. This happened with the help of community organizations and artists, who mobilized people to protest, create community based art, and use their resources. The best example of this would be Chicano Park or Barrio Logan in San Diego, California, whose residents stopped the city from bulldozing their homes under a freeway construction project. There are plenty of other examples of working-class Mexican American participation in the civil rights struggle spearheaded by Chicano leadership. Some Mexican Americans associate the term entirely with its lower-class origins. More information about Barrio Logan, see Raúl Romero Villa’s study *Barrio Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture* (2000) 172-184.


69 Ibid., 140. Tejanos, of course, had not been Mexican citizens since 1836 when Texas became an independent republic – U.S. citizens they became in 1845; yet, the Mexican American War considerably accelerated the deterioration of their status in Texas.

70 Ibid., 148-160.


72 Ibid., 107-150.

73 Ibid., 29-32.


75 The G.I. Bill of Rights or the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of June 22, 1944 put higher education within the reach of millions of veterans of World War II and later military conflicts. This has been particularly beneficial for soldiers from racial minorities who otherwise could not have afforded college education. Retrieved on February 14, 2003, from http://www.higher-ed.org/resources/GI_bill.htm.

76 Emilio Zamora (lecture at the University of Texas at Austin in January, 2003) points out that World War II was a turning point in Mexican American history not only because of the educational opportunities opened by the G.I. Bill, but also because the war effort contributed to the integration of Mexican immigrants into American society. Also Limón (1998, 114) mentions the greater public presence of Mexican Americans since World War II, though he refers mainly to those from the elite class. In regard to Mexican Americans, David Weber’s (1973, 225) take on the generational model is somewhat different; he claims that Mexican immigrants who settled in the Southwest entered into a society where their roles as foreigners were already predetermined, and thus they could not choose to reject the past generation in favor of mainstream assimilation as immigrants from European backgrounds generally did. See also Albert Camarillo, “The G.I. Generation,” in Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies, 2:2 (Fall 1971) 145-150.


80 Ironically enough, service in the Army seems to be the best way to emancipation for lower-class people of color, as testified by the film director John Sayles. “There were also many black officers interviewed, including Colin Powell and people like that, who were asked, ‘What do you think of this war?’ and they’d say, ‘Well, it’s my job to go.’ They’d be asked, ‘Why are you in the army?’ and they would say, ‘It’s the best job I could get.’ I was fascinated by the idea that the United States Army, which used to be a bastion of segregation and racism, has gotten to the point where, although it’s not the most liberal place in the world, it has become more liberal than the private sector.” Interview with John Sayles by Dennis West and Joan West in Cineaste v22, n3 (Summer, 1996) 14-18.

81 Carey McWilliams, North from Mexico: The Spanish Speaking People of the United States (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1948) 44.


83 See, e.g., Erlinda Gonzalez-Berry, David Maciel, and Carlos Herrera’s essays in The Contested Homeland: A Chicano History of New Mexico, ed. by Erlinda Gonzalez-Berry and David Maciel (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).

84 In spite of their efforts to adopt Anglo-American lifestyle, the Cherokees, too, had to give up their lands and move to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma after losing a lawsuit against the state of Georgia in 1830. The Cherokees then became one of the “five civilized tribes,” whom the U.S. government considered more “developed” than the nomadic Plains Indians due to the “progress” they showed in Oklahoma. See Henriksson (1986).
When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) 173. It is not clear whether these writers have also included in their data Arizona, which separated from New Mexico in 1863.


The commodification of Indian cultures for the enhancement of touristic business has a notorious reputation in New Mexico. What is interesting in the present situation, though, is that the Pueblos themselves have taken the lead and established casinos, resorts, and hotels for tourists, creating revenue, jobs, and social infrastructure for themselves and boosting the state’s poor economy. A lot of the bad hype around Indian business, I believe, emanates from jealousy and stereotypical notions about the inability of Indians to handle money. For example, the joint resort enterprise of the Santa Ana Pueblo and the Hyatt Hotel chain proves the opposite. See http://www.santaana.org/.

In the introduction to The Contested Homeland (2000), for example, editors Erlinda Gonzalez-Berry and David Maciel completely fail to see New Mexicans as descendants of conquistadors, too; instead, they emphasize the Anglo-American conquest and the resistance of the New-Mexican sediosos as the colonized people par excellence.


Tijerina Tantrum also is the name of Delilah Montoya’s serigraphic print, which captures the upbeat swing and optimism of the early civil rights’ era.

Often overshadowed by the turmoil around competing political factions, many individuals and organizations got involved in the civil struggle and worked hard to organize their communities for social justice, labor rights, better education, and effective political participation. Among these efforts in New Mexico, the organizing work conducted by María Varela and Elizabeth Martinez in particular should be mentioned. See David Maciel and Juan José Peña (2000) 269-302, 284.


Gutiérrez, When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away (1991).


In the Epilogue (“The Stories We Tell about Subaltern Groups”) of his publication The Penitente Brotherhood: Patriarchy and Hispano-Catholicism in New Mexico (2002), Michael P. Carroll ponders over the controversy caused by Gutiérrez’s study which was not well received by Pueblos themselves. In his interpretation, the negative reaction sprang from the writer’s feminization of Pueblo culture as “an exotic Other.” I suspect that Carroll’s (as well as perhaps Pueblos’) reactions might have something to do with the general conceptualization of “feminine” as automatically inferior and “sexual” as something tainted by definition. See also Ted Jojola and Simon Ortiz in The American Indian Culture and Research Journal, Vol. 17, No. 3, 1993.


Ibid., 71.


Ibid., 17-18.


Ibid., 166-175.

Ibid., 190-215.

Ibid., 338-340.


112 For more information, visit the Alamo fan website: www.thealamofilm.com.

113 Richard Flores, *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2002). According to Flores, rather than dealing with the tension between Mexicans and Americans, John Wayne’s film functioned as a vehicle for his political “vision of Cold War nationalism told through the idiom of the Alamo,” 118. It remains to be seen whether the current “war on terrorism” will be remembered in the Alamo version presently filmed in Texas.


115 During the early 1900s and almost one hundred years after the battle, industrial cotton farming (expanding to eastern and central Texas from the South) brought with it a new social order, which was characterized by severe race segregation and labor exploitation. Also, the tension and economic competition between Anglo and Mexican Texans escalated after World War I, with rising numbers of Mexicans entering Texas as immigrants and migrant workers. As a consequence, Mexicans became stigmatized as an “inferior” people, who were, along with black workers, regulated by Jim Crow policies. See Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997). For more information, visit website http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jmcrow/: “Jim Crow was not a person, yet affected the lives of millions of people. Named after a popular 19th-century minstrel song that stereotyped African Americans, “Jim Crow” came to personify the system of government-sanctioned racial oppression and segregation in the United States.” Retrieved on February 14, 2003.

116 Martyrs takes its cue and cinematic inspiration from one of the most celebrated films of the time, D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of the Nation* (USA, 1915), which notoriously posited blacks as responsible and deserving of their own plight in the South. Flores, 2002, 98.

117 Ibid., 103-105.

118 The Texas Rangers were a volunteer frontier “police troop” founded officially in 1835 to fight Indians. Admired as heroes by white Texans, they became regarded as southern Texas Ku Klux Klan by many Mexicans of the region. See Weber (1973) 187.


121 Ibid., 4.


123 Ibid., 34-35.

124 According to Montejano (ibid., 104), the modernization of Texas meant its inclusion in global trade through agricultural and commercial boom, improved transportation routes, new laws, and practices, which reflected the interests of “North Atlantic capitalism.”


127 Foley, 1997, 2.


3. IMAGES AND MEANINGS

Reading the Imagery of Chicanidad

Are you Malinche a malinche? Who are you (who am I mal inche)? seller or buyer? sold or bought and at what price? What is it to be what so many should say sold-out malinchi who is who are we what? at what price without having been there naming putting label tags what who have bought sold malinchismo what other -ismos invented shouted with hate reacting striking like vipers like snakes THEIR EYES like snakes what who what

Margarita Cota-Cárdenas

Three Female Archetypes

If Christopher Columbus can be regarded as the paragon of the objectifying male gaze, then the perennial historical object of its desire would be La Malinche, the Indian woman who became the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés’ translator, adviser, and mistress, and who bore him a son, Martín Cortés, one of the first mestizos. La Malinche – Malintzin Tenepal by her Indian name – was born into Aztec nobility around the year 1505. After the death of her father, her mother remarried, and Malintzin, disinherited, was sold into slavery. Her role in the conquest of Mexico started when the Mayas gave her, among twenty other slave girls, to Cortés as a gift. By that time, at the age of fourteen, she spoke at least the Aztec language, Nahuatl, and Maya, and soon was able to translate between the Spaniards and the various Indian peoples they encountered. Doña Marina by her Christian name, La Malinche thus became instrumental for the conquistadors in their negotiations between massacre, brutal force, and diplomacy. After the fall of the Aztec empire and on the eve of the arrival of his Spanish wife, Cortés married Doña Marina to one of his lieutenants, Don Juan de Jaramillo, endowing her with a handsome gift of lands and property. Her son by Cortés was sent to Spain and Doña Marina died young in obscure circumstances. However, thanks to Cortés’ soldier and chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who knew her well, her story ended up in historical records instead of falling into oblivion like the stories of many other women caught up in the historical upheavals of their time.2

During the period of the Mexican Revolution, the historical figure of Malinche became reframed according to contemporary political interests; the epithet “malinchista” was used to refer to someone who presumably betrayed her/his people. This misogynistic interpretation of a historical narrative then traveled from Mexico over to the United States and prospered within the Chicano movement up until the early 1970s when Chicana feminists
started to reinterpret, “decolonize,” and rehabilitate Malinche as the revered mother of the mestizo race, re-envisioning her as an empowered subject of consciousness, whose decisions were individually and politically motivated. Such Chicana intellectuals as Norma Alarcón and Emma Pérez, for example, have shifted the Malinche paradigm by looking at her story from a psychoanalytical point of view, focusing on the suppression and exploitation of female sexuality. Alarcón sees Malinche as a cause of self-hatred among Mexican/Chicana women and, respectively, self-love as a tool for survival, which, however, can lead to rejection from the community. Reflecting the suspicion and fear of the mysterious, so-called “enigmatic female,” the male myth of Malinche consists of the various aspects of sexuality latent in her figure: woman as passive and readily sexually exploitable; woman as pawnable and instrumental in male communication and the networking of power. Calling for a demythification of Malinche, Alarcón doubts whether she could have been a truly conscious individual in the environment where slavery was a cultural norm and women, in general, were treated as slaves in any case. She quotes Simone Weil’s analysis of the master-slave relationship:

[T]he thought of being in absolute subjection as somebody’s plaything is a thought no human being can sustain: so if a man (I add woman) is left with no means at all of escaping constraint he (she) has no alternative except to persuade himself (herself) that he (she) is doing voluntarily the very things he (she) is forced to do; in other words, he (she) substitutes devotion for obedience […] [D]evotion of this kind rests upon self-deception, because the reasons for it will not bear inspection.

Malinche thus functions as the trope of the power struggle between women and men, marking the category of “women” always as ambivalent, inferior, and “other.” A more virulent aspect of Malinche was formulated by influential Mexican poet Octavio Paz in his publication entitled *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), which accused her of the downfall of the Aztec empire and the ensuing national trauma of all Mexican people ever since. “The Curse of La Malinche,” a popular Mexican ballad of the mid-1970s captures this sentiment:

The curse of offering foreigners
Our faith, our culture,
Our bread, our money,
Remains with us
[…]  
Oh, curse of Malinche!
Sickness of the present
When will you leave my country?
When will you free my people?
Employing a Freudian reading, Emma Pérez in turn blames Paz for a metaphorical unification of all Chicanas within *La Chingada*, the “fucked mother,” immortalizing them for all time as “the betrayer” of *La Raza*, the Chicano people. Pérez sees Paz’s vehemence against Malinche in the context of the psychological disruption of family dynamics, mainly due to an inferiority complex coupled with the incestuous desire of the father. In this oedipal triangle drama, the mestizo son repudiates the castrating European-male-colonizer father, yet he cannot break away from the dependency on white patriarchal power. It is women, however, who bear the brunt of his resentment. On the other hand, the nature of a relationship between an older European man and a young Indian woman is veiled by taboo; Malinche, like the famed Indian princess Pocahontas (also only a teenager when – possibly – meeting Captain Smith), “fell in love” with and helped the white man, the act that later became regarded as a mortal sin in the case of Malinche. Pocahontas, nevertheless, managed to retain her good reputation and continues to be extremely popular as the oft commodified “noble Indian Princess,” the archetypal grandmother of all Americans, whose image is immortalized on the attractive package design of Land-o-Lakes butter.

Although I doubt the rationale of naming Malinche as the first feminist of the Americas, unquestionably her story, whether circulated as an image, subtext, or symbol, continues to be of fundamental importance to the evolution of Chicana theory, politics, literature, and visual art. Literary historian Tey Diana Rebolledo, for example, endorses this and chooses a very pragmatic perspective by highlighting Malinche’s role as an arbiter between cultures, interpreter of languages, and a political/cultural mediator. Her designation “Translator of Foreign Mail/Male” reconstructs Malinche in the interstices of the modern patriarchal, bureaucratic public world and the female-centered private space of the family, the position that Lorna Dee Cervantes very acutely describes in her poem:

I became Scribe: Translator of Foreign Mail: 
Interpreting letters from the government, notices 
of dissolved marriages and Welfare stipulations.

In Rebolledo’s words, “Because she possessed the power of language and political knowledge, for them [Chicanas] La Malinche is a woman who deliberately chose to be a survivor – a woman with a clairvoyant sense who cast her lot with the Spaniards in order to ensure survival of the race.” By thus emphasizing the double role of Malinche as a complex textual strategy as well as a pragmatic opportunist in a historical sense, Rebolledo rejects the dichotomy between essentialized identity politics and the discourse about authenticity that underlies some of the recent debates around the indigenous descent of modern Chicanas/os. This “intraethnic” argument surfaces for example in Sheila Marie Contreras’ criticism of “self-indigenization,” that is, the use of *indigenismo* as a discursive strategy for social change. Although much of Contreras’ criticism is well-argued and motivated oftentimes, her reading of “dehistorisized Chicana/o identity” seems to erase large parts of Chicana theory and practice that, indeed, are deeply rooted in historical perception. Rebolledo’s argument, in contrast, weaves comfortably through the concepts of “fiction” and “fact” simultaneously,
juxtaposing Malinche, as a myth, with another mythical female image named La Llorona, the weeping woman who incorporates the syncretism of European and Native American forms.

La Llorona, the evil doppelgänger of the mother Malinche, has lost her children through abandonment or murder or both and cannot rest thereafter. Connected to the Medea legend as well as to Spanish medieval notions of ánimas en pena, spirits in purgatory, La Llorona is also associated with the pre-Columbian Aztec belief that women who died in childbirth achieved afterlife next to the dead warriors. Their anguished wailing during the night, particularly at crossroads or near bodies of water, scares children and tempts men. Thus in popular stories, La Llorona transforms from a desperate young mother into la bruja, a deadly witch, and eventually (by an enigmatic twist of meaning) into la puta, a whore. Today in Mexico, the word “mother” itself carries a multitude of sexually derisive connotations (as it does in English, too), such as puta madre, pinche madre, chingada madre, hijo de la chingada, which seem to suggest male ambiguity and anxiety about the coexistence of motherhood, sexuality, and bodily abjection. The prolific body of art, literature, and criticism about women (of any race or ethnicity) afflicted by domination and madness lends transnational clout to Norma Alarcón’s assertion about Chicana symbols:

The strategic invocation and recodification of “the” native woman in the present has the effect of conjoining the historical repression of “noncivilized” dark women – which continues to operate through “regulative psychobiographies” of good and evil women such as Guadalupe, Malinche, Llorona, and many others – with the present moment of speech that counters such repressions (Spivak 1989, 227).

José Limón, on the other hand, interprets La Llorona from an ethnographic point of view, informed by a class-based socio-political analysis. He argues that La Llorona, independent from other female symbols, embodies and articulates the “utopian longing of the Greater Mexican folk masses,” which he sees as an expression of the doctrine of the “political unconscious” launched by Fredric Jameson. Moreover, Limón contends that, in contrast to other, “officially administered” legends of women, La Llorona remains largely in the control of women themselves and consequently is better able to articulate their own symbolic perceptions of the world. Unlike Limón, Rebolloved bases her interpretation on the concept of a historical palimpsest (i.e., the dispersion and recycling of cultural meanings over time and space), drawing attention to La Llorona’s two aspects – life-giving and life-destroying – which suggest the dual nature of ancient Nahuatl deities, such as the Aztec mother goddesses Tonantzín and Coatlique. The evil mother therefore is not only the precondition and negative aspect of the good mother, Virgin Mary, but also the terrifying representation of “ambiguity, guilt, and loss, and inspires fear of the unknown […] a dark part we need to come to terms with.” This aspect of La Llorona is compellingly captured in Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem:

Talonéd hand on my shoulder
behind me putting words, worlds in my head
turning, her hot breath
she picks the meat stuck between my teeth
with her snake tongue
sucks the smoked lint from my lungs
with her long black nails
plucks lice from my hair.\textsuperscript{18}

Not that Chicanas could have left La Llorona cry alone at night without (tragi-) comical relief, though. Black humor redeems her misery for example in Delilah Montoya’s photographic installation entitled \textit{For a Good Time. Call 1-800-La-Llorona} (1997).\textsuperscript{19} And electrified as a fatal lesbian romance in Monica Palacios’s story “La Llorona Loca: The Other Side,” she does not long for her lost children at all, but roams in search of “La Stranger” – her female lover and other self.\textsuperscript{20}

Chicana lesbians have also effectively reframed the third major female archetype of their culture. In the Southwest, she is called the Virgin of Guadalupe, or more familiarly just Guadalupe, Lupita, or Virgencita, the little Virgin. During the conquest, her symbol was imported to New Spain from Extremadura, the province in southern Spain from where many of the conquistadors originated. The name “Guadalupe” is a corruption of Arabic, meaning “the river of love and light.” In \textit{Nican Mopohua} – a post-conquest Nahuatl account of the first visitations of the Virgin Mary – Guadalupe is given a variety of names that originate from the Aztec religion: Tequatlasupe, Coatlaxopeuh, Tlalticpaque.\textsuperscript{21} Today most Mexicans or people of Mexican decent venerate her as “Our Mother,” the beloved Catholic idol, yet do not necessarily know about the Indian earth goddess Tonantzín, whose ruined shrine served as a foundation for the first temple of the Virgin Mary in New Spain.

Spanning over five hundred years of American history, the symbol of the Virgin highlights a number of events during which she has played a particularly important role: the conquest itself, the War of Independence in the 1810s–1820s, the Mexican Revolution in the 1910s, and the U.S. farm workers’ strike in the 1960s. Her traditional role as a cultural intermediary in these and other events has been called into question by art historian Jeanette Favrot Peterson, for example, who argues that the story of the dark-skinned Virgin’s appearance as well as the aforementioned Nahuatl document, \textit{Nican Mopohua}, were in effect manufactured and promoted entirely by the Catholic clergy in order to divert the Indians from their pagan ways. There is no historical evidence that the dark-skinned Virgin, from the sixteenth century on, served as a symbol of freedom for the oppressed native populations, claims Favrot Peterson. Further, she deems unwarranted the belief that the image of Guadalupe spontaneously welded all the strata of Mexican society under the nationalistic endeavor. Thus, both the image and the legend basically served two purposes: to affirm the power of the Christian god over the Indian gods and to mediate between the native populations and their new Spanish rulers. The seventeenth century, according to Favrot Peterson, marks the development of class distinctions, largely based on skin color, which also emerge in the first existing visual and written documents on the Mexican Guadalupe. To separate the country from Spain, the creoles, that is, Spaniards born in Mexico, became the
most important promoters of the cult of the “American Virgin.” Even though during the War of Independence (when the creoles sided with the lower classes against the Spanish *peninsulares*) the “Indian Virgin” was once again used as a unifying symbol, the native Indian population did not hold any share in the nationalistic creole ideology of *patria*. Independence from Spain brought little change to their predicament, and the creole upper class associated itself with the mythologized Indian of the Aztec empire, as represented in an eighteenth-century oil painting that shows a feathered “noble savage” venerating the Virgin. Only during the revolution of the 1910s and the ensuing social and agrarian reforms, the image of Guadalupe became a symbol of freedom for all classes, argues Favrot Peterson.22

Guadalupe’s revolutionary meaning was later reintroduced in the United States by the labor organizer César Chávez, who chose her for the main symbol of the farm workers’ strike in the 1960s. Thus, like many other female figures, Guadalupe has proved amazingly productive and malleable in the assistance of religious, nationalistic, and revolutionary enterprises. Plugging himself into the philosophy of deconstruction, Chicanoized Mexican performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña describes his renewed relationship to the Virgin after he had moved from Mexico City to California in the 1970s:

Suddenly the political and religious images that I used to question as icons of authority and as artificial generators of *mexicanidad* began to transform themselves into symbols of contestation against the dominant Anglo culture. […] I have learned to understand that symbols, no matter how charged they might be, can be emptied out and refilled; that religion in postmodernity is intertwined with pop and mass culture.23

Whether read as a symbol of patriarchal indoctrination or a postmodern strategy of resistance, the story of a brown virgin’s first appearance in the Americas continues to be retold, here in a poetic form:

El nueve de diciembre del año 1531 / a las quarto de la madrugada / un pobre indio que se llamaba Juan Diego / iba cruzando el cerro de Tepeyác / cuando oyó un canto de pájaro. / Alzó al cabeza vio que en la cima del cerro / estaba cubierta con una brillante nube blanca. / Parada en frente del sol / sobre una luna creciente / sostenida por un ángel / estaba una azteca / vestida en ropa de India. / Nuestra Señora María de Coatlalopeuh / se le apareció. / “Juan Diegito, El-que-habla-como-un-águila,” / la Virgen le digo en el lenguaje azteca. / “Para hacer mi altar este cerro eligo. / Dile a tu gente que yo soy la madre de Dios, / a los indios yo les ayudaré.” / Estó se lo contó a Juan Zumarraga / pero el obispo no le creyo. / Juan Diego volvió, lleno su tilma / con rosas de castilla / creciendo milagrosamente en la nieve. / Se las llevó al obispo, / y cuando abrió su tilma / el retrato de la Virgen / ahí estaba pintado.24
While in Mexico so-called marianistas defend ferociously fundamentalist Catholic values epitomized in the mythologized image of Guadalupe and marked by the male-defined ideal of the self-scarifying, abnegated mother, in the United States Chicana artists have employed the Virgin to rally for women’s liberation and sexual self-determination. Lately, Alma Lopez’s digital images of the Virgin as a lesbian and author Sandra Cisneros’ essay about her as the love goddess of the Americas are perhaps the most contentious examples of this re-coding of meaning.\textsuperscript{25} At stake are the ideological cornerstones of the Chicano “nation” – La Familia and/as Aztlán – as well as those of U.S. nationalism, that is, freedom, democracy, and citizenship. La sagrada familia venerated by the Catholic Church and the “family values” of American republicanism have thus become critically re-examined in the light of Paul Gilroy’s assertion that “families are […] not only the nation in microcosm, its key components, but act as the means to turn social processes into natural, instinctive ones.”\textsuperscript{26} Rendering suspect the fundamental American ideas about civilization, another Chicana artist, Ester Hernández, imagines the nation even more profoundly “other” in her etching entitled Libertad/Liberty (1976), which shows a woman standing on scaffolding, chiseling a pre-Columbian female figure out of the Statue of Liberty.\textsuperscript{27}

\textit{Cultural Nationalism and Women-of-Color Feminisms}

The myth of Mexican American women as passive and submissive received the status of an official self-definition during the First Chicano Youth Conference in Denver, 1969, when the Chicana Caucus declared that “It was the consensus of the group that the Chicana woman does not want to be liberated.”\textsuperscript{28} At odds with the historical tradition of women’s political activism (dating back to the Mexican Revolution and the decades of immigration, economic depression, and war), this declaration reflected the awkward position of educated Chicana activists, who found themselves sandwiched between the male-dominated cultural nationalism of El Movimiento and the racism of the American feminist movement. Since Chicana feminists challenged the very traditions, practices, and beliefs that Chicano nationalists were extolling (the family, patriarchal order, and the auxiliary role of women), their criticism was not well received by the males. They derided the women as followers of white feminists, sell-outs, or lesbians, and suppressed feminist issues, claiming them to be harmful to La Causa, the common cause. Chicanas, on the other hand, also questioned the feminist call to “universal sisterhood” because, while opposing male dominance, mainstream feminism tended to overlook differences between women based on historical, racial, ethnic, and class antagonisms.\textsuperscript{29} Straddling these contradictions, early Chicana feminists strived to define their own feminist ideology, devising specific strategies in order to overcome suspicion within and without the Mexican American community. Their predicament had much in common with the struggles of black, Asian, and other U.S. women of color, as well as with those of Mexican and third world women, as expressed here by novelist Ana Castillo:
While I have more in common with a Mexican man than a white woman, I have much more in common with an Algerian Woman than I do with a Mexican man. This opinion, I am sure, chagrins women who sincerely believe our female physiology binds all women throughout the world, despite the compounded social prejudices that daily affect us all in different ways.30

Yet, it is critical to remember that Chicana feminism was not monolithic, as pointed out by Alma García, the editor of the anthology of Chicana feminist thought, and neither was “white” feminism a unified movement.31 In retrospect, it is interesting to read how the Chicana feminists’ agenda at the National Chicano Political Conference in 1972 (San José, California) resembled contemporary Nordic feminism with its emphasis on such social issues as reproductive rights, extended maternity leave, childcare, welfare, equal pay, and equal educational and job opportunities.32 As the critical focus of American feminist theory shifted from accentuating the division between “universalized” male and female toward the complex issues of gender and social construction of difference, the voices of women of color became audible, indeed. Meanwhile, the term “women of color” itself turned out somewhat problematic. On the one hand, some critics have claimed that it assigns a subordinate, unified status to all distinctions between various non-white peoples in relation to the privileged standard that continues to be white middle-class.33 Others have expressed skepticism about the ability of women-of-color feminists in the U.S. to give voice to third world women at large.34 Without further commenting upon these controversies, it seems safe to say that the commonalities between the experiences of women of Latin descent and black women, for example, were and continue to be germane.

Both Chicanas and black women criticized the individualistic ethos of the American women’s movement, which sprang from a conception of the oppressive nature of the nuclear family vis-à-vis gender equality. In inner-city working-class ethnic neighborhoods, women’s activism was tied to the collective effort to improve and lift up their entire communities in the first place and only secondarily to the struggle for their personal liberation. Moreover, for both groups of women, the Civil Rights Movement was not only a struggle against racism in American society in general, but also against women’s marginalization and sexism embedded in their own communal practices, in particular. As described by Patricia Hill Collins, black feminism encompasses both experiences and ideas, that is, everyday lives of black women and the work of such intellectuals as Pauli Murray, Fanny Lou Hamer, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks. In line with Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, Hill Collins emphasizes the importance of self-definition based on the equal development of gender, ethnic, and class consciousness, asserting that “The struggle for an Afrocentric feminist consciousness requires embracing both an Afrocentric worldview and a feminist sensibility and using both to forge a self-defined standpoint.”35 Hill Collins’ theoretical and interpretive framework has given direction to many reconfigurations of women-of-color feminism(s); particularly her warnings about separatism and ethnocentric isolationism have been well heeded, as proven by the attention given to coalition politics and transnational/international issues in many recent feminist publications. Interesting examples of this would be Emma
Pérez’s study of feminism and women’s subtle interventions in male-centered nationalism in the debate about suffrage in early twentieth-century Mexico and Rosa Linda Fregoso’s interpretation of Angela Davis’ publication, *Women, Race, and Class*, as a foundation for a transnational feminist perspective.36

The discussion above, inspired by several anthologies of feminist writing by women of color, attests to women’s active roles in communities and also sheds some light on the hardships they face due to their position in the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. In Mexican American communities, nevertheless, women have traditionally been powerful, which shows in the manner Chicana writers and artists voice a connection with and draw inspiration from the strong matriarchal images as well from their own specific *madres, comadres, abuelitas,* and *tías*. Although matriarchal tradition, female bonding, and domestic leadership may have empowered Chicanas in their private sphere, in the public sphere – where power relations continue to be negotiated through social status, money, and male bonding – their role in advocating social change becomes drastically diminished. As described by Elizabeth Martínez, *Chingón* politics (roughly translatable as tough-guy politics), and the hard edge of electoral politics in general, continue to demarcate the political representation of women of all colors and classes, regardless.37 What is more, the time-consuming familial and communal responsibilities attached to matriarchal tradition tend to constrain women’s participation in public life, a fact that has not escaped Chicana lesbians.

**Lesbian Empowerment**

Today, many of the strongest voices in Chicana/o intellectual community belong to lesbians. Perhaps because in more peripheral areas it is very hard for women to deviate from traditional ways, the modern migration of Chicana lesbians seems to be heading from Texas to urban California. Often the process of unlearning to identify with the needs of men starts when young Chicanas enter college. In colleges, the intellectual stimulus and support from a strong community of academic Chicanas – lesbian and heterosexual alike – evidently creates an emotional and physical bind among women (often from quite traditional families), who are in the process of defining their own identities. The loving, caring, working partnerships that develop and occasionally turn into families devoid of adult males resemble in some ways those of the nineteenth-century professional women, who lived in “Boston marriages,” 38 mutually supporting each other’s careers and actively engaging in politics. Besides class and race, of course, the crucial disparity is that women then were not regarded as sexual beings at all whereas today it appears to be sexual difference that first and foremost signifies lesbian identity. Says Carla Trujillo, the editor of several books on Chicana lesbians:

> As lesbians, our sexuality becomes the focal issue of dissent. [...] The effort to consciously reclaim our sexual selves forces Chicanas to either confront their own sexuality or, in refusing, castigate lesbians as *vendidas* to the race, blasphemers to the church, atrocities against nature, or some combination.39
Hostilities vented against lesbians at various academic venues (such as the conferences of NACS, the National Association for Chicano Studies) betrays that the real fear stems not entirely from lesbianism conceived as sexual practice and performance but as ideology, claims Trujillo. In ideological terms, Chicana activists have consistently sought to modify the paradigm of Chicano Studies, true, but the lesbian contestation threatens to entirely de-and reconstruct the main tenets of its ideological foundation, that is, cultural nationalism based on male genealogy.

Emma Pérez, on the other hand, brings to the debate the aspects of gender and sexuality by juxtaposing social construction with lesbian desire in her discussion about homophobia and socio-sexual hierarchy in the Chicana/o family and community. As a historian and therefore rather exposed to the controversies milling around academic legitimacy, Pérez also participates in the discussion about postmodern philosophy, particularly in regard to its problematic stance about subjecthood. Her take on that is clean-cut:

Postmodernists suspiciously glare at those of us who claim to speak as women, as third world people, or as lesbians. Being a woman, a lesbian, or a person of color does not ensure that one will speak as one, given our multiple identities and multiple voices. There is no “authentic” Chicana lesbian voice. But authenticity is hardly the issue.

Like many other minorities, she asks why it is so that just at the very moment when many formerly silent voices begin to act as subjects of their historical representation and agents of the definition of their identities, the concept of subjecthood becomes suspect. That is the issue. In her search for “decolonized” spaces and languages to empower the Chicana subject, Pérez lands on an even more controversial notion, i.e., the notion of essentialism. Based on her reading of Irigaray, Pérez argues that “[w]ithin a male symbolic, women have two choices: either practice strategic essentialism or embrace the male symbolic, which mimics women who mimic men who sometimes mimic women mimicking men.” Thereby she explicitly endorses her genealogical links to European feminist philosophy as well as to the postcolonial/postmodern discourses associated for example with such authors as Chandra Mohanty, James Clifford, and Homi Bhabha.

By pressing on the legitimacy of strategic essentialism as part and parcel of political agency and representation, Pérez, by default, also endorses the work of another Chicana radical, namely Gloria Anzaldúa, whose ideas about lesbian identity politics, however, appear very circumspect in regard to the recent outbreak of naming and labeling identities, fragmented all the same. Being herself accused of essentialism, of manufacturing a unified voice for the mestiza subject, Anzaldúa’s criticism reminds us of the imminent risks of labels, which, according to Anzaldúa, invariably come with strings attached to them. She questions the common desire to “discover” and name great queer antepasadas/os in order to construct historical lineage and claim legitimacy, a stand that sounds antagonistic, indeed, in view of...
the popularity and significance bestowed upon these endeavors. In this respect, it appears rather ironic that Alicia Gaspar de Alba, in her essay about the historical figure of Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz, uses some of the symbolic constructions introduced in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Gaspar de Alba proposes to reconfigure Sor Juana, a seventeenth-century Mexican nun, writer, and distinguished scholar, not as a Hispana, but as a Chicana lesbian feminist endowed with a mestiza consciousness in an Anzaldúan sense.45 What perhaps makes such figures as Sor Juana and Frida Kahlo so attractive to appropriation is not only their illustrious careers and fascinating personalities, or their ambivalent association with male centers of power, but, most importantly, the fact that they represent an absence of motherhood, by vocation and by fate, respectively. How much this “lack” defined their identities remains unknown; what is evident, however, is that the symbols of motherhood loom large over the lives and cultural practices of all present-day Chicanas.

**Aesthetics of Chicanisma**

Stereotypically, Chicana art has been approached from the view point of two interlinking principles, namely *rasquache* and *domesticana*. The former term was coined by the art historian Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in order to describe the unique characteristics of Mexican American working-class aesthetic sensibility; the latter, launched by Amalia Mesa-Bains, refers to rasquache’s female counterpart.46 While rasquache grew out of both resistance against majority culture (with its modernist art forms and institutions) and affirmation of Chicano cultural values, domesticana added to the picture by bringing in female genealogies and gender stratification within Mexican American culture. If the symbolic space of rasquache was the barrio and its archetypal hero-protagonist *El Pachuco* (a 1940s’ stylish gang member reminiscent of Hollywood film noir), then domesticana centered on the private space of home, family, domestic religious traditions and rituals, and feminine roles. To what extent Ybarra-Frausto’s definition of rasquache (as an irreverent and defiant underdog perspective that incorporates oppositional consciousness with a kitschy taste for decoration and popular mass-culture) can be applied today is debatable, whereas domesticana, as a relatively general term, seems inclusive enough also to capture some germane aspects of present-day Chicana art. Its form is often derived from such domestic religious practices as making yard shrines for Catholic saints or altars for deceased family members and arranging *ofrendas*, offerings, for the Mexican Day of the Dead celebration, or from juxtaposing ultra-feminine vanity paraphernalia with signs of violence and fragmentation. Its content, till today, often involves a re-evaluation of the female archetypes and symbols discussed earlier in the text as well of various other historical stereotypes and popular female images, which take part in an intense play of visual signifiers that negotiate tensions around Chicana identity.47

Artist and scholar Amalia Mesa-Bains, for example, emphasizes the importance of spirituality in Chicana art, which layers rich Catholic iconography with indigenous imagery and personal memorabilia as a means of remembering. Memory, death, and healing form the axis by which the relationship between the destructive historical experiences of Mexican
Americans and the reflections of the sacred becomes what Mesa-Bains calls a “politicizing spirituality,” a bridge between the past and the present. Often indulging in the assemblages of multiple textual/cultural influences, home altars decorated with sacred objects, candles, flowers, and photos of dead family members convey personal stories, testimonios, thus functioning as the carriers of oral history lost in official written records. As in Mexico, so too in the U.S. many women artists gravitate toward photography, which might have to do with the implicit connection between the photographic image and death, the theory advocated by French philosopher Roland Barthes. On the other hand, the practice of natural healing, both personal and communal, through ceremonies traditionally executed by curanderas, healer women, is reflected in the popularity of such contemporary forms as installation and performance in Chicana art. Highly respected in their communities, curanderas function as the repositories of memory, oral tradition, and multicultural knowledge of the natural world. But they can also act as brujas, witches, encoding the dual nature of most feminine archetypes. Besides brujas and pre-Columbian fertility goddesses, on the bad side of the Virgin of Guadalupe also reside an odd number of “real-life” malcriadas, bad girls, whose presence in Chicana art sneaks subversive subtexts into the discourses of cultural meaning. Such “border-line” cases are the images of la soldadera, a revolutionary woman warrior, la pachuca, an urban gang girl, and the spitfire, a cinematic stereotype of a hot-tempered Latina as described in Sandra Cisneros’ poem titled Loose Woman:

They say I’m a macha, hell on wheels
viva-la-vulva, fire and brimstone,
man-hating, devastating,
boogey-woman lesbian.
Not necessarily so,
but I like the compliment.

The moral crisis created by misbehaving women focuses on the body, as a metaphor of the nation, as a symbol of social order versus social disruption, and as an allegory of communal coherence versus disintegration.

A politicizing spirituality introduced by Mesa-Bains thus becomes joined with a “politicizing carnality,” if you will. But long before for example Michel Foucault and a number of feminist theorists unearthed the body politic, laying bare the modern technologies of classifying and disciplining bodies and thus giving a say to the embodied subject, the stark physical differences between human beings had triggered the imagination of people for quite some time. During the first Euro-American contact, the shape and color of the body carried messages, skin turned into writing paper, limbs articulated the syntax, and the holes of the body made the punctuation marks of the violent language between the European explorer and his American “Other.” Like Mexican art, Chicana/o art is figurative sans pareil, claims Mesa-Bains. It remembers history and wants to re-member the broken body of the past Indian and mestizo communities by transforming somatic into aesthetic. The bodily aesthetics therefore mix syncretic features of pre-Columbian practices, such as flaying and sacrificing,
Catholic symbolism associated with the body of Christ, and such urban practices as tattooing, scarification, heavy make-up, clothing styles, and hair fashioning. Thereby the employment of the human body in the context of an identification process turns the body into the battleground of representations.54

To her question whether rasquache still exists, Laura Elisa Pérez answers yes, claiming that Chicana/o cultural practices are “vulgar,” “tacky,” “lower class” on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, “mongrel products pilfered from dominant cultures illegally, without sanction, [and] redeployed back into national discourse as agents of ideological disorder, of cultural aperture.” 55 This partisan view, however, understates the fact that today many of the most prominent Chicana/o artists are part of American academia and quite far from “lower class”; they do not make art of recycled materials or what happens to lie around in the house but instead use rather expensive techniques such as film and digital imaging; and the market value of their work is going up along with the rising interest in it among art collectors.56 But this development has not escaped the attention of many professionals in the U.S “multicultural” art scene only. In his reply to a proposal for a Chicana art exhibit, a curator at Kiasma (the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, Finland) suggested that the museum of ethnography might be a more suitable venue for this purpose. Evidently, anxieties about parochialism or folklorish style do not easily leave the discourse of artistic quality, not even when the official policy speaks for diversity and inclusion. Taking the risk of being considered a vendido, Chon Noriega questions the usefulness of “always starting with the premise of cultural or racial otherness,” which posits “Latino art as a genre equivalent to its exclusion” from the dominant canon and over again draws its parameters to reinstate its role as the “negative self” of modern (or postmodern) art. Yet the line between “the ethnic artist and everybody else in the art world” is drawn in the water.57 It is clear that Chicana/o art shares commonalities, contexts, and sources with the dominant American and European visual arts that go deeper and wider than the acknowledged appropriation of the iconography of U.S. commercial, media, or popular culture. Clearly, it cannot be emptied out as a simple function of identity politics; it is political, for sure, but so is all art. Moreover, like other art, it sustains both contextualization and close reading, in a formalist sense, literate enough to detect the interactions between its various dimensions.
Discourses on (Art) Photography

On one side, time and motion studies, criminal records, sociological dossiers, humanist documentaries, medical photography, ethnographic records, reportage, sports pictures, pornography, identikit faces, all kinds of portraiture, and photographs in official documents, papers and files. On the other, the landscape tradition, aerial surveys, astronomical photography, micro-photography, topographical records, certain kinds of advertising images, and so on. Two kinds of longing, Two kinds of subjection. (The gaze has both passion and perspective.)

John Tagg (1988) 58

Regardless of photography’s multiple contexts listed above by photo-historian John Tagg, the story of art photography seems to fall neatly in place within the great narrative of modern art. That narrative started from the Renaissance invention of the linear perspective, and moved through the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradition of oil painting to the beginning of modernity in the early nineteenth century. On the one hand, the rapid introduction of ever more sophisticated photographic techniques as of the late 1830s was part and parcel of the modernization project – capitalism, industrialization, mass production, and urbanization. On the other hand, photographs assumed from early on the role of the “poor man’s painting,” imitating the elevated formal traditions of “high art,” that is, landscape and portrait painting. What made photographs a potentially ideal heir of painting was their much admired ability to “record the real,” to create a simulacrum, a mimetic replica of life. 59 This concept of a universal optical experience disconnected from any historical contingency pointed toward a new turn in art history, which then became manifest in the dogma of high modernism in the visual arts.

So, in spite of photography’s association with mechanical reproduction and its intimacy with lived experiences, the early twentieth century saw the mutation of “documentary” photographers into full-blown artists in a modernist sense. On the one hand, this development was not as uniform as often implied in popular photography publications, which is proven for example by Tina Modotti (1896–1942) in Mexico, August Sander (1876–1964) in Germany, and several avant-garde photographers in Paris. In the United States, on the other hand, the most prominent photographers’ intense concern with abstraction, two-dimensionality, and the aesthetic qualities of the photograph duplicated the theories of contemporary European painting. Consequently, photography’s emergence as a new autonomous art form (conceived by technology but descending from painting) called for, first, cutting photographic images away from their historical role in the service of social survey, surveillance, and scientific exploration, and second, reconstructing them as transcendental aesthetic objects created by the artist’s unique agency; and, thirdly, incorporating them inside a new discursive space – the art museum. 60
The self-conscious aestheticism of the early twentieth-century Pictorial and Secessionist movements in the United States articulated the secondary nature of the camera as a neutral medium of the photographer’s subjectivity, highlighted in the photographic studies of self-referential abstract forms and the depictions of nature as an expression of the artist’s psyche. Although the decades of the Great Depression and war slowed this development down and spurred a temporary dominance of social documentary and photojournalism, the opening of the Department of Photography in the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York in the 1950s marked the official consolidation of photography into the family of modern art. This was followed by an appearance of a number of publications on art photography and a series of large photography exhibitions hosted by MOMA and other prestigious art museums around the country. Then, assisted by A. D. Coleman’s influential essay “The Directorial Mode: Notes toward a Definition” among other theoretical texts, the 1970s eased the artist-photographer-director back to the center stage of image production. The “directorial mode” theorized by Coleman reversed the ideals of “faithful-to-life” documentary as well as modernist “straight photography” (which involved little manipulation during the printing process) represented by Alfred Stieglitz and Ansel Adams, to mention the two most canonized American modernist photographers.

As a result of this rewriting of the history of photography, the representation of “reality” without or within (oft still considered the privileged territory of photography) gradually lost its status at the expense of the fantastic, fabricated, and conceptual. This return of the artificial coincided with the beginning of the postmodern era astutely criticized by Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, among others, who fashioned appropriation, quotation, and pastiche as the essential characteristics of postmodern sensibility. Although Jameson’s totalizing gesture has proved redundant long ago, art photographers have, as of the 1970s, engaged in their visual repertoire the whole history of photographic techniques, styles, and themes, enthusiastically embracing their new role as the manipulator of “reality” and director of the photographic image. So too the Chicana artists of this study, whose works frequently quote various image-making traditions, derive material from a range of discursive practices, construct the scenes and subjects of their images (albeit frequently in collaboration with their human subjects), and self-consciously comment on the parameters of their own production and representational strategies.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has quite correctly stated that “[i]t is no accident that passionate photographers are always obliged to develop the aesthetic theory of their practice, to justify their existence as photographers by justifying the existence of photography as a true art.” It often seems that the type of art work that most prudently rearticulates current theoretical concerns also finds its way more easily into museums, galleries, and other arenas of critical exposure. To reverse this common prejudice (without completely denying its acuity), it could just as well be acknowledged that practice does influence theory-cum-ideology. If the artist Orlan’s video performances during her seemingly endless plastic surgeries resound the tenets of performance theory or if Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s high power career as a border shaman appears to interbreed seamlessly with every twist of U.S.-Mexico border theory, that only foregrounds recurring historical trends, well-examined examples of
which being the inextricable link of romantic painting (or landscape photography, or Chicano muralism67) with nationalism and of abstract expressionism with modernist individualism. By way of representation, these styles did not tediously reflect or manifest the historical and social practices at the moment of their birth but instead interacted with them, constituting ideological practices discursively by “making sense of” and thereby giving meaning to these same practices. On the other hand, photo-historian Geoffrey Batchen’s project to introduce vernacular photographic objects (e.g., photo-sculptures, jewelry, and postcards) into the historical narrative of art photography yields legitimacy to those artists who combine photography with non-typical materials and techniques, such as found objects, personal mementos, stitching, or sewing. It also, of course, sheds light on the little-known history of women as users and producers of photographic technology.68

Then how do images, whether paintings or prints, make meaning? This is the central question of semiotics, the study of signs and meanings, which continues to be the most applicable method of interpreting images. Semiotics (or semiology) was originally introduced by the linguist Ferdinand Saussure, who revolutionized the simple one-to-one understanding of the relationship between words and things by conceptualizing language as a system of signs in which the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and each word derives meaning from its relational position in the total system of similarities and dissimilarities. However, it is better to avoid the literal application of Saussurian structural linguistics to the visual image because images do not have an underlying system of exact rules; there is no grammar, no tense, no “language” of photography or a single signifying system upon which all photographs rely.69 The similarity that images do share with language, though, is its use of rhetoric coding for the sake of efficient communication. Victor Burgin defines rhetoric as “the artful use of language in order to persuade.” 70 To catch the readers’ attention, rhetoric employs such devices as repetition, synecdoche, hyperbole, analogy, and allegory; and figures of speech, such as metaphor, symbol, and metonym. These, according to Roland Barthes’ early classic *Elements of Semiology* (originally published in 1964),71 offer the key for the “close reading” of photographic signs in relation to one another and to the complete, language-specific system of signification. After this predominantly structuralist early phase of semiology, writers from various theoretical positions have problematized the analogy between “natural” language and visual “language.” Nonetheless, the paradigm of the semiotic interpretation of images still rests on Barthes’ hypothesis that the semiotic signification process articulated by photographic visual rhetoric exists prior to any categories of style, production, or usage, inflecting photographic meaning across and through the various genres and institutions of photo-practice.

Structuralism’s demise at the rise of postmodern theory, psychoanalysis, feminism, and race critical theories gave a new twist to the semiotics of the image, too. The new position adopted by poststructuralists contextualized, elaborated, and complicated the semiotic analysis by rehabilitating the body as a means of both material and cultural production. Such feminist film critics as Laura Mulvey (1975) and Teresa de Lauretis (1987) have used psychoanalysis to interpret the cultural practices of looking, seeing, and being looked at as an epistemological frame for the construction of knowledge. Consequently, the critical focus
shifted onto the photographer’s role, meaning the role of his gaze that directs the camera’s eye, and onto the prospect of her gaze that might reconstruct reality differently. Writers of color followed suit, spinning the discussion from the construction of the sexual other to that of the racial other. In his text “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” Kobena Mercer claims that “The feminist appropriation of Lacanian psychoanalysis to theorize cultural struggles over the image has been profoundly enabling, but questions now being raised by cultural struggles over the meaning of ‘race’ suggest that universalist pretensions can be disabling, for they preempt the development of pluralistic perspectives on the intersections of multiple differences in popular culture.” 72 In its unmitigated anger, Mercer’s criticism resembles that of Homi Bhabha, who wrote the following in response to Frantz Fanon’s text, “Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body.” 73

All these writers confirm the argument that racial difference should be regarded as a dimension of human representation, rather than an illusion, 74 or an imperfect substitution of the “real thing,” as maintained by Karen Mary Davalos in the following quotation from her publication on Mexican American art practices:

Representation – as opposed to the thing itself – maintains yet cuts off its referent. By standing in for the object or event, representational practices substitute or add something to the referent. This addition or substitution adds a layer of meaning to the object or event and works to distance the viewer and producer from the thing itself. However separate, representations are “disconnected from ‘real’ political life; nor are these expressions ‘transparent’ records of histories and struggles” (Lowe 1996, 156). […] Representational practices among people of color are fragmented because they occur at the cracks and fissures of structural and ideological power.75 [italics added]

The problem with Davalos’ approach is that she a priori postulates an ideal representation of the fixed referent, thereby perpetuating the conceptual void on the one hand between the “real” and its representation, and on the other hand between “good” and “bad” representations. That images – photographs in particular – are representations of constructed truths that images then reconstruct does not come out in her interpretation. What Davalos actually means by fragmented representational practices thus remains unclear as well as how exactly the overlapping histories of mestizaje (racial mix and blending) and dispersal (diaspora) could help produce more complex representations, as she claims in the same context. When cultural practices surrounding art work appear to legitimize a traditional contextual reading of meaning, the images themselves tend to turn insubstantial like in Davalos’ study on exhibiting mestizaje.
In regard to the broad historical and theoretical contexts introduced in Part I, my method of inquiry in Part II is simple: to explore the photographic signification processes in the art works studied by using the interpretive tools provided by current theories based on semiotic reading. Reflecting on Stuart Hall’s emphasis of the reception of images, I also consider significant my own reactions as an audience response in a viewing situation. My aim, therefore, is to transcribe a critical dialogue of sorts between the artists, their intentions, their works, and myself, a dialogue focused on the following questions. How do Chicana photographs embody or reproduce certain categories of knowledge, or disrupt them, alternatively? In what kind of discourses do they take part, reinforcing or possibly contradicting them? To what extent do the artists endorse the self-reflective, potentially even coercive practices of so-called postmodern photography, or reversely, could it be rightfully claimed that Chicana photography is predominantly about the signified, i.e., the subject referred to?76 Has Chicana art become just another “look” or “style,” well integrated into its own ethnic paradigm and with little relevance outside of it, incorporated in the category of oppositional art practices on today’s multicultural museum wall and legitimized by art collectors’ dollars? Is there any longer need or separate spaces for contestatory art (in the sense of Chicana historian Emma Pérez’s notion of the “sitios y lenguas” for decolonized expression of difference)77 now that major U.S. newspapers enthusiastically report about the growing political/economic impact exercised by the country’s largest ethno-racial minority, uniformly called “Hispanic”? To quote Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s words, “what are the material and discursive forces that both exceed and bind the individual artist?” 78

In order to discuss and analyze the issues of Chicana photography in a meaningful way, I believe that it is critical to be aware and well informed of those particular material and discursive forces outlined in the first part of this dissertation. On the other side, what is deemed not essential in the framework of this study is an aesthetic evaluation, periodization, stylistic definition, or corrective inclusion of Chicana art in terms of any bona fide art movement, not even for the sake of a good argument. Also, as my interest is to keep focusing on the artwork itself, not much attention will be given to the external institutional conditions of Chicana/o art, which are being investigated in other projects.

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4 Ibid., 182-185.

5 Ibid., 186.


9 See, e.g., Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s essay “The Politics of Location of the Tenth Muse of America: An Interview with Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz,” in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, Ca.: Third Woman Press, 1998) 136-165, where she names Malinche the first feminist of the Americas (before Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz) because of her brokering between European domination and indigenous resistance.


11 Rebolledo, 1995, 64.


17 Rebolledo, 1995, 52-63.


20 Rebolledo, 1995, 80-81.


22 Jeanette Favrot Peterson, “The Virgin of Guadalupe: Symbol of Conquest or Liberation?” in *Art Journal* 51:4 (Winter 1992) 39-47. Favrot Peterson’s historical review of Virgin imagery and other colonial images certainly manages to deprive the viewer of ever again looking at the image of Guadalupe as just another quaint sample of Catholic paraphernalia. She confirms that the lack of documentation obscures the very beginnings of Guadalupe devotion in New Spain, which involves the story of her first appearance in 1531 to Juan Diego, a newly converted Indian peasant. Even today, this story is widely regarded as a true historical fact. However, according to Favrot Peterson, there is no reliable evidence supporting either the historicity of this event or the widespread devotion of Guadalupe among the native population during the sixteenth century. Instead, St. Joseph was worshipped as the official saint of the Indians (private communication with art historian Charlene Villaseñor Black).


naturalized the “native” identity (instead of taking it as an artifice), thus appropriating the voice of the “gendered
quotation on page 162.
not cover lesbians of color, though. Mifflin, 1999) gives a fine overview of the history of lesbian activists in the United States. Her investigation does

Cynthia Orozco, “Sexism in Chicano Studies and the Community,” 265-270; and Sonia López, “The Role of the
following writings: Alma García, “Introduction,” 1-16; Anna Nieto Gómez, “Sexism in the Movimiento,” 97-100; Cynthia Orozco, “Sexism in Chicano Studies and
the Community,” 265-276; and Sonia López, “The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement,” 100-106.

“the subject who speaks” and “the subject who is spoken of” as formulated by Stuart Hall. Invoking Gayatri
Construction of Chicana/o Identity” (1998) in which she discusses in depth the implications of a hiatus between
In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture

See Laura Elisa Pérez, “El desorden, Nationalism, and Chicano/o Aesthetics,” in Between Woman and
Sonia López, “The Role of the Chicana within the Student Movement,” in Chicana Feminist Thought
My discussion about early Chicana feminism is based on the anthology Chicana Feminist Thought: The
Basic Historical Writings, ed. by Alma García (New York, London: Routledge, 1997), particularly on the
following writings: Alma García, “Introduction,” 1-16; Anna Nieto Gómez, “Sexism in the Movimiento,” 97-100;
Chicana liberal feminists who aim at enhancing the well-being of the Chicano community, with the special emphasis on improving women’s status; Chicana insurgent feminism that emanates from the political
tradition that contests the social relations of production and reproduction, sexual orientation and international
solidarity issues; Chicana cultural nationalist feminism whose focus is the betterment of women’s position but
with traditional reformist outlook. In general, according to Pesquera’s study of academic Chicana women, their
feminist consciousness seems to follow from their group status, social and geographical location, networks,
periences, and connections to the Chicano and feminist movements.
In Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism (New York: BasicBooks. A Divison of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1995), David Hollinger claims that “[i]n this view, white and nonwhite are the two relevant
categories, and all distinctions between various ‘colored’ peoples are less significant than the fact that they are
nonwhite” (page 24), thus invalidating the term “women of color.” Unlike Hollinger, who sees the term only in
terms of race, Chandra Mohanty’s definition of it is political and designates a political constituency, not a
biological or sociological one. She emphasizes that what constitutes “women of color” or “third world women” as
a viable political alliance is a common context of struggle and oppositional consciousness rather than racial
identification. See, e.g., Chandra Mohanty, “Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of
I am referring to Sheila Marie Contreras’ dissertation, “Blood Lines: Modernism, Indigenismo and the
Construction of Chicano/o Identity” (1998) in which she discusses in depth the implications of a hiatus between
"the subject who speaks" and “the subject who is spoken of” as formulated by Stuart Hall. Invoking Gayatri Spivak’s question “Can the subaltern speak?” she posits that Chicana writers who claim indigenous ancestry have
naturalized the “native” identity (instead of taking it as an artifice), thus appropriating the voice of the “gendered
subaltern.” Rather similar kind of controversy about “authenticity” happened between Patricia Hill Collins and
David Gilroy about the former’s usage of such terms as “Afrocentric” and “black” (see Victor Burgin’s discussion in In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture [Berkeley: University of California Press, c1996] 15-17).
Lillian Faderman, To Believe in Women: What Lesbians have done for America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999) gives a fine overview of the history of lesbian activists in the United States. Her investigation does not cover lesbians of color, though.
Helsinki School of Photography.

years under the auspices of the main art institutions in Helsinki. The name of this "new painting" is the

canonization of photography as a modernist art form


Routledge, 1990) for an incisive discussion about the body conceived as a grammatical system of language.


"Histories," in

Juana Inés de la Cruz," in ibid., 136-165.

Journal of Chicano Studies,

CARA to CACA: The Multiple Anatomies of Chicano/a Art at the Turn of the New Century," in

Latino art, the prime example being the exorbitant prices currently assigned to Frida Kahlo's paintings.

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the Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin, Texas (July, 2003) in order to celebrate the collaborative silkscreen print

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Chicanas/os become the consumers, not just creators, of their community's own images of their lives and their

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identity, and politics without falling back onto binary categories. She gives an interesting turn to the debate about

the interpretation of Chicana/o art by distancing it from ethnicity and race, as well as nationality, and instead


Ibid.


Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Spiritual Visions in Contemporary Art," in Imágenes e Historias/Images and

Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art, exhibition catalogue ed. by Constance Cortez (Italy: Tufts University

Gallery, 1999) 1-10.

For more information about soldaderas and puchucas, see Elizabeth Salas, Soldaderas in the Mexican

Military: Myth and History (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) and Rosa Linda Fregoso, “Re-Imagining

Chicana Urban Identities in the Public Sphere, Cool Chucha Style,” in Between Woman and Nation (1999) 72-91.


See, e.g., Peter Mason’s Deconstructing America: Representations of the Other (London and New York:

Routeledge, 1990) for an incisive discussion about the body conceived as a grammatical system of language.

Amalia Mesa-Bains, “Chicano Bodily Aesthetics” and Victor Alejandro Sorell, “Words and Images in the


Laura Elisa Pérez, “El desorden, Nationalism, and Chicano/a Aesthetics,” in Between Woman and Nation


Gaspar de Alba’s survey on some major Chicana/o art exhibitions during the last fifteen years (“From

CARA to CACA: The Multiple Anatomies of Chicano/a Art at the Turn of the New Century,” in Aztlán: A

Journal of Chicano Studies, 26:1 [Spring 2001] 205-231) convinces me that it is possible to talk about art, identity, and politics without falling back onto binary categories. She gives an interesting turn to the debate about

the interpretation of Chicana/o art by distancing it from ethnicity and race, as well as nationality, and instead

foregrounds it, on the one hand, as an issue-based practice, and, on the other hand, as an aesthetic commodity with market value. Referring to Davalos, Gaspar de Alba points out that by collecting art, “collecting ourselves,” Chicanas/os become the consumers, not just creators, of their community’s own images of their lives and their identities. This good message was embraced perhaps over-enthusiastically at the Serie Symposium arranged by the Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin, Texas (July, 2003) in order to celebrate the collaborative silkscreen print project run by the Coronado Print Studio. The overarching topic of the discussion was the rising market value of Latino art, the prime example being the exorbitant prices currently assigned to Frida Kahlo’s paintings.

This discussion for the most part follows Chon Noriega’s argument in his editorial essay “Art Official


See Norman Bryson, Vision and Painting (London: Macmillan, 1983). Bryson argues that the overarching rationale in art history up until the twentieth century had established an evolutionary narrative of a steady development of representation toward a perfect mimetic copy of reality.

An interesting discussion on the tension between “art” and “documentary” in American photography is offered in John Tagg’s The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (1988). In Finland, the canonization of photography as a modernist art form par excellence has taken place only during the last five years under the auspices of the main art institutions in Helsinki. The brand name of this “new painting” is the Helsinki School of Photography.

These were the main preoccupations of European cubism and surrealism, respectively. At that time, there also was a reaction against modernism’s auratic ideals of pure art. This oppositional movement, Dadaism, was
spearheaded by Marcel Duchamp, whose ready-made “art objects” undermined the idea of pure art by proposing that the artist invents nothing but only loans, manipulates, displaces, and reformulates what already exists. This trend was not embraced in American art photography although Alfred Stieglitz for example did have some contacts with European avant-garde. See Douglas Crimp, On the Museum’s Ruins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983) 66-69.


66 Eduardo Barrera (quoted in Border Women: Writing from La Frontera, ed. by Debra Castillo and Maria Socorro Tabuena Córdoba, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 12) laconically claims that “Gómez-Peña fabricates his border by drinking from the same theoretical watering holes as the academics who test their arguments with his texts. This quasi-incestuous relationship has turned into a vicious circle which excludes primary referents.”

67 It is interesting to study the common strands appearing in Chicano murals (as representations of Mexican American cultural nationalism) and in the murals by the early 20th-century Finnish painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela, who visualized scenes of the national epic Kalevala. Finnish nationalistic discourse has frequently employed the interpretive malleability of Kalevala as a means to negotiate the tension between myth and history, primitive (painting, sculpture) and rational (architecture, design), natural and cultural. In essence, what is at stake is Finland’s uneasy “borderline” location within the East/West binary of European cultural geography.


70 Ibid., 80.

71 Barthes, Elements of Semiology (1968).


73 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 92.

74 This argument is succinctly formulated by Oni and Winant for example in their essay, “Racial Formation,” in Race Critical Theories (2002) 123-146.


77 See Emma Pérez, “Irigaray’s Female Symbolic in the Making of Chicana Lesbian Sistos y Lenguas (Sites and Discourses),” in Living Chicana Theory (1998) 87-101. Pérez speaks for “strategic essentialism” as a means to find places where the acknowledgement of differences does not automatically entail a pressure or desire to resolve them.

PART II : ESSAYS
Women have often taken up photography, as a second alternative, wherever it was available, utilized it in both provisional and professional ways, and adapted it to their life situation; on the death of their husband, for lack of any other means of income, as an excuse to go out into the world, from a longing for freedom and emancipation, or a need for artistic and social legitimacy, and so on.

Lena Johannesson (2004)  

THIS PART of the study starts with a brief discussion on the careers of women photographers as described in two ground-breaking publications: Women Photographers – European Experience (2004) edited by Swedish art historian Lena Johannesson and curator Gunilla Knape, and Women’s Camera Work: Self/Body/Other in American Visual Culture (1998) authored by American Studies professor Judith Fryer Davidov. Emphasizing the multifaceted role of photography as a relatively new trade accessible to women, as these publications do, resonates quite interestingly in the work of Chicana photographers. In the American art world, they have frequently fallen into a vague in-between category of the exotic “other,” the professional legitimacy of which was/is suspect outside the spaces dedicated to multiculturalism. This diachronic perspective on the trade also suggests a viable prospect for some transnational considerations, based on the history of the medium itself, its various modes of production, and its role in the social formation of class, race, and gender.

During its infancy in the nineteenth century, according to Gunilla Knape, photography was less restricted and regulated by traditions than the older fields of visual and artistic production, such as painting, sculpture, and printing, making it easier for women to enter the fast developing new profession. Thus in northern Europe, quite a few women managed to become professional practitioners through the kitchen door, so to speak, as portrait or rural “village photographers,” rather than being stuck at the main gate of the traditional patronage system. Yet, their input has gone largely unrecognized since photo-historians have customarily focused on the more “heroic” aspects of photography, associated with the technologies of science, social engineering, and various types of public documentation. Photography has, therefore, become identified as a male domain par excellence, while women’s role in its history (behind the camera as opposed to in front of it) has remained obscure until very recently.

There is little information available about the extent to which women practiced photography in the nineteenth-century United States, but I would guess not as much as in Europe due to certain historical contingencies. After the turn of the century, the modernist movement in the fine arts adopted and reified aesthetically experimental photography, on the one hand reinforcing the heroic myth of the artist-genius (e.g., the Secessionist movement in the U.S.) and on the other hand hailing the subversive, democratic potential of the
photographic reproduction of images (e.g., dadaism and surrealism mainly in Europe). Either way, in modernist art practices women served mostly as models and wives for the male artists, and those women who, indeed, produced art have received little recognition. Many women photographers during that period were not trained in art schools but had a less glamorous training in diverse technical aspects of photography, which made them suspect as serious artists; or they were amateur autodidacts. It seems that the well-documented careers of such photographers as Gertrude Käsebier, Imogen Cunningham, Dorothea Lange, and a handful of other women did not significantly affect the dominance of men and the male point of view in U.S. photography.

This brief look at women’s role in the profession makes an illuminating backdrop to the career trajectories of the Chicana photographers in this study inasmuch as they seem to recapitulate the larger narrative described above. None of them were initially schooled as an artist but, instead, received training and practiced first in related, technically-oriented professions: Celia Álvarez Muñoz as a fashion illustrator and art teacher, Kathy Vargas as a rock-an-roll documentary photographer, and Delilah Montoya as a medical photographer. Laura Aguilar did not enter into university programs but learned her craft in community colleges and various workshops. Their twisting inroads to the high ground of the contemporary art world could serve as a good case study in what Lena Johannesson describes as “unglamorous but technologically advanced range of specialist training” that “formed the basis for many people’s livelihoods, something they could fall back on.” Similarly, Johannesson’s argument about the primary importance of documentation and preservation in women photographers’ work applies to these Chicana artists, whose first experiments with photography were often sparked by the need to document the everyday life and environment of their families, neighbors, and communities.

Chapter 4, “History as the Site of Identification,” first focuses on the photo-mural of Celia Álvarez Muñoz, which deals with her family history from the perspective of Mexican American border experience vis-à-vis the twentieth-century transnational history of power politics and war. The topic of the second essay is Kathy Vargas’ series of photo-montages, which challenge the historical narrative of the Battle of the Alamo in 1836, again, by way of overlapping official visual representations, family stories, and her personal life experiences, so as to “recouple” the reified master symbol of Texas and the entire nation with its historical contingencies. I will argue that these Chicana artists, both living in Texas, systematically manipulate the strategies of so-called decolonizing imaginary, advocated by various Chicana/o historians, as a means of unraveling the forces of language (including visual/photographic “language”) as mediators of their life experiences as well as Mexican American history in general.

Particularly the artists discussed in Chapter 5, “Community as the Site of Identification,” fall into the lineage of women photographers whose careers can be described, to use the Swedish authors’ formulation, as dramatic and emancipatory histories of survival and adaptation to difficult life situations. Both Laura Aguilar’s and Delilah Montoya’s careers as photographers were launched by the need to document their respective communities, on the one hand, and to find and forge their own ethno-racial, political, and sexual identities, on the
other. With the photographs studied in this chapter, both artists engage in the visual invention or construction (rather than documentation) of alternative communities. For Aguilar, this involves an allegory of an all-female, non-hierarchical social body, enacted against the ideologically laden discourse of nature. Montoya, in turn, takes on the project of “remodeling” the nationalist myth of the Chicano homeland, Aztlán, eliciting her vision from the multiple expressions and locations of Mexican American culture. In sum, imagining Mexican American community, through their art work, happens from within rather than from without.9

Chapter 6, “The Body Politic of Chicana Representation,” consists of three essays, each of which deals with the formation of and challenges to the embodied Chicana/o social and political subject through some particularly contentious locations. Aguilar’s nude self-portraits, discussed in the first essay of this chapter, insert the Chicana subject into the long art and literary tradition of configuring American identity (and the nationalistic project it has supported) in relation to the land, landscape, and nature. In contrast to Aguilar’s intimate photo-series, both Montoya and Álvarez Muñoz explore the terrain between institutional power politics and the Chicana/o body in creating giant-size multi-media photo-murals. Montoya’s altar-inspired work turns the image of a pinto, a Mexican American prison inmate, into a site of communal empowerment and remembrance, which not only destabilizes the power parameters of three institutions – the prison, the museum, and the church – but also questions the patriarchal spiritual leadership embedded in New Mexican indigenous/Catholic heritage. Álvarez Muñoz’s artist’s book and installations trace the history of Mexican women workers, first as labor leaders and civil activists in twentieth-century Los Angeles, and then as contemporary factory employees, maquiladoras, in the service of global economy at the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Since the object of this research, after all, is visual representation, the theoretical component of the discussion derives primarily from writers specialized in photography. However, once the essays were completed, I identified a recurring subtext that associated my interpretation with the writings of the anthropologist Mary Douglas. The notion of abjection – launched by Douglas’ publication, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1966), and then avidly deployed by feminist and postcolonial scholars – serves as an obvious heuristic device throughout the text in as much as it helps decipher the social parameters of photographic representation. Together, the seven essays elucidate the way these Chicana artists have utilized the conventions and innovations of their medium to reinscribe the Chicana/o body, which in public discourses has traditionally been represented as the abject “other” – through pathologization, criminalization, and/or reification – which needed to be contained often by means of representation.

Acknowledging the interconnectedness of time (history) and space (topography) in representational conventions, my argumentation in general is making use of the categories fashioned by the French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre and more recently by Mary Poovey, a cultural geographer who writes about the spatial practices of capitalism within the postmodern paradigm. The latter’s essay, “The Production of Abstract Space,” addresses such topics as the change of space, its uses, its representations, and the discursive and political contestations involved in the urbanization of England; yet her discussion carries global
implications. Besides its lucid theoretical formulation, I find Poovey’s discussion particularly useful because of the thought given to visuality, in general, and to the image of the social body in relation to those of its individual components, in particular. She suggests a *four point approach*, which I hope to elaborate upon for the support of my argument throughout these essays.

First, Poovey advocates an examination of the “*material reorganization of the relationship between human activity and space,*” keeping in mind the historical projects by which land was subjected to cartographical standardization reflecting the rationale of Euclidean geography. Second, one should analyze the “*textual treatment of spatial issues*” in the works of contemporary authors, both those who condoned material changes and those who opposed them. Third, one should look at the *conceptualization of space,* that is, the “*specific dynamics by which what Lefebvre calls natural space was organized into abstract space,*” which reduced the irregularities of natural landscape to a homogeneous two-dimensional grid, the parts of which became interchangeable, measurable, and seemingly universal. Last, Poovey suggests an investigation of the combined “*effects of these material, textual, and conceptual treatments of space on the lives of individuals,*” pointing out the capacity of her theoretical categories to expose the artificiality of separating materialism from textuality.¹¹ In Chicano literary criticism, an incisive analysis along these lines has been formulated in Mary Pat Brady’s recent study of writings from the “*extinct lands*” and “*temporal geographies*” of Arizona.¹² Just as in her publication, the *balancing of materialism and textuality* also is the major challenge of these essays, a challenge which hopefully also turns into their major strength.

Chapter 7, “Discussion,” utilizes the findings and arguments presented in the essays to bring the discourses of Chicana/o identity formation to a concrete level of art practice, its various contexts, and the life experiences of the artists themselves. Special attention is given to the notion of the “*Wild Zone,*” a term derived from anthropology and used by literary critic Cordelia Chávez Candelaria in reference to the “*separate political and cultural space that women inhabit*” (see page 24; endnote 55).¹³ The Chicana artists endeavor to reclaim the body of the mother from the realm of the abject (or the reified) so as to make her ideologically pivotal in Chicana/o community and cultural nationalism, challenging the concept of mutual exclusiveness of feminism and nationalism. The final passage makes a short detour overseas to link this theme with some historical developments outside the United States. While focusing on art photography, this study as a whole simultaneously constructs, from a European vantage point, a “*thick*” description of Mexican American history, identities, communities, cultural practices, and self-representations about which very little is known in Finland.
CHAPTER 4. HISTORY AS THE SITE OF IDENTIFICATION

“Why do you want history?” [...] – because in the culture I live in history is the name of the space where we define what matters.

Meaghan Morris (1992) 14

Photographs are never ‘evidence’ of history; they are themselves the historical.

John Tagg (1988) 15

“We go to our own pasts through history, through memory, through desire, not as a literal fact,” claims cultural critic Stuart Hall, touching upon the question of identity formation concurrently framed by personal and national narratives.16 Within the matrix of general principles and periodizations, public historical discourse has traditionally subordinated local and individual particularities so as to sustain the “coherence” of linear causality, the foundational principle of historiography. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s ideas about this “selective coherence,” Australian media critic Scott McQuire, for example, argues that “historical ‘events’ tend to become visible only to the extent that they conform to established discursive patterns, while those which resist or transgress the existing order often remain below the threshold of ‘knowledge’.” Modern history, he continues, “is inscribed in this field of tension, suspended between its powerful belief in the teleology of human progress and an increasing awareness of the fragmentation and dispersion of knowledge.” 17 This acute awareness of multiple histories informs the work of revisionist African American, Mexican American, and Native writers, who oppose national narratives of a singular internal “engine” of progress and instead point to a simultaneous, yet uneven development of plural societies formed through conquest, colonization, and transnational movements.18

However, relatively little thought has been given to images (outside of media studies, cultural studies, and anthropology) as primary sources of historical and epistemological knowledge, or to the practice of historical explanation in conjunction with image, word, and myth. The “visual illiteracy” among historians has relegated photographs and works of visual art to a secondary role of seemingly self-evident auxiliaries to literary products in spite of the fact that photographs and films nowadays comprise a large section of historical archives.19 Today’s poststructuralist criticism of photography is an ideological heir to twentieth-century European thinkers, of which perhaps the best-known is the French cultural critic Roland Barthes. His seminal work, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (1980), meditates from a very intimate point of view upon the elusive nature of photographs as evidence of past events and deceased people. Although his discussion aims to prove the affinity between photography and death, he also endorses photographs as a means of nostalgia, remembrance, and forgetting. The aspect of remembrance associates Barthes with Walter Benjamin, the German literary and cultural critic, whose initially optimistic attitude toward photography as an
agent of democracy, which would liberate art from its ritualistic origins, was undermined by the rise of fascism. His rather pessimistic 18 ‘theses’ on the concept of history were written just before his suicide in 1940 and published posthumously.\textsuperscript{20}

Both historiography and photography, claims author Eduardo Cadava in his treatise on Benjamin’s theses, are media of historical investigation. The first essay of this chapter, titled “The Machine in the Desert,” argues that Celia Álvarez Muñoz’s photo-mural \textit{El Límite} (1991), as contemporary art photography \textit{par excellence}, makes a strong case for Cadava’s claim that there is no thinking of history (and identity, I would add) “that is not at the same time a thinking of photography.” \textsuperscript{21} The beginning of the essay interweaves the personal and historical narratives circumscribing Álvarez Muñoz’s monumental work that depicts the locomotive – albeit through an image of a toy train – as a potent symbol of modernity and war in the United States. Rendering visible the construction of teleological ideologies (national, ethnic, and personal) inherent in both historiography and visual representation at large, the installation aims to \textit{relocate} historical discourse from the spheres of public, given, and universal to the private sphere of family memories, which span over one hundred years of transnational conflicts.

The second part of the essay comments on some critical interpretations that have added to \textit{El Límite} aspects of meaning that I consider either inaccurate or not sufficiently elaborated upon by the authors in question. First, I will challenge the necessity and validity of an attempt to assign to Álvarez Muñoz’s work the status of a “Chicano epic” (purported by Daniel Contreras) so as to authenticate her as a \textit{Chicana} artist with a mission of political unification. Second, I will expound upon the definition of Álvarez Muñoz as a conceptual artist (presented by art historian and critic Lucy Lippard), which I find quite problematic, taking into consideration the array of ideas and practices connected to this dominant art movement of the 1970s. The latter part of the essay will thus accentuate the \textit{textual affiliations} of the photo-mural within the context of avant-garde modernism and its multiple forms of expression.

Kathy Vargas’ series of twelve photo-montages titled \textit{My Alamo} (1995), which is the topic of the essay “Behold the Unblinking Eye,” focuses on the enactments of historical inscription taking place within and around a single edifice, namely the Mission of the Alamo, located in Vargas’ hometown San Antonio, Texas. The discussion of the series begins with a reflection on anthropologist Richard Flores’ exploration into the dynamics of the “historical production” of the Alamo Plaza through memory, films, historiography, and literature. Filling in some gaps in Flores’ examination, the essay proposes that, in her art work, Vargas engages in constructing an alternative reading of the battle between the Mexican and Texan troops in 1836 – epitomized in the cry “Remember the Alamo” – and reconnecting the myth/symbol with its local contingencies and ideological reproductions in various media, including Hollywood cinema. Then follows a discussion of some stylistic and formal features that situate Vargas’ art work in the historical frame of American modernist photography as well as in that of Chicano art, so as to elucidate how the images destabilize historical and aesthetic “knowledges” by distancing the viewer from their reified enactments.

The final part of the essay takes on historian Emma Pérez’s conceptualization of Mexican American history, suggesting an over-all interpretation of the series as a “colonial
Freudian fable,” that is, as a re-enactment of the oedipal drama between the white father, the Indian mother, and their mestizo offspring.  

(Several other Chicana writers have formulated their thoughts in Freudian terms, for example film critic Rosa Linda Fregoso and literary critic Norma Alarcón. The theoretical writings of the latter, in particular, have influenced my discussion of Chicana subjectivity in Chapter 6, connecting it with its historical, spatial, and psychological particularities.) The arguments in this chapter are founded on the proposition that the art work of both Álvarez Muñoz and Vargas consistently employ the tactic called “decolonial imaginary” or “decolonizing history” conceptualized, for example, by Emma Pérez and Antonia Castañeda, whose aim is to defuse the grand narratives of modernity from the point of view of the colonized subject. Says Pérez,

To think of the past as a colonial imaginary opens up traditional categories such as the “West” or the “frontier.” Traditional historiographical categories, questioned only from within for revision, have been built upon that which came before, and therefore have contributed to the colonial. […] Chicana/o historiography has been circumscribed by the traditional historical imagination. This means that even the most radical Chicana/o historiographies are influenced by the very colonial imaginary against which they rebel. […] If we are dividing history into these categories – colonial relations, postcolonial relations, and so on – then I would like to propose a decolonial imaginary as a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history. I think that the decolonial imaginary is that time lag between the colonial and postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated.  

In short, the project of these Chicana scholars is to reconceptualize history as a narration shaped by a multiplicity of voices rather than just the official ones that strive to sustain the uniformity of knowledge. This study interprets the art work under discussion as materializations of this kind of decolonizing position or sensibility.
The Machine in the Desert: *El Limite* by Celia Álvarez Muñoz

*Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway before our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low and the crooked shall be made straight and rough places plain.*

Isaiah 40:3–4

In the colonial era, the eighteen hundred-mile trail from Mexico City to Santa Fe, New Mexico was called *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*, the Royal Road of the Interior. Today in the United States, this old route runs approximately along the I-25 freeway between El Paso, Texas, and Taos in northern New Mexico. In 1880, the town of El Paso on the U.S.-Mexico border had a population of some seven hundred inhabitants. By 1920, some decades after Celia Álvarez Muñoz’s grandparents had crossed the border from Ciudad Juárez to El Paso, its population reached close to eighty thousand. The arrival of the railroad transformed and disrupted the history of the Southwest, El Norte, as it also transformed the lives of the people in the area, including the Álvarez family. In an exhibit of Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada’s turn-of-the-century prints, Álvarez Muñoz saw a picture depicting in lively detail a train wreck in northern Mexico. “My grandparents were in a similar derailment,” says Álvarez Muñoz in an interview:

My grandmother was pregnant at the time, and she was buried up to [her chest] in debris. Later, the baby was born with broken ribs. And my grandfather’s ear was severed in the crash. It wasn’t placed back on correctly, and he always had trouble with it, a lot of pain. Abscesses. That eventually led to his death.

Hence, the train acquired a special meaning in the historical memory of the family. Different versions of the *El Limite* (a railroad term for maximum cargo load of freight) installation have been on display in various venues, but the discussion in this essay is mainly based on the version included in Álvarez Muñoz’s retrospective exhibition in 2003 at the Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin, Texas (fig. 1, page 273). Originally, however, the photo-installation was commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego for the exhibition *La Frontera/The Border: Art about the Mexico/United States Border Experience*. In 1991, the installation/solo show *El Limite* opened in the museum and kicked off the larger exhibition, which then toured in Mexico and around the United States in 1993–94. Rather than exploring the question of ethnicity like most of the touring Chicano art exhibits during the past decade, this exhibition was organized around the theme of a specific geopolitical site – the border – and based on such charged national issues as immigration, deportation, citizenship, bilingualism, and biculturalism that also formed the political nexus of El Movimiento (see pages 45–47).
On the one hand, the exhibition thus incorporated the ethos of the Mexican American civil rights struggle. On the other hand, being a joint effort between a Chicano community arts center (i.e., the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego) and a mainstream art institution, it materialized the desire for national visibility and a long overdue cross-cultural collaboration as well as its counterpart – the fear of the commodifying effects of such a “cross-over” under the rubric of multicultural momentum. To some extent, Celia Álvarez Muñoz’s career as a self-identified Chicana artist has been riddled by this tension (which I will further contextualize in the final discussion of this study) even though all of her art work evolves from the paradigmatic tropes of Mexican American experience. *El Límite*, in particular, questions the mythic origins of the nation from a Chicana/o perspective because it “takes place” in an actual geographic site, the city of El Paso, located at the crossroads of two perpendicular lines drawn on the map. Both of these lines have also been metaphorically described as “scars,” namely the railroad and the U.S.-Mexico border (see pages 17-19).

The aims of this essay are, first, to discuss Álvarez Muñoz’s work in the context of photography as a *medium of representation* and, subsequently, in the context of the discourse of meaning that arises from the conception of the photograph as a *metaphor of history* – national, ethnic, and personal – that was initiated by early twentieth-century German cultural critics Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer and then elaborated by John Tagg, Allan Sekula and Eduardo Cadava, among others. The second aim is to focus the emphasis from the sphere of photography-cum-history onto a more specific field of cultural production and consumption, namely Chicano arts, in order to further support the following argument: the primary interest of *El Límite* does not lie in the representation of an alternative reading of history and identity (although this aspect should not be ignored in the interpretation). Instead, I will argue, the photo-mural inverts the scale and focus of an epic visual style so as to literally enlarge and make visible the production of difference and the reproduction of sameness inherent in representation at large. Thereby Álvarez Muñoz’s work reveals her interest in the forces of language and mediation that work as a kind of “secondary system” between us and so-called reality. This also was the main concern of the 1970s’ conceptual art movement succinctly expressed in the remarks of one of its best-known members, Bruce Nauman, “[b]etween the world and our mind there is a whole system that we take for granted […] Invented forms of language might be adequate only to one kind of environment.” Finally, therefore, the essay reflects upon Álvarez Muñoz’s position as a conceptual artist and a Chicana artist, a seemingly incongruous definition considering that Chicano art continues to be typically characterized as figurative.

*On the Wrong Side of the Tracks*

*El Límite* consists of large-scale black-and-white photographic images scanned onto two canvases. Each canvas depicts one part of a giant toy train made of sardine cans. The left panel (fig. 2, page 274) shows the disconnected rear end of the train coupled with the text:
Stories from Dad came from two sources; invented and real life adventures. At times hard to separate or distinguish. En las arenas, near the railroad tracks, they played with toys made out of things that don't belong together. Like combinations we were warned against. Nunca, never eat watermelon during a certain time of the month. Nunca tome leche cuando coma pescado. Nunca tome un helado cuando ajitado.

The right panel (fig. 3, page 274) shows the locomotive and three freight cars heading left; instead of a trail of smoke, the locomotive blows out a text relating the artist’s childhood memories of her father, an avid story-teller:

Some stories stemmed from trips to the Golden State on trains, he jumped on in El Paso, during the depression years. My favorite stories dealt with The War when he was moved across the world and throughout Europe, again, mostly by train. Little do we know that colic couplings may well become the main ingredients required to survive.

The Spanish words on the left panel carry the cultural legacy of the artist’s grandparents stranded in a train accident while visiting their old home from El Paso. But the story of the massive displacement of Mexican people in El Norte started earlier, at the onset of the Porfiriato, the reign of the dictator Porfirio Díaz from 1876 until 1910. While Díaz’s land policy favored big landowners in the name of progress and national unity, efficiently separating small farmers from their ranchitos, his project to erect an extensive national railroad system offered them access to employment opportunities across the border. Instead of modernizing Mexico’s economy, the railroad system thus depleted the population of small Mexican towns and villages and quickly fell into the hands of the same American corporations that owned the major railroads in the American West. During the early 1880s, several railroads – the Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, and the Texas and Pacific – reached El Paso, the home town of Álvarez Muñoz, making it the regional satellite for national and international trade, transportation, tourism, and labor migration. The major themes of the emergence of modern El Paso were economy and warfare. One of the continuous attractions of the region for enterprising prospectors and developers was already well articulated by the Spanish conquistador Juan de Oñate, whose equestrian statue now enhances the El Paso International Airport. Upon his arrival to colonize El Paso del Norte, he thus pronounced “I wish to take possession of the land [for the Spanish crown] on this day of the Ascension of the Lord, the 30th of April of the present year 1598,” and continued, “I also take possession of all the […] ores of gold, silver, copper, mercury, tin, iron, precious stones, salt, morales, alum, and all the lodes of whatever sort, quality, or condition.”

Whether embraced by Spanish colonizers, their descendants, or frontier pioneers extolled by the historian Fredrick Jackson Turner (see pages 41-42), the mission to pacify and “civilize” El Norte, the Southwest, was generously assisted by capital interests from
metropolitan centers. Employed by the railroad companies, professional photographers promoted the expansionist cause by documenting the intense progress of transcontinental construction work in large format prints and expensive photo-albums for federal and private investors and in cheap stereographic cards for the education of the general public. The images of such nationally celebrated 19th-century photographers as Alexander Gardner and A. J. Russell, “laid out visual stories confirming the railroads’ claims that they would one day traverse the vast expanses of the West, capitalize on its natural resources […], and establish a network of cities and towns that would provide economic opportunity for countless Americans.” A few dissenting voices against technological utopianism came from the emerging environmentalist movement and the Eastern literati, whose pastoral idealism was compromised by the noise of the locomotive. But, for the most part, professional painters as well as photographers whole-heartedly adopted the mission of manifest destiny and made a significant contribution to the ideological groundwork of the Union poised to push its way to the Pacific.

The toy train Celia Álvarez Muñoz commissioned from her over eighty-year-old father rearticulates with a comic twist these nineteenth-century expansionist, nationalist discourses. As such, the symbolic image is neither utopian nor unambiguously dystopian. However, the linear storyline is “sidetracked” by three conflicting facets: the artist’s furtive comments on the images themselves, her father’s quirky hand-craft, and the “truth” ascribed as given in the modernist myth of progress. In contrast to José Posada’s train on which Álvarez Muñoz’s grandparents traveled, the toy train is not derailed – it does not run on tracks because there are none, but hovers precariously across a white stretch of canvas with no horizon and no perspective. As a matter of fact, it has no apparent route since its halves are disjointed and unaligned, rather like the head and the tail cut off from the whole. Viewed in the context of what is generally considered “Western photography,” this somewhat pathetic representation of unending linear movement gone awry casts a shadow of doubt over the de facto object of celebration in nineteenth-century documentary and survey photography: the control of technology over unruly nature, associated with the control of the camera over the elusiveness of reality.

The arrival of modernity along the tracks signaled profound disruptive changes in local economies of the Southwest, changes that photographs of triumphant railroad construction teams did not show. When hard times hit, Álvarez Muñoz’s father, a second generation Mexican American, had to jump the train, join the ranks of migrant workers, and seasonally leave his family for the land of milk and honey (as southern California was advertised in railroad pamphlets designed to attract new settlers to the West). The timeless innocence and nostalgia of a simple childhood toy set the text on the same image in sharp relief: “Some stories stemmed from trips to the Golden State on trains he jumped on in El Paso, / during the depression years.” Moreover, by calling California the “Golden State,” Álvarez Muñoz evokes another story of massive human displacement driven by economic forces, which brought thousands of Asian workers overseas to seek their fortune and to cater to the growing demand for cheap labor in American mines and railroads. In China at that time, California was known by a name “larger than life,” i.e., Gold Mountain. When the gateway to Gold
Mountain was closed first to Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century and then to other Asians and Eastern Europeans by consecutive immigration acts in the early twentieth century, employers turned their hopes to Mexico, which became the major supplier of temporary labor for southwestern industry.38

Besides people, of course, the bare white space containing the toy train also displaces a landscape – not just any landscape, though, but the *ideologically constructed landscape* that carries concrete implications and meanings born over the centuries of European influence. Around the time of railroad construction, the descriptions and depictions of the West were riddled by a paradox; the garden of plenty enhanced by the touch of European civilization was interrupted by images of a hideous wilderness, a wasteland inhabited only by hostile savages and licentious Mexicans. On the one hand, this imaginary landscape embodied the promise of great riches and opportunities to European settlers; on the other hand, it achieved this effect only by conjuring a *tabula rasa*, an anti-place, an empty landscape with no history and no investment of previous human occupation or labor on the land. “In focusing on the most dramatic features of the western landscape,” writes photo-historian Martha Sandweiss, “in illustrating what Americans could accomplish through focused use of the West’s resources, the photographers and their patrons turned their backs to the history of human conflict in the West and set their eyes squarely on the region’s future.” 39

The white canvasses of *El Límite* can thus stand for the white page of historiography, geography, and travel writing, for the imagined virgin landscape of fine art painting and documentary photography, and for the “*tabula rasa*” of the mindset that obliterated all signs of long-term native and Mexican communities in the Southwest.40 For the viewer, moreover, it can function as an interactive silver screen of sorts, to reflect a sequence of images capable of refilling the empty space between the lines, behind the screen, and beyond the historical amnesia of the nation. Sparingly composed, the photo-mural does not show a single human figure, yet it does, indeed, involve a large number of embodied and gendered subjects through the artist’s authorial voice and the strong physical presence of her father, the anti-hero, who not only recreated his childhood toy but also, in its image, resurrected the whole community of working-class Mexicans in El Paso.

During the economic boom prompted by border commerce and the railroad, tens of thousands of Mexicans crossed the bridge from Ciudad Juárez to settle *en el otro lado*, on the U.S. side of the Rio Grande. In El Paso, the barrio of Chihuahita grew between the river and the railroad tracks, close to workplaces and the border but far enough from the amenities and the middle-class neighborhoods of the city. The living conditions in the barrio were primitive, unhealthy, and dangerous, and got even worse during the 1910s’ influx of Mexican Revolution refugees. The urge to regulate visibility of the poor as a class and their invisibility as individuals led to total residential and educational segregation, which in turn guaranteed a large reserve of cheap, unskilled, non-unionized labor for the region’s economy based on extractive production of raw materials.41 This social *status quo* was further buttressed by labor union ostracism, scientific theories of racial difference, and legal restrictions that barred Mexicans from attaining American citizenship. Eventually the dire social circumstances in Chihuahita and other Mexican barrios started to attract public attention, not because of concern about
human suffering involved but because they became perceived as a general health hazard and an
eyesore in the rapidly developing modern city. Consequently, the progressive forces joined
hands with the Army to sanitize and Americanize the barrio dwellers, albeit not to stop their
labor exploitation. Celia Álvarez Muñoz, for example, benefited from early experimentation
with school bussing in the 1950s as, when given the opportunity, she volunteered to go to an
Anglo-dominant high school on a hill on the other side of the tracks.

Things had not worked out equally well for her father, whose toy train evokes lively
childhood images of debris-littered barrio playgrounds where he learned the ropes of survival.
“En las arenas, near the railroad tracks, they played with toys made out of / things that don’t
belong together.” The athletic hobby of jumping freight trains provided him with more useful
skills than school did when the post-World War I boom turned into a bust in 1929. The ensuing
decade of depression saw him venturing beyond the barrio on his own, surviving economic
hardship, and finally, ironically enough, earning his sense of full American citizenship due to
the war in Europe. Meanwhile his daughter grew up under the strong influence of her mother’s
side of the family, whose values were more middle-class and entrepreneurial, yet less
patriarchal than his. While the father crossed national and international borders without ever
really leaving the barrio, the daughter was busy learning how to steer roller skates and how to
balance a bicycle without falling down on one or the other side.

Besides economy, with its leading role in geographical, demographic, and social
change in the Southwest, the impact of militarization and war has continuously engraved its
mark on the land, people, and communities. The powerful involvement of the federal
government throughout the region dates back to the late nineteenth-century Apache wars when
the U.S. Army rode around the desert, chasing bands of raiding Indians. After Mexican
revolutionary forces occupied Juárez in the 1910s, established their headquarters there and
turned the town into a hotbed of revolutionary activity, agitation and violent disorder increased
along the border, intensifying its militarization and further aggravating racial tensions already
strained by World War I. Fort Bliss, the U.S. military base in El Paso, welcomed 60,000
National Guardsmen to help its troops protect the border and turn the base into a major army
post, which it remains today. Together with Biggs Air Force Base in El Paso, White Sands
Missile Range, Kirkland Air Force Base, and Los Alamos and Sandia Laboratories in New
Mexico, Fort Bliss constitutes the “Mecca” of the war technology machine of the Southwest.
The culmination of this development took place in July 16, 1945, when the first atomic bomb
was detonated at Tularosa Basin some hundred miles north of El Paso. That arid stretch of land
– traversed by the old road, El Camino Real – is also known as El Jornada del Muerto,
ominously enough, after the death of a German trader there in 1666.

By placing vintage photographs of the Mexican Revolution side by side with images
that engage computer technology (for example, a geographic “satellite image” drawing that
showed a fine line of railroad tracks traversing across the land from Texas to Arizona to
California), the original 1991 El Límite installation made an assessment of the military
campaigns of its own time as well. Operation Desert Storm in Iraq, which also happened in
1991, relied heavily on computerized satellite imaging and real-time media coverage of war
operations, which turned the war into a living-room TV-spectacle that aspired to unify the
nation against the common enemy. The selection and overt manipulation of photographic images in the *El Límite* installation, on the contrary, alienated the viewer from the assumed subject, the “truth” of warfare, by foregrounding the photographic construction of meaning and the vexing presence of the photographer therein. This reminds the viewer that, since the U.S. Civil War, photographic images of war scenes, while interpreted by most viewers as factual historical records, have often vigorously contributed to the creation of a coherent narrative and moral authority to justify the atrocities of war.46

If we understand space, as well as subjectivities, as a materialization of history, these military events and installations evidently have in a tangible way materialized the hopes and fates of large numbers of southwesteners, too. In hopes for a better future for themselves and their families, thousands of young men and women of color joined the Army in the 1940s – not unlike today – and were shipped overseas to fight the war that had little to do with their lives at home.47 Among these soldiers, Álvarez Muñoz’s father was introduced to globalization in Alaska and on the German front. “My favorite stories dealt with The War when he / was moved across the world and throughout Europe, again, / mostly by train.” The unassuming tenor of a child enchanted by faraway places associates this family story with other stories of other trains, entirely different from her father’s adventures to southern California and back. This time, however, his own agency diminishes as he was moved across the world, largely by the same means of transportation as, some ten years later, thousands of undocumented Mexicans would be moved across the border back to Mexico by the government program named Operation Wetback.48 Yet, tells Álvarez Muñoz, her father served with pride and probably gained a stronger sense of belonging and citizenship although he never got around to make use of the G.I. Bill that would have granted him free college education.

“The Camino Real,” declare the writers of a picture book about the old route, “first and foremost, is a symbol of the eternal human desire to move, to wander, to see what lies over what the Spanish called [las sierras azules].”49 Álvarez Muñoz’s art work makes it apparent that this human desire and its fulfillment come with a price. The sense of personal freedom and deeper understanding is tinged with a trace of nostalgia, not with the kind of “imperialist nostalgia” suffered by those – whether writers, photographers, or investors – who longingly reminisce over older societies and environments they themselves helped to obliterate, but with a kind of nostalgia without regret.50 As *El Límite* suggests to us, movement, travel, and experiences of crossing are multiply coded, overdetermined by their retellings, and contested by the inevitable differences between those who traverse space, from migrant workers to refugees to soldiers to tourists and modern-day professional nomads, such as artists and academics.

*Breaking Down the Iron Horse*

Contemporary art, like any expression of cultural identity, does not have a single place of origin. Therefore, the rest of this essay is dedicated to the charting of Álvarez Muñoz’s work at the interstices of two art movements, the heyday of which happened about at the same time in
the 1970s. One is Chicano art, closely associated with the El Movimiento “cultural
renaissance,” and the other is the conceptual movement, dominant in the “mainstream.” Over
the span of three decades, these art movements have changed shape, transformed into “new
styles,” and “interbred” with other art discourses. Nevertheless, both of them continue to wield
strong influence on artists, who have frequently risked their careers and credibility by crossing
largely ephemeral borders that crisscross the art world. The rest of the essay will open with a
review on the El Límite installation in the context of Mexican American art, more specifically
referring to the Chicano mural movement and its affinity to the epic tradition, and then extend
the discussion to the domain of “mainstream” conceptual art.

Epic art, by definition, narrates histories rather than represents ideas via static
iconography; traditionally in painting (as well as in photography and film), it comes into
existence when the Greek word epós, an unwritten collective form of knowledge, is delivered
through a closed narrative form, a story. Epic stories typically extol the accomplishments of
heroes, whose hegemonic masculinity and individuality is incorporated in and disseminated
through the authority of the narrator. These epic – and hence explicitly masculine – qualities
can be attributed to El Límite only provisionally in spite of the installation’s apparent cinematic
scale, monumental span of time and space, and the employment of certain narrative forms. At
best, Álvarez Muñoz’s work could be called a pseudo-epic of sorts since it incorporates subtle
criticism of the symbolic abstraction of meaning that sustains hegemonic power without
offering an alternative narrative closure as a replacement.

How does the photo-mural respond to its epic appearance then? First, it replaces the
voice of the omnipotent narrator with the voice of the artist herself, who reflects upon her own
childhood experiences by juxtaposing the stories of her father and the instructions of the
female family members who brought her up. Second, it creates a surreal topsy-turvy world
where the formidable scale of “predetermined” global change is transposed onto the ad hoc
playground of barrio children, whose toys made of urban detritus appropriate and lampoon the
sublime grandeur of the machines of technology. Third, it constructs an uneasy hiatus between
its narrative content (which introduces a world full of color and adventure as well as resistance
and hardship) and its formal content that confines its exuberant subject matter within the bare
space of a white image field and black print. These disruptions articulate the impossibility of a
simple epic closure, also signaling that the acknowledgment of grand narratives does not
automatically signify an unambiguous endorsement of these narratives even as vehicles of
social empowerment.

If we, after all, take issue with literary critic Daniel Contreras’ argument that El Límite
should, indeed, be called a Chicano epic, some thought needs to be given to its position in
relation to the two perennial epic forms of Mexican American cultural expression, namely the
mural movement and Chicano epic poetry. The Chicano mural movement was initially inspired
by Mexican muralism, which emerged in post-revolutionary Mexico as a modernist art style
designed to educate the largely illiterate Indian population about the ideals of modern Mexican
society (see pages 44-45). With objectives somewhat similar to this model, muralism in
California became the flagship of the Chicano civil rights movement and the Mexican
American artistic and literary renaissance that started in the late 1960s. Thousands of large
collaborative mural paintings that proliferated first in the barrios of California and then throughout the Southwest reinvigorated Mexican and indigenous cultural heritage, ethnic pride, and grassroots activism.\textsuperscript{55}

On the one hand, the murals fought against entrenched racism and affirmed Mexican American identity by transposing themes from the indigenous history of the Americas upon depictions of life in economically impoverished but culturally vibrant urban barrios. On the other hand, they constructed a closed epic narrative, based on the fantasy heritage of indigenous Aztec origins, which excluded not only those of biracial/bicultural descent, but also present-day Indians, gays, lesbians, and women who breached the ideal image of Chicano womanhood, symbolized either by the Virgin of Guadalupe or by \textit{La Adelita}, the female soldier of the Mexican Revolution.\textsuperscript{56} Thus, in spite of celebrating indigenous heritage, the Chicano epic fashioned in the murals as well as in El Plan Espiritual de Aztatlán of 1968 (see page 47) did not fundamentally conflict with the ethos of Juan de Oñate’s speech of possession in 1598, “In the name of the most holy trinity and the invisible eternal unity, deity, and majesty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in one, the one and only God, who, with his eternal love, omnipotent power, and infinite wisdom, rules, governs, and orders mightily and tenderly from sea to sea, from eternity to eternity, at the beginning and end of all things […] I wish to take possession of the land […]” \textsuperscript{57} The essentialized Chicano subject became solidly grounded in the Catholic faith and indigenous, homo-social \textit{patria}.

However, the ideological closure inherent in Chicano muralism did not go without challenge even during its heyday. Various women muralists, in particular, pushed against the confining walls of the Barrio (constructed as the sanctuary of cultural nationalism), but perhaps the loudest dissenting voice of self-criticism came from a performance group called ASCO (meaning \textit{nausea} in Spanish), whose melodramatic “camp spectacles” disturbed both mainstream and Chicano art society. In a performance piece called \textit{Instant Mural} (1974), for example, some members of the group were taped on a wall to question “our own complicity in the perpetuation of boundaries which confine us by exposing their frailty (masking tape)” and to call for an exploration of new conceptual and iconographic territories.\textsuperscript{58} Álvarez Muñoz’s art, albeit far from being melodramatic, has responded to this call by destabilizing the conceptual territory of nationalism in which Chicano art, to some extent, continues to be rooted. Thus, rather than displaying any kind of genealogical affinity to or, conversely, overt stand against the mural movement, \textit{El Límite} appears to draw from the artistic sentiments of its discontents by reorganizing the visual “cosmology” of the Chicano epic form with the help of photographic technology.

An essential part of this “cosmology” is embedded in the concept of \textit{la familia}, which naturalizes the heterosexual social hierarchy and women’s allotted place therein. The original \textit{El Límite} installation in the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego accentuated the role of women \textit{in war} by including a copy of the popular vintage photograph of a soldadera, one of the revolutionary female soldiers exalted in the popular symbolic image of \textit{La Adelita}. As in the original print from the 1910s, she is leaning out from a train perhaps to find out what is happening farther ahead; but in the \textit{El Límite} version of the photograph, the artist blurs her face, symbolically erasing both her identity and her presence as a sign of unambiguous
historical meaning. In a more concrete way, that is what happened after the Mexican Revolution to real-life *adelitas*, too, who had to give up their pants and the guns they so proudly carry in vintage photographs and resume their traditional domestic roles as mothers and wives of returning soldiers. Of course, the urgency to “re-domesticate” women in post-war eras has affected all women, regardless of their race or ethnicity, by isolating home as the hallowed space of the ideological and physical reproduction of the nation. After World War II, while U.S. war veterans entered colleges to receive free education, women were instructed in economic house keeping and many lost their jobs. The war and militant nationalism, as a road to emancipation, has evidently offered uneven prospects demarcated not only by race, but also by gender. *El Limite* destabilizes the gendered concept of family, home, and community as the sole bedrock of Mexican American identity while weaving its narration around temporal and spatial mobility characteristic of photo-technology. It offers the spectator a dizzying satellite view of a fine line stretching from Texas to California. On the ground level, the same line was followed by the train that carried Álvarez Muñoz’s father Francisco, escorted by her son Andres, toward San Diego to take part in the opening reception of the *El Limite* installation in 1991.

This kind of conceptual complexity that intersects both home and travel, local and global, private life and its public reframings, can perhaps be found only in the work of another El Pasoan, author and literary scholar Arturo Islas, whose novels *The Rain God* and *Migrant Souls* retell the stories of his own family members and their border crossings through fictional representation. With its generational flow of characters and a (semi-)autobiographical center of consciousness, the family saga Islas composes evidently aligns with European modernist literature rather than with such typically Mexican American literary traditions as the biographical testimony or the *corrido*, the epic border ballad. As the canonized literary form of Chicano cultural nationalism, the latter lineage has been well-researched by Américo Paredes and José Limón. According to Limón, Chicano epic poetry – exemplified by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’ *I am Joaquin* (1967) and José Montoya’s *El Louie* and *Los Vatos* (1969) – emerged as a creative response to the “anxiety of influence” stirred by its historical antecedent, i.e., the Mexican border corrido, distinctly Spanish in style.

Thus Chicano epic poetry, interpreted as a redressive symbolic re-enactment of violent social turmoil (in this case, the civil rights struggle), falls rather seamlessly into the paradigm of an oedipal family drama, with its standard plot of rebellious (indigenous) sons rising against the authoritarian (white) father. However, the oedipal thematization of a generation schism between parents and children does not agree particularly well with Álvarez Muñoz’s work, whose depiction of personal and national dramas appears wryly subversive rather than brashly rebellious, as evident in her assertion that “Stories from Dad came from two sources: invented / and real life adventures. At times hard to separate or distinguish.” Therefore, the narrative axis of the social drama unfolding in *El Limite* shifts from an exceptional individual (the epic hero) as a surrogate for “the people” onto two technological inventions – the locomotive and the camera – as powerful but ambiguous, potentially repressive vehicles of historical knowledge.
Even though the preceding discussion implies that it is unwarranted to call Álvarez Muñoz’s photo-mural a new Chicano epic, I find Daniel Contreras’ argumentation insightful in other respects. His concern about the disappearance of an all-encompassing political theory betrays the matching distrust of local socio-political activism of which he reproves Fredric Jameson, the Marxist theorist of postmodern culture. Similar negative reaction to contemporary art (and theory) has been quite common among left-wing literati, who resent the lack of “common cause” in today’s political practices and discourses. Accordingly, Contreras interprets *El Límite* first and foremost as a potential unifier of fragmented postmodern politics. While I do not think that his argument does justice to Álvarez Muñoz’s work, I still believe he is quite right to contend that the phrase “coliccouplings,” as a means of empowerment, expresses a “call for complexity, and it is not identity politics that are inherently unproductive, but only particular articulations of them.” What he refers to in evoking the problems involved in identity politics (which I will return to in the final discussion of this study) is embedded in the key sentence printed on the photo-mural, “Little do we know that colic couplings may well become the main ingredients required to survive.”

“Things that don’t belong together” converge with “coliccouplings,” ambiguously evoking disease, cramps, convulsions, excruciating sense of pain, violent separations, and reconnections. The phrase, “coliccouplings,” can thus be interpreted as a sign of multiple alienation: linguistic, generational, cultural, and psychological. In the deepest sense, it can refer to an almost life-long silence between an absent father and a self-searching daughter. On a social and cultural level, it points to the fear of self-annihilation in the face of the tragic condition of “assimilation,” of having to make an impossible choice between two cultural and national identities, says Álvarez Muñoz. Paradoxically, while quick assimilation is expected of all immigrants entering the United States, it has simultaneously been obstructed for example by a systematic stratification of population due to railroad and freeway construction. In El Paso, San Antonio, Austin, Los Angeles, San Diego, just to mention a few cities, major transportation arteries slice through barrios or cut them off from downtown areas, thus erecting “concrete curtains” of race and class, or internal borders that function— not unlike the national border—as an abjection machine that turns all individuals into potential criminals, *coyotes*, *pollos*, *ilegales.* Bringing the entire arrangement of text and image in *El Límite* into focus, the phrase, “coliccouplings,” conveys two contrasting arrays of meaning: one positive, referring to the desire to push the limits of photography and to overcome one’s personal limits or the limits imposed by others; and the other one negative, foreshadowing an infinite deferral of reconciliation and an ultimate limit of sorts— of weight, of growth, of extraction, of exploration.

*A Differential Trail of Thought*

Complete with beautifully printed color photographs of art works, the coffee-table-format publication titled *Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Art: Artists, Works, Culture, and Education* (2002) includes biographical essays about some two hundred Chicana/o artists, thus
creating the unofficial canon of Chicana/o art of the twenty-first century. In her entry on Celia Álvarez Muñoz in this volume, Lucy Lippard writes that Álvarez Muñoz is a conceptual artist working “in the spaces among media, ideas, and cultures,” and “her work creates new meaning through its combination of signs and symbols drawn from different communication systems, including illustration, painting, advertising, design, photography, mixed-media, installation, printmaking, […]” Considering the quite conventional aesthetic criteria adopted by the editors, this statement appears somewhat out of place, but what exactly does it mean and where does it situate Álvarez Muñoz’s work in the field of (post)modern art? Like the first conceptual artists of the late 1960s, whose enduring influence can be witnessed during a visit to almost any contemporary art museum, Álvarez Muñoz negotiates the inherent tensions of the art world. Her identification with the history of avant-garde practices therefore is a partial legacy, especially so in regard to the concepts of the art object and the artist’s subjectivity.

Shifra Goldman exposes the bare bones of the conflict between early Chicano art practice and avant-garde modernism:

Chicano murals, born in the heyday of “modernism” – with its emphasis on formal elegance, abstraction to the point of minimalism, and an elite appeal – insisted on representationalism if not actually social realism of the type brought to its apotheosis in Mexican murals. The murals insisted on “messages,” on narrative, on historical painting, in a period which denied these attributes in art.

Avant-garde modernism, however, was far from being as monolithic as Goldman implies. As an heir to the 1910s’ and 1920s’ radical art movements, such as dadaism and surrealism, it was changing the paradigm of modernism, generating such new art forms as performance, Fluxus, and earth art. While taking its cue from the formal rigor of minimalism, early conceptualism had a rather utopian objective of dismantling the modernist practice of art itself, determined by the dictates of art institutions and the art market. This enterprise included social dimensions, too, ranging from the democratization of art production (and reception) by detaching them from the art market, to the demystification of the “unique art object” and the elevated style of “art talk.” The radical mission eventually failed, according to self-designated ex-conceptualist Ian Burn, as conceptual art (marketed as a new “authentic” art movement) was rapidly commodified and absorbed into the New York-based art establishment during the 1970s. Moreover, dematerializing the art object into a semiotic language game did not lead to its democratization but to even further mystification. The early conceptualists’ failure to accomplish their original goals has not, however, diminished the significance of the movement as a historical phenomenon that overlapped both modernism and postmodernism and provided conceptual tools for an emerging body of artists alien to the modernist ideal of art, regarded as elitist, white, male, and detached from the rest of the world.

How, then, does Álvarez Muñoz’s work relate to the multiple styles and contesting philosophies of conceptual art? While adhering to some iconographic characteristics of conceptual art (such as the integration of text and the sophistication of visual design), it should be noted that, in essence, Álvarez Muñoz’s work is deeply contradictory to the basic tenets of
the kind of conceptualism delineated by, for example, artists Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt, the leading figures during the early stages of the movement. Although Kosuth’s eclectic model of an artist as a writer-philosopher who produces work in order to propose theories and test hypotheses (he called this analytic conceptualism) is not completely out of sync with her interests as an artist, its deeper implications clash with the meaning conveyed by such work as El Límite, which is certainly not strictly confined within the closed circuit of semiotic signs or autonomous art talk. Sol LeWitt’s paradigm of art, on the other hand, negated the role of the artist’s agency to the point of immaterializing him/her altogether during the automated art process. Says LeWitt,

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work [...] In other forms of art the concept may be changed in the process of execution [...] When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes art.70

Peculiar enough, his contestation of modernist formalism yet adopted the appearance of formalism and “pure art,” presumably unaffected by the material world. What surfaces once again is the idea of the machine – sublime, disembodied, anonymous, and self-contained – as a transcendental moral agent, epitomizing a teleological trajectory toward perfection in society and, in LeWitt’s conceptualization, in art.71 The machine, however, leaves no room for desire, fantasy, or humor – the trade marks of Álvarez Muñoz’s work, which is highly reflective and skillfully crafted, but also chatty and self-confidently subjective. Thus El Límite challenges the “death of the author,” first pronounced by Roland Barthes in order to question interpreters’ reliance on the artist’s assumed intentions,72 then vehemently argued for by a plethora of post-structuralist theorists, and eventually disputed by feminist writers and artists, who reinserted the body into contemporary art, insisting on the indeterminacy underlying the mind/body dichotomy. In the photo-mural, the conceptual component conveyed by its subtle aesthetics intersects with the factual body (of the artist) in the formation of subjectivity as well as in the description of social structures that delineate its emergence. As a result, the work demystifies the agency of the artist, utilizing fully the narrative capacity of texts and images while evading their predominantly theoretical repercussions.

Attentive to the art-historical underpinnings described above, Álvarez Muñoz’s work displays an affinity with the ethos of post- or new conceptualist artists,73 who probe language not as an overpowering and isolated system of information but as a synthetic discursive practice, organized by social, racial, and sexual power structures. (Of the new conceptualists, Victor Burgin, Jenny Holzer, and Mary Kelly in particular have concentrated on studying the complexities of subject formation.74) Yet, Álvarez Muñoz’s work has an additional political spin of its own that stems from her ethno-racial background. Again and again, the texts of El Límite articulate two levels of experience, two disparate spaces complementing and opposing each other simultaneously, both suspect. “Like combinations we were warned against. / Nunca, never eat watermelon during a certain time of the month. / Nunca tome leche cuando
coma pescado. / Nunca tome un helado cuando ajitado.” At this instance, the narrative voice suddenly shifts over from the artist and her father to the female family members, also switching the language and discursive mode of the entire work. The rather permeable language qualifying (in English) the male public sphere of travel, war, and technology turns into direct speech (in Spanish) in the private sphere of domestic cultural reproduction governed by women. Therein the child is instructed through linguistic coercion to feel shame, to distinguish between good and evil, to subdue her unruly libido under the law of the symbolic, and to embrace traditional family values of femininity and religion.

Demarcating the boundaries of the female body by advice, warnings, and threats also demarcates the social boundaries of a community under duress. An educator herself, Álvarez Muñoz has a keen eye for the repressive aspects of language in the service of socialization and normalization; the heterosexual family in her work appears just as any other closed binary system constructed by the opposite, yet complementary poles of the mother and the father.75 This tension is reinforced in the composition of the entire work itself, which resembles a giant-size open photo album, the cherished container of family snapshots. That certain things are incompatible and should not go together, that they make impure combinations, alert and attract, and create an erotic tension is reminiscent of one of the most enduring narratives hailing from the conquest, that of miscegenation. Generally purity rites (like the ones here mediated through Spanish sayings, dichos) are set up against bodily intrusion, the mixing of liquids, and the disintegration of the unified self. In Mexican American culture, rites like that undermine the primarily mainstream popular strategy of romanticizing racial/cultural blending for the sake of the narrative coherence of the nation, and perhaps they have also served to ward off very real, historical appropriations of property that have happened because of racially mixed marriages.76

Although the interpretation suggested above might stray quite far from the idea the artist had in mind in the first place, it appears quite obvious that the narrative coherence of El Límite is not subverted by way of obscure, semi-unconscious political intuition but by the artist’s meticulous orchestration of the visual and verbal elements in her work, perfectly balanced so as not to fall on either side of the track.77 Therefore Álvarez Muñoz’s art work — her oeuvre as a whole — is re-electrifying not only the progressive momentum of conceptual art (by taking distance from the art movement’s conservative, formalist characteristics), 78 but also the old discourse of photography (as art) and its function. She brings her work out from the representational space of the museum and art magazines, distributing it more widely through books accessible to a larger audience and, increasingly, displaying it through collaborative public art projects dealing with Mexican American history. Her heterogeneous politics of display and placement thus work against the commodifying and neutralizing tendency of the art world which dulled the political edge of the early conceptual movements and is also rapidly integrating one of its most controversial offsprings, postmodern photography.

In sum, borders that cross through Álvarez Muñoz’s art production as they cross her identity seem to ultimately work for her benefit, making it legitimate to describe her art as quintessentially conceptual as well as “post-Chicano,” a term coined by art historian Victor Zamudio-Taylor. Neither seeking to invent a new phase in the stylistic evolution of Mexican American art nor implying an appeasing sense of social and political change, the prefix “post”
in Zamudio-Tailor’s term acknowledges a growing differentiation and self-awareness among Chicana/o artists. While evading the canonical signifiers of Chicano art, Álvarez Muñoz yet embraces its most salient qualities – its intimacy with the public and its commitment to narrate untold histories. One of her recent public works in Texas engages the history of San Antonio through the story of the San Antonio River, the most vital geographic feature of the city. The story told by the straight railroad lines cutting across the western landscape remains inert compared to that of the river, winding through downtown San Antonio and reminding us that rivers can be bridges, too, not only boundaries, bending here and there, como la vida, … continuamente, to borrow the words of the artist.

4 In the U.S., male photographers played a particularly prominent role, firstly, in geographic surveys and expeditions, whose main aim was to make an inventory of the natural resources of the continent, and, secondly, in the documentation of people as well as historical events, such as the Civil War, in order to provide visual props to an emerging social order based on racial hierarchies. In her fascinating study of women photographers in the United States, Judith Fryer Davidov (1998) focuses on those few women who created formidable careers in the context of the early 20th-century modernist and documentary movements. Her study, however, gives little information about women photographers outside these spheres, noting that most were “middle-class women who had money and time to devote to leisure pursuits” (page 81).
8 Ibid., 17.
9 This approach adheres to the appeal of the pre-eminent Chicano anthropologist Renato Rosaldo in his criticism of Benedict Anderson’s notions of nation building. Renato Rosaldo’s comment builds on Anderson’s conviction that national communities should be judged by the style in which they are imagined, not in terms of whether they are authentic or inauthentic, and therefore it is crucial for Mexican Americans to become agents in the imagining of themselves. Rosaldo emphasizes the heterogeneity of nations and different subject positions of its citizens by remarking that “[m]embership in imagined national communities appears to be a contract that requires constant negotiation. […] How do marginalized groups imagine themselves and the nations they inhabit?” Rosaldo, “Re-imagining National Communities,” SCCR Working Paper Series, No. 36, Stanford University, 1984, 21; http://ccsre.stanford.edu/PUBL_SCCRpapers.htm.
10 Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (originally published in French in 1974) and Mary Poovey, “The Production of Abstract Space,” in Making Worlds: Gender, Metaphor, Materiality, ed. by Susan Hardy Aiken, Ann Brigham, Sallie Marston, and Penny Waterstone (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1998) 69-89. I find Michel de Certeau’s theories, commonly used e.g. in sociology and ethnography, less useful in the study of visual culture.
11 Ibid., 70-71. Italics added.
remaking the earth as a controlled, managed Garden of Eden” (page 76).

In the modern narrative, technology (symbolized by the train) is combined with the divine imperative in All of these narratives in their own way merge biblical ideas about the fall, recovery, and the return to “original” outlined the big narratives of western culture – the Christian, the modern, the environmentalist, and the feminist.

New York and London, 2003) 111. In her study, Merchand (a feminist historian of environment and science) has

Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example. See also Antonia I. Castañeda,

praxis of her scholarship, positioning them in the framework of transnational postcolonial criticism theorized by

in synthesis, the public world.” da Glória Marroni de Velázquez, “Changes in Rural Society and Domestic Labor in Atlixco, Puebla, 1940-1990,” in


An insightful discussion on this topic is presented by Martha Sandweiss in Print the Legend: Photographs and the American West (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Illuminations (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 217-252; 253-264. Benjamin’s contemporary, Siegfried Kracauer, assesses the link between historiography and photography in the following criticism of historicism:

On the whole, advocates of such historiist thinking [endnote 4] believe they can explain any phenomenon purely in terms of its genesis. That is, they believe in any case that they can grasp historical reality by constructing the course of events in their temporal succession without any gaps. Photography presents a spatial continuum; historicism seeks to provide the temporal continuum.


Historian Emma Pérez is one of the radical Chicana scholars whose criticism of traditional historiography as well as conventional Chicano history springs from her solid feminist outlook and engagement in discussion on postcolonialism. Her main work, The Decolonial Imaginary (1999), outlines both the theory and praxis of her scholarship, positioning them in the framework of transnational postcolonial criticism theorized by Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example. See also Antonia I. Castañeda, “Presidarias y Pobladoras: The Journey North and Life in Frontier California,” in Chicana Critical Issues (1993) 73-94.

Pérez, 1999, 5-6.

Quoted in Carolyn Merchant, Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture (Routledge: New York and London, 2003) 111. In her study, Merchant (a feminist historian of environment and science) has outlined the big narratives of western culture – the Christian, the modern, the environmentalist, and the feminist. All of these narratives in their own way merge biblical ideas about the fall, recovery, and the return to “original” Eden. In the modern narrative, technology (symbolized by the train) is combined with the divine imperative in “remaking the earth as a controlled, managed Garden of Eden” (page 76).


Alicia Gaspar de Alba, “From CARA to CACA: The Multiple Anatomies of Chicano/a Art at the Turn of the New Century,” in Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies, 26:1 (Spring 2001) 205-231, see page 220.


32 An article in *The Austin American-Statesman on January 12, 2004 relates the prolonged dispute about the Oñate statue, which has caused bad blood between the pueblo Indians and the Hispanics of the area. That the statue was renamed *The Equestrian, removed from downtown El Paso, and placed in the airport terminal finally seemed to placate the raw emotions.


36 The clash between Jeffersonian agrarian philosophy and industrial mercantilism during the industrial revolution has been insightfully studied by literary critic Leo Marx, who discusses for example Nathaniel Hawthorne’s antagonism toward the prevailing faith in progress expressed in his 1843 satirical short story, “The Celestial Railroad.” The following extract from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales, “The Celestial Railroad.” (1843) gives a good idea of his sentiments: “NOT A GREAT WHILE AGO, passing through the gate of dreams, I visited that region of the earth in which lies the famous city of Destruction. It interested me much to learn that, by the public spirit of some of the inhabitants, a railroad has recently been established between this populous and flourishing town, and the Celestial City. Having a little time upon my hands, I resolved to gratify a liberal curiosity to make a trip thither. Accordingly, one fine morning, after paying my bill at the hotel, and directing the porter to stow my luggage behind a coach, I took my seat in the vehicle and set out for the Station-house. It was my good fortune to enjoy the company of a gentleman- one Mr. Smooth-it-away- who, though he had never actually visited the Celestial City, yet seemed as well acquainted with its laws, customs, policy, and statistics, as with those of the city of Destruction, of which he was a native townsman. Being, moreover, a Director of the railroad corporation, and one of its largest stockholders, he had in his power to give me all desirable information respecting that praiseworthy enterprise.” Retrieved on January 23, 2004 from http://www.robininstrument.com/cgi-bin/showtext.pl/Literture/american/1800-1890/hawthorne-celestial-477.txt. See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, c2000, originally published in 1964) 26-27, and Susan Danly and Leo Marx, eds., *The Railroad in American Art: Representations of Technological Change (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1988).

37 In exhibition after exhibition, photography of the West (of the U.S.) is defined as only encompassing the survey and documentary projects carried out by men who considered themselves not artists in the first place but entrepreneurs. The catalogues of art exhibitions seldom comment on this inconsistency. See, e.g., Sandra Phillips et al., *Crossing the Frontier: Photographs of the Developing West, 1849 to the Present (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1996); May Castleberry, ed., *Perpetual Mirage: Photographic Narratives of

37 Both nick names refer to California’s 1849 gold rush.


40 This process is compellingly described and analyzed in Mary Pat Brady, Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space (2002, see pages 17-21, quotation on page 21). Anglo surveyors, ethnographers, travel writers, and such, writes Brady, described Arizona as available for colonization, and “The paintings and drawings that accompany these accounts emphasize the vastness of the terrain, the smallness and scarcity of inhabitants, the abandoned and ruined status of ranchos and towns, and the extraordinary and strange natural formations.”

41 See Mary Pooeye’s study on the social production of abstract space in Hardy Aiken (1998) 69-89.

42 Garcia, 1981, 85-154; Luckingham, 1982, 49-52. In her e-mail message on Oct. 8, 2005, Álvarez Muñoz pointed out that all of the area called Chihuahuita today was not uniform in the past, but varied in its boundaries and socio-economic makeup. “The description of Chihuahuita must be about the section from Chihuahua St. to the border. The dividing line was 7th street, which separated Chihuahua St. from Canal Street where my grandparents ultimately settled. That section south of Canal Street was composed mostly of tenement housing and, yes, was pretty bad. […] Your assessment of the conditions surrounding the toy train is probably right on the money.” So Canal Street where Alvarez Muñoz’s family ended up living in the 1950s consisted mostly of private houses, but it was however a far cry from the middle-class neighborhood that her mother aspired to.

43 Information about Álvarez Muñoz’s childhood and her family history is based on the discussions with the artist on May 10, 2003 and January 25, 2004 in Austin, Texas.

44 Luckingham, 1982, 75-77. See also Peter B. Hales, Atomic Spaces: Living on the Manhattan Project (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, c1997).

45 Preston et al., 1998, 23.


47 Today, January 22, 2004, the death toll of American troops in Iraq is over 500, a good many of them African American or Latino. On January 22, 2004, The Austin American-Statesman published a story in memory of Pvt. Larry Polley, a 21-year-old black man from a small town in Texas killed by a land mine in Iraq. The article tells how he believed that the Army would be his ticket to a better life and how he loved his country and was proud to serve it.


49 Preston et al., 1998, 6.

50 See Renato Rosaldo, “Imperialist Nostalgia,” in Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis (Boston: Beacon, 1993) 68-87. The enthusiasm about travel, migration, and movement displayed by a host of postmodern theorists, James Clifford perhaps being the best known, is questioned by many writers of color. Author bell hooks, for example, states bluntly that “[t]ravel is not a word that can be easily evoked to talk about the Middle Passage, the Trail of Tears, the landing of Chinese immigrants at Ellis Island, the forced relocation of Japanese-Americans, the plight of the homeless.” hooks, “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” in Cultural Studies (1992) 338-346, 343.

51 This definition was formulated by art historian Marcia Pointon, Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting, 1830-1908 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 134.

52 This style characterizes the literary and visual products of numerous artists of color blessed with a sense of comic relief and black humor. Some African American artists, in particular, have utilized black humor to reveal the nature of collective racism in white culture. Kara Walker and Carrie Mae Weems serve as good examples of this. The latter’s well-known work, Mirror, Mirror (1986-7), includes the text: “Looking into the mirror, the black
woman asked, ‘mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the finest of them all?’ The mirror says, ‘Snow White you black bitch, and don’t you forget it!!’.” Latino artist Enrique Chagoya blends irreverent humor and criticism in his postmodern pastiches that draw imagery from pre-Columbian as well as mass-media culture.


54 Victor Zamudio-Taylor points out that there also were significant differences between Mexican muralism and the Chicano mural movement, the most obvious being that the former was government-sponsored and executed on the walls of government buildings whereas the murals in California decorated barrios and freeway underpasses and carried anti-establishment messages. Zamudio-Taylor, “Inventing Tradition, Negotiating Modernism: Chicano/a Art and the Pre-Columbian Past,” in The Road to Aztlán, ed. by Virginia Fields and Victor Zamudio-Taylor (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001) 342-357.


57 Preston et al., 1998, 6.


59 For more about soldaderas, see Elizabeth Salas, Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History (Austin, Tx: University of Texas Press, 1990).


61 Mexican American folklorist and ethnographer Américo Paredes is best known for his research work on the folklore and ballads of Mexico and the Mexican American border region. His 1958 study, With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero, introduces the legend of Gregorio Cortez, a Mexican American ranch hand who shot a sheriff and then became a folk hero as he escaped the posse of Texas Rangers. Paredes’ academic successor José Limón has utilized Harold Bloom’s publication, The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry to theorize on the further development of epic verse and its political significance in the view of Fredric Jameson’s concept the “political unconscious” (1981). See Limón, Mexican Ballads. Chicano Epic: History, Social Dramas, and Poetic Persuasions, SCCR Working Papers Series No. 14 (Stanford University, 1986). José Saldivar’s Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997) offers a helpful overview and an updating of this extensive and controversial topic.

62 This axis also interpolates a larger field of discourse and representation to which the art work responds politically and historically. The train in the garden of Pennsylvania as depicted in George Inness’ romantic landscape painting, The Lackawanna Valley (1856), conveys ideas of social movement wildly different from, say, A. J. Russell’s railroad survey photograph, Citadel Rock, Green River, Wyoming (1867/68); yet both images idealize the “progress of civilization” through technology. Perhaps in its most degraded shape, the locomotive is found in David Treuer’s novel, The Hiawatha (1999), named after an old locomotive doomed to demolition and gradually disintegrating like the poverty-ridden family of urban Ojibwes described in the novel. Hiawatha, of course, also is the name of the popular 19th-century American epic by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who was inspired by the Finnish epic Kalevala.) In contrast, the train fashioned by Álvarez Muñoz and her father is humorous rather than sinister, and its freight of soil, sticks, and pebbles less painful to encounter than the loadful of human destitution hauled by Treuer’s locomotive.

63 Contreras, 1995, 7. By “particular articulations,” Contreras presumably refers to the troubling tendency of political struggles solely based on race, ethnicity, class, or gender to reproduce new hierarchies of power, new naturalized differences as well as uniformities to maintain unequal power structures.


65 I owe thanks to Brianne Brown from Austin, Texas, for providing me information about the effects of road construction on urban development. The encroachment of freeway construction upon Mexican American neighborhoods and the resistance against it have been compellingly analyzed by Raúl Homero Villa in Barrio-Logo: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature and Culture (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). One of the paradoxes of Álvarez Muñoz’s life is that her husband Andy Muñoz’s career at the Federal Highway Administration has been largely responsible for her physical as well as social mobility.


72 See Barthes (1977). Barthes does not deny the agency of the artist, as is commonly believed, but, rather, aims to foreground the critical role of the reader/viewer in the process of interpreting the meaning of works of art.

73 Again, it should be remembered that the prefix *post* in art context does not necessarily refer to a temporal linearity. Analytic and synthetic forms of conceptualism were contemporaneous during the late 1960s and ’70s as proven by, for example, Hans Haacke, whose works were contentious political and clearly intersected with the ideological values of the culture at large. See Alberro (1999) xxiv-xxv. My argument in this paragraph is informed by Marja Sakari’s description of the three forms of new conceptualism (2000, 33-58).

74 Ibid., 2000, 53-55.


76 The romanticization of racial blending has frequently legitimized the use of power in the acquisition of land and resources. One of the early examples involves Juan de Oñate’s wife, who was related to both Hernán Cortés and the last Aztec emperor Moctezuma. Before the late 20th century, inter-racial romances generally involved a white man rescuing and thus winning the affection of an Indian/Mexican woman, or sometimes reversely, as in the case of Pocahontas. Relations based on mutual consent between non-white men and white women, however, have been strictly taboo and perhaps are still.

77 See José Saldívar’s discussion in Border Matters (1997) 60-63, 102-103.

78 This momentum is evoked by Ian Burn who writes that “[c]onceptual art has dual character, […] on the one hand, the social nature of the work was progressive; on the other, its structural adherence to the avant-garde geography was conservative. Insofar as art history has chosen to notice only the latter, its reactionary aspect has dominated interpretations.” Burn, 1999, 405.

79 Victor Zamudio-Taylor, “Inventing Tradition, Negotiating Modernism: Chicano/a Art and the Pre-Columbian Past,” in The Road to Aztlán: Art from a Mythic Homeland, ed. by Virginia Fields and Victor Zamudio-Taylor (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001) 342-357, see pages 355-357. It seems appropriate here to quote Griselda Pollock’s claim that “[c]ritical theorization of class, race and gender are, however, themselves by-products of the contradictions within modernity. Contradictions are to be overcome; they are not superceded by invented terminologies. Terms such as ‘post’ (post-Feminism, post-Modernism, post-Industrial) can easily lull us into a false sense of historical advance, when no change has fundamentally taken place. And the dominant systems have merely adapted faster than we have to the ever-shifting plays of power and resistance.” Pollock, Looking Back to the Future: Essays on Art, Life and Death (Singapore: G+B Arts International, 2001) 17.
Behold the Unblinking Eye: *My Alamo* by Kathy Vargas

*The fabric of self-identity – individual, ethnic, or national – is woven in time and space, history and geography, memory and place. In mediatic time-space, however, neither monument nor moment survives beyond the immediate, and there are no permanently stable points of orientation.*

Victor Burgin (1996) ¹

Towering over thousands of big and small historic sites dotting the Texas landscape, only the Alamo, originally named Misión San Antonio de Valero, in downtown San Antonio carries the meaning “larger than life.” In the early eighteenth century, it was one of the original five missions along the San Antonio River built by the Franciscan friars in order to convert the native population, and later, after being secularized in 1793, it came to serve as a military base for the Spanish, rebel, and then Mexican troops. San Fernando de Béxar, the town that grew in the vicinity of the military presidio, developed into the city of San Antonio, which till today carries a distinct flavor of its Spanish origins.² Today the most visited tourist attraction in Texas, the Alamo remains a politically contested site for researches, writers, and local folks alike, an issue vaguely acknowledged even in the visitor brochure published by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, the owners of the site since the 1900s:

While the facts surrounding the siege of the Alamo continue to be debated, there is no doubt about what the battle has come to symbolize. People worldwide continue to remember the Alamo as a heroic struggle against overwhelming odds – a place where men made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom. For this reason the Alamo remains hallowed ground and the Shrine of Texas Liberty.³

While the final battle of the Texas Revolution against the Mexican army happened in San Jacinto, the battle of the Alamo a few months earlier in the February of 1836 stands as the master symbol in the historical mythology of Texas and American culture (see pages 65-66). This is aptly described by anthropologist Richard Flores, who takes on the task of deconstructing this nationalistic narrative in his study, *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* (2002), which adds to the growing array of academic work dedicated to unearthing the exclusions and delusions of American historical and cultural memory. Flores bases his discussion on the fact that after over a half century of disregard, the restoration of the Alamo mission coincided with the period of intense capitalistic intrusion, which transformed the Spanish-Mexican character of San Antonio and economically displaced its former inhabitants. The rest of the story has more to do with fiction than history, claims Flores and continues by elaborating on the theories of Anthony Giddens and Fredric Jameson. According to the former, a critical marker of modernity is the “disembedding” or the “lifting out” of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their reconstructing in radically
different spatial and temporal locations as “symbolic tokens.” Jameson’s formulation of modernity expounds on Giddens by introducing the Marxist concept of *reification* as a force through which the old social relations, cultural practices, and belief systems are systematically broken up in order to construct and naturalize the new political, economic, and social hierarchy.⁴

Utilizing these theories, Flores then (re)constructs the Alamo as a Texan manifestation of the modernization project by analyzing both textual material (literature and films) and empirical material (the urbanization and topographical reorganization of San Antonio), which have played central roles in the production of the site, both discursively and geographically. Flores concludes that

*b*y 1915 the Alamo had emerged as a master symbol, uncoupled from its Texas parochial setting and rewritten to incorporate a new social imaginary through a dynamic process of meaning making, memory marking, and contemporary identity creation. The effect of these reproductions was the making of a “Self” – or more precisely, the fashioning of a masterful Anglo Self – over a Mexican “Other” within a structured relationship of dominance.⁵

More generally, he further suggests that the signifying fabric of the image does not, in the first place, arbitrarily disconnect from the subject it was predicated on, but rather, it becomes gradually removed from its original socio-political contingencies at the local level while engaging in the work of its symbolic mission at the national level. This is as far as Flores’ analysis goes by way of decolonizing Mexican American history; beyond its boundaries remain the troubling issues of class and gender, embodied, for example, in the glaring presence of both Anglo and Mexican American upper middle-class women as the creator-protectors of the shrine, which reifies rugged individualism, patriotism, and white male heroism. Flores also misses the re-appropriations of the Alamo site by contemporary cultural/political practices, one of the most peculiar being its momentary occupation by a group of young Mexican American communists in 1980, who took down the Texas flag and hoisted in its stead a red flag.⁶

In this essay, I argue that Kathy Vargas’ photographic series, *My Alamo*, participates in the *recoupling of the master symbol* with its local circumstances and historical contingencies, reaching over the disjunction between space and time that characterizes modernist myth-making as well as today’s ideological reproductions of nationalist narratives. By eclectically juxtaposing modernists aesthetics with some features of the Mexican *testimonio* and home altar traditions (see pages 87-88), Vargas challenges what “goes without saying,” destabilizes what the public myth claims to be common knowledge – in a Barthesian sense – and re-establishes, through feminist psychoanalytic sensibility, the complexity of multiple identifications amid oppressing historical legacies.⁷
Together with the work of three other Chicana/o artists, the *My Alamo* series was commissioned for the exhibition called *From the West: Chicano Narrative Photography*, which took place in 1995 at the Mexican Museum in San Francisco. One of the goals of the exhibition, as stated by its curator Chon Noriega, was to refocus the concept of Western art by showing artists who actually are native westerners, not artists or writers looking at and reflecting upon the West from elsewhere. Vargas’ series consists of six photo-montages (later in the text also called tableaux) matched with an equal number of smaller mixed-media still-live images, each one eliciting from its photographic counterpart some typical motifs, objects, or ideas which have been elevated into the official iconography of the nation. The overlay of multiple exposures, the incorporation of handwritten autobiographical texts, and the nearly monochromatic hand-applied toning of the picture surface lend the photo-images a slightly dreamy quality characteristic of Vargas’ well-honed style but rather unusual in contemporary art photography in general, which mostly favors large size, saturated color, and sharp detail.

For the purpose of lodging Vargas’ work in the “family tree” of visual representation, rather than examining historical paintings with their fantasy depictions of the Alamo battle, I believe it is more illuminating to glance at more contemporary distortions of history produced by popular culture, i.e., Hollywood cinema. The on-line poster of *The Alamo*, the film released in early 2004, takes its aesthetic cue from the 1849 daguerreotype of the front of the Alamo chapel, which is the oldest extant photograph in Texas. Like an apparition shrouded in somber primeval dusk, the familiar parapet of the mission emerges from the dark horizon; from underneath threatening clouds, against a biblical halo of light, a text reads “Stand your ground, The Alamo.” Suggesting sanctity as well as the kind of indiscriminate “authenticity” frequently assigned to old photographs, the poster presents the standard tale of the origin of the nation (see pages 65-66); yet of course, it ultimately relies on the cultural consensus of its spectators, whose role is to fill in the gaping void left by the all but complete socio-historical decontextualization of the center image. In addition, the “timeless time” of the iconography is accentuated by the symmetry of the poster’s composition, which centers the spectator in the position of mastery: distant, detached, and securely locked within the subject-versus-object binary opposition. The predetermined relation between visual representation, subjectivity, and knowledge negates not only the complexity of the historical “truth,” but also the validity of the kind of human experience that does not comfortably fit within the parameters of the dominating order of signification, in this case, the Texas myth of origin. This is the controversial field of meaning where Vargas wedges her photographic reconstruction of subjectivity and identity *vis-à-vis* the foundations of the modernist mission.

The house where the Vargas family has lived over several generations is located within a few miles from the Alamo Square. Vargas comments on her series:

Some of my recollections of the Alamo are humorous; some are serious. Most of them have a bite, but it’s a bite I did not invent. It’s a bite that recurs in the inherent aggression and often in the racism that is part and parcel of standing before war...
monuments and thinking oneself to be on one side or the other, either by choice or because history gives us no choice.\textsuperscript{10}

Thereby she “authenticates” her lived experience as a \textit{testimony}, that is, as a forthrightly subjective narration, reflective of its own status and embedded in material fragments, communal practices, and personal memories of everyday life. In the last analysis, however, Vargas herself refrains from pointing to the ultimate meaning of her own reconfiguration of the place. She acknowledges, “Trying to think of myself as victor or vanquished in relationship to the Alamo, I couldn’t come up with a concrete conclusion – hence my ambiguity.”\textsuperscript{11} This is the tension that puts the elements of her images in a perpetual dynamic dialogue with each other, a suspension of belief that denies a simplistic Hollywood-style resolution of the enduring social conflict and the coherence of its historical representation.

Thus the oblique fashion \textit{My Alamo} deals with its historical theme can be regarded as a manifestation of the artist’s fluid position. First, the series provides a link between culture seen as symbols, signs and texts, and culture seen as practices – social, political, or individual. Although the Alamo, as a public urban space, unabashedly parades dominant social practices, what remains hidden behind the façade are their incongruities contained in and naturalized by the form of the built environment. This “hidden” is the domain of Vargas’ images. Second, the series locates its argument, for the most part, within that which is intangible, elusive, and impossible to verify by way of “objective” observation. Yet, Vargas does not metaphorize Chicana experience by directly referring to its archetypal tropes or figures (see pages 77-83), the predilection reprimanded by literary critic Rosaura Sánchez, for example, who declares that Chicanas need fewer myths and more historical analysis.\textsuperscript{12} Third, the series reconstructs women’s participation in historical and social processes not only by questioning the privilege of “manly men” in the execution of “important” actions in general, but also by engendering specifically Chicano history, which constructed its own masculine lineage populated by both mythical and human heroes. These three aspects also inform Emma Pérez’s notion of decolonial imaginary, which lands in the unexplored twilight zone between the colonial and the postcolonial, revealing the imprecision of meaning of the latter term in particular. The way Pérez situates her terminology and objectives as a historian seems to resonate directly in Vargas’ visual work:

Bhabha writes, “It is not the colonialist self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of the colonial otherness.” I would change his colonial otherness to decolonizing otherness. The historian’s political project, then, is to write a history that decolonizes otherness. […] My commitment to history also moves me to see it with another “I/eye”: the “I” which is often denied in the writing of history, where subjectivity was once unacceptable, yet inevitable.\textsuperscript{13}

In the beginning, there was a ragged broom made of sticks and thorns, held by the indigenous man called Juan Vargas from the Mexican province of \textit{Coahuila y Texas} (fig. 4, page 275). Originally a member of the Zapotec nation from the region today called \textit{Oaxaca}
thousands of kilometers farther south, it is not clear how he ended up in El Norte during the first decades of Mexican independence from Spain. The efforts to establish democracy in the young nation were thwarted by the dictator, General Santa Anna, who in the 1830s furnished a military expedition to suppress a separatist rebellion brewing in Texas. On the march north, he “recruited” men from native villages to bolster up his troops. This is where the first tableau of the My Alamo series picks up the story of Vargas’ great-great-grandfather, Juan, whose figure appears from a dark background dressed in a white campesino outfit and vigorously swinging a broom. The handwritten text on the photo-image anchors the figure to the family saga related to the artist by her father: Juan Vargas had been present at the battle of the Alamo – on the Mexican side – but being an indio, Juan was not trusted to carry a gun but instead was armed with a broom. The broom marks Juan as an outsider, insignificant yet potentially dangerous for both Mexicans and Texans, the main actors on the scene.

The historical legacy of Juan’s cleaning job after the battle continues to be productive in the present as it indirectly refers to the social construction of a racially marked underclass, whose task of performing janitorial duties seems to pass on from generation to generation. Kathy Vargas’ father, however, proves a willingness to reconcile Juan’s predicament by believing that this ancestor probably was rather glad not to have had to kill anyone on either side. The tactic of strategic essentialism used by the father in order to establish a family tradition of pacifism also functions as a counter-discourse to a contemporary scholarly dispute about the role of Tejanos in the Texas Revolution and thereafter. It has been claimed that a major part of the revisions of Texas history done by Mexican Americans themselves suffers from so-called “me-too” syndrome, described by film critic Rosa Linda Fregoso as a tendency to focus on the elite class Tejano leaders, who fought alongside with the Anglo-American “Texians” in the rebellion against the Mexican government (only to be ostracized by them after the victory).14 While it is true that the matter of independence divided the Tejano community, these accounts often overlook the complexity of the social, national, racial, and gender stratification in the province prior to the rebellion, and how this complexity affected the way people identified with each other on the issue and with the political turmoil to follow. Although one of the main causes of the Revolution allegedly was the Anglo settlers’ demand to continue the practice of slavery (illegal by the Mexican constitution), in Tejano communities the proportion of socially disempowered people was significant, too, mainly affecting the Indian and mixed-blood populations, who worked as day-laborers or indentured servants for the land-owning Spanish elite.15 These circumstances are not plainly readable but amply alluded to in the My Alamo series, particularly if we look at the shrine-like counterpart to the photo-montage of Juan Vargas, the indio.

Swept away by Juan’s broom, small profiles of the Alamo facade now dot the shiny mat that frames the still-life couple (fig. 5, page 275) of the first tableau. The still life lays out the outcome of the rebellion – i.e., the independent Republic of Texas (1836–1845) – in its purely iconic, textual format. This “shrine” of Texas, composed in a straight grid of horizontal and vertical lines, superimposes the most celebrated patriotic symbols of the state: the Texas flag, the star, and the gun. In a way, the image offers to the viewer an imaginary window through which to look inside the Alamo mission’s interior. Mausoleum-like, the building
houses the flags of all the states/countries where the Alamo fighters came from as well as some personal relics of their leaders, including a strand of Davy Crockett’s hair. Visible in the image, the fragment of the Lone Star flag lacks some of its essential qualities, though; the familiar red-white-and-blue colors seem faded, the fabric delicate, and its space disconcertingly fragmented by the gun that seems to appear at once behind the flag and in front of it. The power of Vargas’ craft to reinterpret, manipulate, and reconstruct physical space thus seems to compensate the imbalance of power between the broom and the gun. By distancing, reorganizing, and thereby destabilizing nationalistic symbols that render invisible indios like Juan, Vargas’ art decolonizes his otherness as well as her own, as acknowledged in the writing that delineates the flag, “I’ve always felt close to Juan Vargas’s role: a witness to the gunplay over Texas, much like a human camera.”

In another tableau of the My Alamo series (fig. 10, page 278), a comic relief transforms the somber tone of Juan Vargas’ war effort as he becomes cast in a heroic role to join some cinematic heroes and anti-heroes of the Alamo. The script by the artist tells about her feeling of gleeful liberation when, in the late 1960s, “a movie company came to town to make Viva Max!. In the movie the Mexicans retake the Alamo.” The Daughters of the Republic of Texas were not pleased when they heard about this mockery of history, but after receiving a monetary compensation, they gave consent to the filming. Visualizing the intersection of these conflicting discourses, Vargas’ montage freezes the moment of intense confrontation between Juan (alias Max, a deranged Mexican general) and John Wayne (alias Davy Crockett in Wayne’s 1960 film) staged for the photograph by live models. Flying strips of blank film cut through and accentuate the energetic wrestling match of the two men over the familiar broom and over the legitimacy of historical meaning.

Nonetheless, the Hollywood appropriations of the Alamo, whether in the guise of a serious docu-drama or a hilarious parody, pale considerably in comparison to yet another cinematic imagining of the battle. Produced by the IMAX company, the forty-five minute, award-winning film Alamo…the Price of Freedom shows non-stop at the Riverside Mall Auditorium next to the Alamo Square. Vargas writes (fig. 11, page 278), “The Mexican American community found the tourist flick Alamo … the Price of Freedom offensive. But it’s still running …” Printed on the still-life image in delicate red handwriting, this comment can hardly challenge the “bigger” story told by the six-story screen and six-track stereo sound of the IMAX theater. So the odds against Vargas’ differential reading of history are formidable, indeed, as testified by Cynthia Salm, whose review appeared in the November 2003 issue of NP (Online Official Publication of the National Association of the Parliamentarians): “In IMAX clarity, the battle is just stunning, literally. It feels like thousands of angry ‘soldados’ are swarming over the walls right at you. You feel the shock of such utter annihilation. No other film has ever devoted so much attention or footage to battle detail.”

Today the Alamo Plaza is the very heart of downtown San Antonio, bustling with shopping and strolling tourists and locals alike. During the eighteenth century, however, the spatial organization of San Antonio went through dramatic changes, explored in Richard Flores’ study, which transformed the dusty square at the town fringes into a park-like center plaza surrounded by new buildings for commerce, tourist business, and entertainment. At the
same time, the Spanish-colonial style main plazas, located next to San Fernando Cathedral, lost their significance as the commercial and public city center, exacerbating the residential segregation and cultural marginalization of Tejanos.\textsuperscript{18} The ramifications of intense technological/commercial modernization plus the spatial restructuring it instigated is alluded to by the \textit{My Alamo} series, too, which visualizes one of the recent stories of territorial segregation based on race. One of the tableaux tells the story of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas’ fight for the “dignity” of the Alamo (fig. 12, page 279), which was threatened by the Mexican vendors of raspas, flavored ice cones, whose presence on the square allegedly shadowed the view of the monument. Vargas’ images suspect, though, that the real cause for indignation might have been the meager financial profit to be expected from Mexican entrepreneurs since blatant commercialism within the Alamo premises themselves did not seem to endanger its dignity. Small change made by raspa vendors dwindles in comparison with the gains made by the Alamo souvenir shop, which carries everything from plastic knives to Alamo Crackers, all made outside of the country. Together with the images of banners and Indian toys, these quaint memorabilia are “enshrined” in the still life (fig. 13, page 279) that matches with the raspa photo-montage.

The three photo-montages and their still-life counterparts discussed above – Juan Vargas with his broom, his encounter with John Wayne, and the expulsion of raspa vendors from the Alamo Square – evoke in an ambiguous manner the racial inflection of public discourses and popular practices that frame the private history of the artist growing up amid the persistent battle of meaning. Their “politically incorrect” representations of this urban space as a territory formed and informed by ideologies, material and social relations, and economic interests lay out a road map to decolonizing, differential understanding of history advocated by Emma Pérez and Homi Bhabha. Unobtrusive in appearance, they yet facilitate the manipulation and reorganization of a representational space otherwise conceived as transparent and homogeneous. In other words, they decolonize the seemingly coherent unfolding of a historical progress parallel to the logic of Hollywood storylines, which instrumentalize the visible in producing the effect of the “real” and reduce the viewer to a passive consumer of the received teachings of a historical “truth.” This certainty, then, is exactly what Kathy Vargas’ work denies from the viewer patient enough to read its multiple subtexts. So much so that even the title of the \textit{My Alamo} series seems to confront one with the implicit question: what is your Alamo, as a visitor of the site itself, as a consumer of its myriad representations, and as a potential producer of historical meaning.

\textit{Blurring the Picture}

Like many other Chicana artists, Kathy Vargas entered the fine arts scene only after working for years in the commercial sector, which honed her technical skills and her penchant for popular culture. During the civil rights era, she first documented her family and the Latino and African American inhabitants of her eastside San Antonio neighborhood, and then moved on to take stage and road shots of rock-and-roll musicians. She switched from the documentary
mode to so-called directional mode during her academic studies in photography, which coincided with the realignment of the art world compatible (albeit not identical) with the linguistic/postmodern turn in cultural theory. In particular for women and artists of color, the postmodern turn opened an avenue to hybrid aesthetic styles, which acknowledged the subjectivity and identity of the artist without compromising her/his critical standing. This section, without desiring to demonstrate that Kathy Vargas should be included in the category of postmodern art photographers, will consider the ways her style articulates postmodern sensibility and its visual idioms vis-à-vis underlying modernist aesthetics.

Undercutting the pre-conceived notion of identity-based art work as subordinated under ethno-racial (or gender) politics by design, *My Alamo* suggests a visual dialogue that extends over several types of photographic forms and cultural associations – Euro-American, Mexican, and indigenous – defamiliarizing all of them and challenging the spectator with a tricky deconstructive exercise. Thus, what appeals to so many admirers of Vargas’ work – their stunning aesthetic beauty – involves something more than an aimless play with the pastiche of by-gone visual fashions. More specifically, Vargas blurs the picture of an independent artistic style by appropriating and merging two allegedly antagonistic photographic traditions: modernist and pictorialist. Before high modernism (spearheaded by Alfred Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession) gained prominence in early twentieth-century American art photography, so-called pictorialists endeavored to win the status of art for photography by borrowing themes and compositional schemes from art history. They emphasized the hand-made, artistic quality of their work by favoring such techniques as soft focus and muted toning reminiscent of European fin-de-siècle aestheticism. They also imitated the painterly style of impressionism and the poetic mysticism of French symbolists in their search for the spiritual essence of the human condition poignantly stated in one sentence by contemporaneous photographer Clarence White: “We grope among shadows toward the unknown.”

However, while drawing from the aesthetic sensibility of pictorialists (quite pertinently considering the romantic ethos explicit in the Alamo myth itself), Vargas steers away from their eclectic symbolism that might interfere with the reading of her images. Therefore, in spite of its multiple layering of meaning, there is no mystery about the ultimate significance of *My Alamo*, which stages its intended message and affinity to various art styles quite clearly. Thus, the series apparently takes its cue from the radical wing of early twentieth-century modernism, that is, from the emerging avant-garde, which favored montage, collage, and the distortion of scale in order to distance the viewer and to underline the constructed, artificial nature of the image. Of course, avant-garde photography (which leaned toward European cubism and abstraction) never flourished in the United States where popular taste has traditionally endorsed styles based on realism. With this in view, it is interesting to study how Vargas recycles all these earlier visual styles and art discourses – whether conservative or radical – and reworks them through her authorial vision in order to make aesthetic and political statements that are able to address contemporary concerns and beliefs as well.

The depiction of the human body in *My Alamo* is particularly significant in terms of the reconstruction of subjectivity and identity based on racial and gender difference. Before making this series, Vargas rarely showed human figures in her photo-montages, mostly still
lives; and even when she did, they were rather blurred, shadow-like, and devoid of individualizing details. In *My Alamo*, however, she has used models to reenact in the studio little cinematics based on her life experience, which unfold as of the time prior to her own birth. Yet her characters are not represented as frozen photographic objects merely posing for the camera but as surrogate subjects in full action and identified by proper names. Their active engagement in the photographic narrative challenges the fixity of the stereotype and the omnipotent gaze of the photographer/viewer. Protected thus from erotization as well as from racialization often inherent in art photography (which traditionally prefers the formal close-up of the human body at the expense of its subjectivity), the human figures in *My Alamo* remain physically ephemeral but also carefully contextualized, bestowing significance upon the historical narration of place and identity rather than to the aesthetic desire of the artist-cum-creator. In short, Vargas does not dissect human bodies as she does “dissect” time and space. Fragmented, isolated, and miniaturized is the image of the Alamo mission itself, which turns into a surreal object of visual manipulation and consumption, either flattened out into a mere decorative motif or unnaturally illuminated like a theater set. Moreover, Vargas’ depiction of the iconic object of veneration as a fetish with no concrete material/historical substance is set against a solid black background. The flatness of the background behind the Alamo pictures draws attention to the depth that the same black surface assumes behind the *mise-en-scène* of the human figures within the tableaux. Thus the series stages and highlights not only an alternative reading of a historical narration, but also, paradoxically, the fragility of human endeavor and the ultimate unknowability of the past.

The former assertion reads against the common concept of photography as a means by which the past could be preserved and rendered conceivable in the present. This also was the underlying belief of those photographers during the late nineteenth century who documented the American West with the purpose of providing truthful surveys of its landscapes and geographies. The panoramic images they produced were often bound in books complete with descriptive captions, maps, and texts, which linked individual images into a seamless linear narrative, tinged with the “familiar rhetoric of Manifest Destiny,” as stated by Martha Sandweiss (see pages 40-43). Instead of assigning fixed meanings to the photographs, the handwritten texts merged into the *My Alamo* images shape the viewer response indirectly, through the subjective center of the artist’s consciousness rather than by the voice of a superior authority. The interdependency of words and images and their irregular organization in the compositional scheme thus derail the kind of linear, prescribed reading typical of Western narrative photography. In contrast, the spin of events, persons, objects, and texts encourages an interactive or dialectic reading of sorts, which weaves through the temporal deposits of meaning that have operated in the construction of the Alamo site. Still, I do not see the textual fragmentation of the images as totalizing as art critic Jennifer González suggests by contending that the written words be just one fragment among others. The writings obviously work quite well as Barthesian anchorages of meaning (albeit an ambiguous meaning) at least for those viewers uninitiated into Texas history. Due to the wry humor embedded in its written elements, I believe, Vargas’ art work escapes both politically motivated simplicity and exclusivity (the two maladies identity-based art work is often accused of) without
compromising the complexity of meaning, knowledge, and the type of interpretation it seeks to promote.

As Jennifer González points out, Victor Burgin’s insights about narrative photography come handy. Burgin suggests that the arrangement of visual elements in a photograph demands a special type of reading, which progresses “not in a linear manner, but in a repetition of ‘vertical’ readings, in stillness, in a-temporality” 27 The images of My Alamo form a series of diptychs, as mentioned earlier, the second part of which freezes the action of the first part by composing a still-life shrine, a kind of seditious subtext to the big shrine, the Alamo mission itself.28 Vargas’ strategy corresponds quite well with the propositions of authors Lucy Lippard and Amalia Mesa-Bains, who see the spiritual and the political not as antithetical (as often perceived in American art) but as capable of coexisting in a syncretic harmony in art work that is not designed to be displayed in religious spaces but in galleries and museums.29 An everyday lived spirituality that underlies Vargas’ aesthetics does not separate the spiritual from the political but invents an ironic counter-narrative against the militarized spiritual ambience of the Texas Shrine, which is endorsed by two bilateral power-brokers – the church and the state.30 The sublime horror of “total annihilation” lingering over the place and marveled at in Cynthia Salm’s film review (see page 132) diminishes when examined through the eyes of antepasados indígenos, indigenous ancestors like Juan Vargas, who continue to be remembered in home altars infused by memories of genocide, slavery, and contemporary marginalization.

As embodiments of materialized memory, traditional Mexican American home altars also function as sites of cultural transmission, and as such, they are mostly in the charge of women. The remembrance of the things past is mediated through carefully placed everyday objects such as jewelry, votive candles, personal trinkets, toys, flowers, and photographs of deceased family members that carry spiritual offerings and requests for protection and blessing. Chicana artists frequently employ this familiar, vernacular aesthetic in their art work, particularly in installations, as it creates and then overlaps the spaces of personal and collective memory that are marginalized or completely erased by selective national memory.31 The incorporation of a popular taste for the exuberant, colorful, and mass-produced, however, has made Chicana/o art somewhat suspect in the house of mainstream American art where the modernist notion of aesthetic autonomy still has high currency. Perhaps in an attempt to offset this negative connotation with the mass-produced “low art,” art historian Víctor Sorell suggests that altar-inspired Chicana/o photography – through its earth-bound alchemy of natural elements – can in effect restore the ritualized “aura” that Walter Benjamin judged as permanently lost from art with the invention of photography.32 Be that as it may, Kathy Vargas’ employment of popular altar aesthetics is obvious, yet restrained and rigorously subordinated to the two-dimensional composition of the picture plane. It does not evoke (or satirize) religious sentiments as much as it reminds the viewer of certain discrepancies in the distribution of power over the scenes depicted. The primary function of Vargas’ altar, then, is neither to remember nor to forget, but to secularize, de-ritualize, and make visible the paradox inherent in the site that is simultaneously constructed as a spiritual holy place and as a pantheon of military idols.
Due to the limited access to education and public media, Mexican American cultural knowledge has often been disseminated through unofficial channels, such as oral history embedded in personal narratives called testimonios. While the “stillness” effect of My Alamo’s altar-like composition juxtaposes the private space of memory with the public space of institutionalized pedagogy, Vargas’ written testimonio, on the other hand, constitutes a transforming “meanwhile” effect of a time-space continuum within which, in Victor Burgin’s words, “‘the present’ is not a perpetually fleeting point on a line ‘through time,’ but a collage of disparate times, an imbrication of shifting and contested spaces.” Rather than being simply imposed on the material ruins of a historical event a long time afterward, her narration is woven into the generational circles of Tejana/o everyday experiences; each reading of her words retells the story, gives it more weight, and offers a possibility for a new interpretation about the social world that gave rise to it. Therefore, it is not only the interdependency of content and form that counts in this stylistic deliberation, but also their contextualization, periodization, and the position of the photographer herself. At the crossroads of photography (the perennial instrument of objectification) and the liberating potential of mestiza aesthetics, the artist’s mobile gaze traced in the previous paragraphs can stare down the unblinking eye of the singular hegemonic vision.

The Place of the Law

In contrast to the spatiotemporal focus of the first part of this essay, the rest of the essay will look more closely at the psychological aspects of Kathy Vargas’ work by discussing those images that directly describe her personal reactions and childhood experiences related to the mission building. (Most interestingly, such scholars as Richard Flores, Emma Pérez, and Rolando Romero also locate their authorial origins through traumatic memories triggered by a childhood in the shadow of the Alamo.) Consequently, the linear time line according to which the images have been publicly displayed in several exhibitions has been sacrificed for the sake of an interpretative thematization which, I hope, will justify the rearrangement.

How to perceive the space beyond the reach of the empirical, “rational” parameters of description? The working of the unconscious in the production of social relations, identities, and places has been acknowledged by most researchers of culture but fully engaged only by those who have the inclination to read Freud, Lacan, and other theorists of psychoanalysis. One of the first attempts to this effect was made by Henri Lefebvre, who maintained that “[i]t is true that explaining everything in psychoanalytic terms, in terms of the unconscious, can only lead to an intolerable reductionism and dogmatism; the same goes for the overestimation of the ‘structural.’ Yet structures do exist, and there is such a thing as the ‘unconscious’.” As early as in 1974, Lefebvre postulated a revival of psychoanalysis on the premise that cities as well as nations could have an ‘unconscious,’ repressed life of their own. Underneath the spatial practice of everyday experience, this repressed life takes place in representational space, that is, in space predominantly non-verbal in nature, appropriated by imagination and the unconscious. Perceived through this “mentalist” register, the My Alamo series – in spite of its
solid grounding in a temporal succession of events – is not only a revision of the national meta-
narrative from an “other” point of view, not only a deconstruction of a historical space as a
product of human practice. It is also a visual re-enactment of a family trauma (“family”
understood empirically as the Vargas family as well as metaphorically as the Mexican
American “la familia”), which involves a rite of passage with its various stages leading to the
acquisition of language and psychological healing. As such (not unlike Álvarez Muñoz’s *El
Límite*), it co-articulates the public world of politics, economics, and institutions with the
private sphere of domestic affairs, reproduction, and the sexual division of labor in a manner
promoted by contemporary feminist critics sensitive to the issues pointed out by Lefebvre. Of
these critics, I find Julia Kristeva, Janet Wolff, and Emma Pérez particularly instructive and
will use their insights as the foundation of the following discussion about the remaining three
photographic diptychs.37

The Freudian fable embedded in *My Alamo* unfolds through a series of crisis situations
where Vargas, as a child, works out the complexities of her identity by rebelling and
negotiating her position in between conflicting messages from various father and mother
figures. Staging models to imitate a family snapshot (complete with the father on the right, the
mother on the left, and the child in the middle), the second photo-montage of *My Alamo* (fig. 6,
page 276) calls upon the power of convention in the making of self-images, confirming the
existence of ideal family life, love, cohesion, continuity, normalcy, and dignity. The harmony
of this family portrait is disrupted, though, by a giant-size raccoon tail ominously hanging over
the scene, almost brushing over the worried face of the little girl in her mother’s arms. The
frozen expressions on the faces of the characters appeal to the viewer’s empathy by asserting
their subjectivity and vulnerability, but at the same time their eyes anxiously respond to the
ideological interpelation of the scrutinizing “I” of the camera – the family becomes “framed,”
first as Indian and then as Mexican, in short, as enemies. Meanwhile, the giant raccoon tail
begs a long trail of identical souvenir cards, which repeat endlessly the discursive power of a
single symbol as an arbiter between right and wrong, good and bad, citizen and alien.

The girl’s encounter with the law of the symbolic is accompanied by her father, most
fittingly, whose complicity with the oppressive patriarchal legacy is revealed when visiting
cousins from Michigan – as explained in the hand-written text on the image – want a family
picture taken in front of the monument. In the center field of the photo-montage, the ensuing
“oedipal drama” becomes externalized in a public scene where the girl flings down the
coonskin cap bought to her for the picture-to-be-taken. For her, Davy Crockett’s cap does not
function as a symbolic token of power and homo-social bond (as it does for the male members
of the family despite of their racial otherness), but as a stigma of being “bad” like Hollywood
Indians on TV and therefore left outside of that bond. Thus the father’s inability to reconcile or
even perceive the contradiction inherent in his own condition is the source of the girl’s revolt
against him and her rejection of the hegemonic teaching endlessly repeated in tourist rituals
performed before national monuments.

The defense against and transformation of these teachings takes place through memory,
materialized in the image of the defiant girl making a scene in a public space, but then
reconceptualized by the narration of the discerning artist well capable of executing the power
of symbolic abstraction. The significance of the photo-montage becomes almost humorously obvious when matched with its counterpart still life. Eliciting the bare essentials of symbolic erotization, the still-life shrine sports a postcard picture of the national father figure, Davy Crockett, standing erect in a buckskin attire and holding to his Kentucky rifle (fig. 7, page 276).38 By appropriating his dress from the indigenous wardrobe, Crockett claims symbolic descent from the original owners of the land, the Indians, whose genocide thus appears as a predestinated sacrifice for the progress of civilization. The frontal stiffness of his pose contrasts with the habitus of Vargas’ father, the “common man” and the “real Indian,” whose vivid encounter with his little daughter mocks the deadly confrontation between Crockett and Santa Anna, the Freudian protagonists in full action. The repressed sexual tensions inherent in the repeated enactment (on TV, in films, in art) of a violent religious/political rite become metaphorized and feminized within the space of the maternal, the hushed interior within the four walls of the womb-like shrine. However – instead of being covered like the pistol showing under the Texas flag in the first diptych discussed – the phallic sign of Davy Crockett’s torso is fully visible against yet another representation of the Alamo façade.

The façade – “as face directed towards the observer and a privileged side or aspect of a work of art or a monument” – disappeared from modern architecture at the wake of a new consciousness of spatial depth and simultaneous perception, states Lefebvre.39 The standard Alamo imagery therefore seems to abide by the older taste for total “spectacularization” of matters on the façade as well as in front of it, coupled with the mystification of what occurs behind it. Behind the image of Davy Crockett is not the Texas flag but a piece of papel picado, a Mexican folk art technique of cutting out stacks of lightweight paper tissue to decorate houses and businesses during popular festivities. In Mexican towns and villages, long strings of these colorful decorations, mostly made by women, flutter in the wind until they fade and wash away with the rain, as reminders of the mortality of all living things. Cut in papel picado, the Alamo façade fades into thin air, becomes transitory, fragile, and transparent. Yet it also invokes the “psychoanalytic” feminine space of the things hidden in the dark depth behind the façade: the shameful, the prohibited, the pre-oedipal, the mundus of death and birth in the middle a medieval township, or the sipapu of the symbolic Indian mother Malinche. The oedipal drama of the conquest remains unsolved, though, as none of the father hopefuls passes the test; so, to take her place in the symbolic order of language and the patriarchal law, the girl first has to come to terms with another separation, the separation from the mother.

Defending Freudian psychoanalysis in the theorization of the decolonial feminist subject, Emma Pérez postulates the Oedipal Conquest Triangle with Hernan Cortés, Malintzin Tenepal, and Octavio Paz (see pages 45, 77-79) as the imaginary members of the “mestizo primal family.” Her adaptation, however, emphasizes the racial aspect of oedipal arrangements and thereby the complex relationship between mothers and daughters, particularly troubled in Mexican American culture where the theme of treason persists not only in relations between men and women, but in all human ties.40 The configurations of different mother figures and their alignments with the girl’s emergent desire (for belonging, for sexual desirability, for imperial ornaments as signs of symbolic power, and, ultimately, for independent social agency)
dominate the photo-montage that stages a vignette of the annual Fiesta celebration (fig. 8, page 277).

Since 1891, the San Antonio Fiesta has commemorated the heroes of the Texas Revolution by crowning the Fiesta royalty – the King, the Queen, and their opulent court – who parade downtown San Antonio in flower-decorated pageants. Initially organized by women, the election of the royalty as well as the control and funding of the entire revelry was subsequently passed to the Order of the Alamo and the Cavaliers, two exclusive men’s clubs established by local elite Anglo men. Secrecy and strict protocol inscribed the yearly elections of the Queen held inside the Alamo mission – only females of the most distinguished “first” families were eligible. The “first” indicated the families who had arrived in town between the years of 1845 and 1900. Besides the common town folk, Anglo or Hispanic, this definition also excluded the descendants of the peninsulares, that is, of those Spanish families who immigrated to San Antonio from the Canary Islands in the 1730s, who were titled hidalgos by the Spanish crown, and who in the olden times had called themselves gente de razón, the people of reason. This heritage of social hierarchy passed over to the new society dominated by the Anglo elite, who identified themselves with the “aristocracy of the Old South.” In Vargas’ image, therefore, at stake is not only the Indian mother (alias her own Huichol mother) versus the European mother (alias the Fiesta Queen of Anglo descent), but also their symbolic alter-egos inhabiting the mestiza “soulscape”: La Malinche, La Conquistadora (the Virgin Mary sculpture carried by the Spanish during the reconquest of New Mexico after the Pueblo Revolt, see 80-81), and even the first lady of the nation, perhaps.

“Enshrined” in the still life (fig. 9, page 277), the sensuous objects of desire include strings of pearls and exotic cornucopia designs on a fine fabric, a fabric that separates the little girl from her innocent dream of one day being an admired princess herself, thus becoming the object of the father’s sexual desire and the beneficiary of his authority. The gaze that responds to her yarning eyes (via the viewer’s look) does not belong to the father, though, but to the haughty Fiesta Queen, the phallic mother whose stately demeanor presides over the mother/child dyad watching the parade and waving at the “royalty” passing by. Carrying regalia reminiscent of both the Queen Victoria of England and La Conquistadora of Spain, this phallic mother merges the Anglo and the Hispanic colonizer in a single female figure that categorically denies the mestiza girl’s desire for “pure” identity and the right of speech endorsed by it. At the same time as the Indian mother’s protecting (or punishing?) hand tempers the narcissism inherent in the girl’s wish to become a princess herself, the hand also holds her back, her voice teaching the child to distinguish between sameness and difference and to acknowledge the limits of her social mobility in the time-honored hierarchy of race, class, and gender. The physical closeness of mother and child destabilizes the border between the two, creating a realm of corporeal, intimate dependency – or the defilement of the maternal as described by Mary Douglas and also present in the derogative term la chingada (see pages 78-79) – that would need to be exorcised in order to establish the symbolic pact. In this case, though, the need appears even more urgent due to the mother herself being a mestiza of mixed blood – an infringement of the miscegenation taboo. Regardless of her own actions, then, the
little girl turns into a malcriada, a child who misbehaves, ridden by guilt and in the limbo of very real prohibitions, ambiguous identifications, and a precarious desire for autonomy.

In her reflection on the possibilities of resistance, Julia Kristeva suggests three possible instances of revolt: ancestral, eternal return, and displacement. Ancestral derives from the prohibition/transgression dialectic at work in violent confrontations with the law (cases in point would be the Texan and Mexican Revolutions and the Civil Rights Movement). But Vargas’ photographs do not reincarnate Chicano heroes, such as Juan Seguín, Emiliano Zapata, Gregorio Cortés, César Chávez, or Rubén Salazar. Rather, My Alamo invests in the second instance of revolt, that is, “the movements of repetition, working-through, working-out internal to the free association of transference” – “it is the course of memory that takes on the Nietzschean vision of an eternal return and permits a renewal of the whole subject.” This renewal also negotiates the identity of the decolonizing speaking subject conceptualized, from a feminist Chicana point of view, by Emma Pérez. But is it enough to undertake the narrative, to become a Proustian searcher for the lost time? Vargas answers no, and embarks on Kristeva’s third instance of revolt, the displacement, the revolt in the absence of real political power. Therefore in the final photo-montage (fig. 14, page 280), she introduces the oppositional anti-hero, the non-prodigal son, and her oedipal proxy, all in one person: Ozzy Osbourne, the former singer of the British heavy metal band Black Sabbath, who breached but got away from the revenge of the Alamo angels.

By any standard, avowing a father who is white, European, low culture, and notoriously addicted to drugs is subversive indeed, but in light of Vargas’ past career as a rock-and-roll photographer, perhaps not so surprising. Certainly, her choice removes any taint of racial (or gender) essentialism by elevating the carnivalesque icon of popular culture against the bourgeois ideal of classical purity and good taste. Osbourne harks back the counter cultures of the 1970s – the hotbed of cultural/political resistance in which Kathy Vargas locates the origins of her commitment to civil activism – with a smack of irreverence to the sacred places of ideological regeneration. The final photo-montage shows a blurred double image of a man frantically playing an electric guitar, framed by the artist’s written testimony: “One night, after a performance here, Ozzy decided to tempt fate and piss on part of the Alamo. And the earth did not swallow him, and lighting bolts did not strike him dead.” Taking after the carnivalesque strategy of the false king, Osbourne uses his body as a privileged site of oppositional underclass politics. His bodily fluids, in particular, seem to possess a formidable deconstructive power to expose the way high culture is structured around the “pollution” taboo against all things low, grotesque, carnal, and sexual. Not even the purified, bottled Alamo spring water proves potent enough to solve the public crisis shaking the town and to remove the stain left by Osbourne’s urine until. Years later, however, the Daughters of the Alamo decided to accept his apology (enhanced by a donation of ten thousand dollars), which lifted the ban on his performance in San Antonio.

The storyline of My Alamo, as a Freudian fable with a feminist swerve, has thus rounded up to a cleft resolution, but, for the sake of pure visual fun, let us dwell a moment longer on Vargas’ sophisticated articulation of the psychoanalytic idiom. The array of material items that ground the scenes and characters of the testimonial story adds up to an intriguing
little collection of sexually charged fetishes: the Texas flag and the lone star motif, the coonskin cap, the broom, knives and guns, and, finally, the fret board of the electric guitar (the most suitable scepter for the false king who fails to revolt successfully, thus committing “oedipal suicide”). By marking either absence or presence of the phallic signifier, each of these fetish objects purports to underwrite the binary system inherent in the logic of referent/sign dichotomy. Yet, their ability to regenerate and ratify meaning proves not only culturally inscribed and thereby insufficient, but also determined by yet another fetish, more powerful still: the big buck, the ultimate currency in Vargas’ oedipal economy. Her final commentary (fig. 15, page 280), inspired by Osbourne’s generous atonement, puts together the missing pieces of the Alamo puzzle and the meaning of history in the age of corporate capitalism: “If only Santa Anna had known what the going price was! Maybe we Tejanos wouldn’t have been ‘mexicans’ all these years.”

2 Part of San Antonio’s first European settlers, who over time wrested economic power from the Franciscan friars and formed the town elite, immigrated to Texas directly from the Canary Islands. Rather than Santa Fe or any other southwestern city founded during the colonial period, San Antonio can therefore justifiably claim both Mexican and Spanish heritage. Tejano Origins in Nineteenth-Century San Antonio, ed. by Gerald Poyo and Gilberto Hinostoa (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), which gives a vivid account of the diverse populations that participated in the formation of the 18th-century San Antonio ranching community.
5 Ibid., 159.
6 According to Mark Louis Rybczyk’s light-hearted account, San Antonio has encountered a communist threat twice: first in 1939 when the labor leader Emma Tenayuca organized a communist rally at the Municipal Auditorium, and then again in 1980 when some unfortunate young Hispanics assaulted the Texas flag at the Alamo and were sued subsequently. For the next few years, the writer claims, the Ku Klux Klan took it upon themselves to protect the Alamo on May Day. Rybczyk, San Antonio Uncovered (Plano, Tx: Republic of Texas Press, 2000) 42-46.
7 I am referring here to Roland Barthes’ well-known formulation which defines myth as depoliticized speech that naturalizes and “purifies” history from ambiguity. Says Barthes, “In passing history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.” Barthes, “Myth Today,” in Visual Culture: The Reader, ed. by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1999, originally published in Barthes, Mythologies, 1973) 51-58, 58.
11 Ibid.
of working where the artist consciously stages events with the intention to photograph them.

By “straight” he means a method of reductive terminology that Victor Burgin, for example, warns about by stating, “the prefix post- must always alert us to the fact that nothing is really over – ideologies are not so simply undone.” Post-colonial, he asserts, in fact means neo-colonial, implying that even today the legacies of history effect “the continued productivity of history in the present” (Burgin, 1996, 189). However, while welcoming the notion of the decolonial imaginary as a heuristic device, I am less inclined to agree with Pérez upon the usefulness of the term “diaspora” to describe Mexican American experience because of the tendency of such highly codified terms to homogenize internal differences. Pérez, nevertheless, argues that the terms “diaspora” and “diasporic subjects” can successfully interrogate the term “immigrant,” which presumably applies primarily to white ethnicities and leaves the categories of gender and race unmarked (see Pérez [1999] 77-78). John Durham Peters offers a very sophisticated terminological analysis of the concept of geographical movement in his essay, “Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora: The Stakes of Mobility in the Western Canon,” in Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place, ed. by Hamid Naficy (New York and London: Routledge, 1999) 17-44. Diaspora, in my understanding, besides carrying distinctly biblical connotations (originating outside of the Americas), also indiscriminately presupposes a physical distance from the place considered home and thus obscures the condition of dispossession not necessarily equivalent with chronic dislocation, a predicament rather common in El Norte.

Abandoning the idea of photography as a pure expression of aesthetic vision or an unmediated representation of mimetic authenticity, many artists at that time were searching for ways to expose the internal complexity of representation and its ideological links with social formation. This move from innocence to vengeful determination. See Lehrer, Viva Max! (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1966).

16 Viva Max! is based on the novel by James Lehrer, which parodies the excessively patriotic aplomb of John Wayne in the film, The Alamo. Peter Ustinov stars in the leading role as Max, aka General Maximillian Rodriguez de Santos, to whom the U.S. government donates a replica of the Alamo Mission so as to assuage his vengeful determination. See Lehrer, Viva Max! (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1966).


18 Flores, 2002, 35-60. While writing about the modern respatialization of the Alamo Plaza, Flores does not remind the reader of the colonial underpinnings of Spanish-Mexican town planning, the nature of which Henri Lefebvre describes in The Production of Space. “The very building of the towns thus embodied a plan which would determine the mode of occupation of the territory and define how it was to be reorganized under the administrative and political authority of urban power. […] Some historians have described this colonial town as an artificial product, but they forget that this artificial product is also an instrument of production: a superstructure foreign to the original space” (2004, 151).

19 In chapter “The Directorial Mode: Notes toward a Definition,” (Light Readings: A Photography Critic’s Writings, 1968-1978, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), A.D. Coleman purports to redefine photographic vocabulary by examining the terms “straight” and “documentary.” By “straight” he means a method of working where the artist consciously stages events with the intention to photograph them.

20 Abandoning the idea of photography as a pure expression of aesthetic vision or an unmediated representation of mimetic authenticity, many artists at that time were searching for ways to expose the internal complexity of representation and its ideological links with social formation. This move from innocence to experience inevitably politicized art discourse and led artists to break from the modernist dogma of the “purity” of each aesthetic medium and to experiment with stylistic mixing and appropriations from earlier art forms (see the discussion on conceptual art in the previous essay).

21 In her seminal publication, Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990, 93), Janet Wolff questions the use of the term ‘postmodernism’ in art as a “movable category whose only commitment is to identify what comes after modernism. […] I would argue that the most useful definition of the postmodern, in painting and other media, is that work which self-consciously deconstructs tradition, by a variety of formal and other techniques (parody, juxtaposition, re-appropriation of images, irony, repetition, and so on). Such an interrogation is informed by theoretical and critical consciousness.” Since Wolff’s theorization, the understanding of the postmodern in the visual arts has undergone various changes. Although prestigious as a style, the postmodern surely did not spell the end of modernist practices; rather, it marked a new, more self-critical phase within these practices, which continue to set the terms of production and reception of postmodern art work, too.


this publication, Juárez gives a very enlightening account of the influence of such European art and literature movements as impressionism, surrealism, and symbolism on 20th-century American art photography.


26 It seems that if the tension between the word and image preoccupied art photographers (and critics) before the modernist dogma banned this marriage altogether, these anxieties did not completely die out once postmodernism and conceptualism lifted the ban. The anxiety about the text reflects the anxiety about the female subjectivity in textual production at large, coupled with the common need of female artists to expose (and thereby dispose of) the masquerade surrounding the construction of gender identities. Rolando Romero points out how, historically, women’s knowledge and contributions to textual production have often been accepted only in disguise, either as mysticism or in the liminal form of healing, mourning, and mediating between life and death, all of which compensate for the male heroic journey for self-transformation. Romero, “The Alamo, Slavery, and the Politics of Memory,” in Decolonial Voices: Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century, ed. by Arturo Aldama and Naomi Quiñonez (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002) 366-377.


29 See Lucy Lippard, “Concrete Sorrows, Transparent Joys,” in Kathy Vargas: Photographs, 1971-2000, exhibition catalogue ed. by Lucy Lippard and MaLin Wilson-Powell (San Antonio, Tx: The McNay, 2002) 14-27, and Amalia Mesa-Bains, curatorial statement in exhibition catalogue, Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art (San Francisco: The Mexican Museum, 1993) 9-17. On the other hand, Vargas' penchant to make use of formal (as opposed to thematic) elements of sacred practices weakens Cuban artist Arturo Lindsay’s argument that “Spirituality […] is the single most important factor in the collective cultural identity of Latinos, and it is an overriding theme that resonates in the work of Latino artists in the postmodern era.” Lindsay, “Mestizaje and the Postmodern Latino Aesthetic,” in Ceremony of Spirit (1993) 42-45; quotation on page 42. The essay on Delilah Montoya’s installation, La Guadalupana, deals more in detail with the issue of the sacred and the spiritual practices used by Mexican American artists.

30 Politicizing spirituality by using traditional religious forms, according to Mesa-Bains, originates from the legacy of conquest and colonization that violently suppressed indigenous religious and cultural practices and simultaneously triggered their re-emergence in disguised hybrid forms. Thus the spiritual memory embedded in Chicana/o art is a “memory of absence constructed by losses endured in the destructive practice of colonialism and its aftermath” (1993, 9).


33 Burgin, 1996, 182. The horizontal alignment of this continuum (typical of nationalistic projects, as theorized by Benedict Anderson) yields a teleological perception of history, which, in turn, tends to produce naturalized coherence to the inherently contradictory cultural narratives that inspire these projects. Today, this kind of horizontal reach is mainly achieved through the omnipresence of the media.

34 Says Emma Pérez, “I, a tejana by cultural construction, have been trying all my life to forget the Alamo, but ironically I chose history as my profession. As a historian, I cannot forget the Alamo; as a tejana, I am not allowed to forget the Alamo. It is imprinted upon my body, my memories, my childhood.” (1999, 127).


36 Lefebvre bases his argument on the conceptual triad of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces, of which I refer only to the first and the last. Lefebvre defines them as “1. Spatial practice, which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society’s relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance.” (In footnote: “These terms are borrowed from Noam Chomsky, but this should not be taken as implying any subordination of the theory of space to linguistics.”) “3.
Representational spaces, embodying complex symbolisms, sometimes coded, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art (which may come eventually to be defined less as a code of that space than as a code of representational spaces).”  Ibid., 33.


In Kristeva’s reading of Freudian symbolism, the obligatory murder of the father reinforces the social pact in which sons have to revolt against the supreme figure of law, value, and authority in order to eventually identify with it and then regenerate it by excluding others from its sphere. The ensuing contrition and patricidal guilt require consolidation through the sacred, through the cycle of purification rites, which are to re-establish the symbolic pact while disguising the initial libidinal impulse to violently replace the father. Kristeva’s analysis of the organization of the sacred place is based on Freud’s Totem and Taboo (1912-1913). She writes, “If you read and reread Freud’s text, you will see that he links the question of the sacred to the double taboo affecting the prehistoric community: on the one hand, the murder of the father; on the other, relations with the mother. Freud thus considers the two points of the oedipal triangle, the two constitutive elements of the oedipal, when he describes the advent and organization of sacred space” (2000, 20).

Lefebvre, 1991, 125.

Lidia Curti, “What is Real and What is Not: Female Fabulations in Cultural Analysis,” in Cultural Studies, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Gary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 134-154. Curti mentions Cherrie Moraga, who, writing about the sense of betrayal between women and the myth of unreliability of women in her own culture, refers to the figure of Malinche in which these beliefs have been “carved into the very bone of Mexican/Chicano collective psychology” (page 149).


Juan Seguin, a wealthy Tejano landowner, fought on the Texan side in the Texas Revolution. Emiliano Zapata was the most successful peasant leader and hero of the Mexican Revolution. Gregorio Cortés, immortalized in the border ballad, corrido, is a paradigmatic oppositional figure of the Texas-Mexican ethno-nationalism. César Chávez was a Chicano labor organizer in California and Rubén Salazar a journalist, who was shot by the police during a Vietnam moratorium in Los Angeles. All these men have played an important role in the construction of Chicano cultural nationalism. See Rodolfo Acuña, Occupied America: A History of Chicano (New York: HarperCollins, 1999).

Kristeva, 2000, 28-29.

Pérez, 1999, 4-5.

Kristeva’s final configuration of the revolt has to do with language, i.e., the poetic style of such writers as Aragon, Sartre, and Barthes, whose literary “extremism” shook the foundations of repressive ideologies (2000). By using Kristeva’s formulation, I do not wish to assess Ozzy Osbourne’s production of musical style but merely to consider his role in the Freudian interpretation of the art work under discussion.

An interesting analysis of the political usage of obscenities is in Laura Kipnis, “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading Hustler,” in Cultural Studies (1992) 373-391.


Kristeva explains the meaning of the phallus (in the child’s oedipal phase) and its difference from the penis in the following: “The penis ceases to be a physiological organ in order to become a phallus in the psychical experience, ‘the signifier of the lack,’ to use Lacanian terminology, because it may be lacking and because it subsumes other lacks already experienced. To this we must add that the signifier of the lack is the paradigm of the signifier itself, of all that signifies. The penis as phallus becomes, so to speak, the symbol of the signifier and the symbolic capacity” (2000, 73).
COMMUNITY AS THE SITE OF IDENTIFICATION

In regard to Chicana photographers, the notion of an artist as an aesthetic morphologist reintroduced by Swedish authors Johannesson and Knape, assumes a larger meaning than initially imagined since Mexican American communities in the U.S. Southwest, though village-like, were always heterogeneous, permeable, and quick to adapt to global economic fluctuations. Yet, the early stages of both Laura Aguilar’s and Delilah Montoya’s careers show uncanny parallels with the description of the Scandinavian “village photographer” as a person who was “neither professional nor family, but a neighbor or friend,” and who traveled around “taking photos of anything [he/she] wanted and on the villagers’ request.” Further, everywhere in Scandinavian local history, “we find evidence of the village photographers’ importance to the community,” claims Johannesson, adding that “[i]n-depth studies show that women were strongly involved in this activity, although few studies have concentrated on women’s contributions.”

In the United States, these kinds of in-depth local studies are even fewer, if any, since most well-known photography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is characterized by middle-class white photographers (male and female) training their cameras on black, Indian, or poverty-ridden white communities, with little agency on the part of the subject. By situating the village photographer – an intermediary between amateurism, professionalism, and art – as the closest predecessor to the favorite genres of the twentieth century, namely documentary and press photography, Johannesson also provides an applicable transnational route for detecting the genealogy of Aguilar and Montoya, both of whom have obviously drawn influence and inspiration from the vernacular aesthetics of their environment, from rather “low-brow” photo-documentaries in Life and Look magazines, popular during the 1950s and ’60s, and from the work of socially-conscious photographers of the same time period. In contrast with Johannesson, British photo-historian John Tagg’s well-known study, The Burden of Representation [1988], completely overlooks the kind of community-based representational agency delineated here while focusing on such institutional practices as the involvement of photography in the nineteenth-century welfare programs and on the emergence of the liberal New Deal documentary mode of the 1930s.

The notion of the village photographer as a cultural preserver as well as an artistic innovator destabilizes the rigid genre boundaries erected for example by French sociologist
Pierre Bourdieu and American photo-historian Alan Trachtenberg. Trachtenberg’s *Reading American Photographs: Images as History from Matthew Brady to Walker Evans* (1989) collated the history of photography and the national history in a single genealogical line of famous men. Pierre Bourdieu’s classic publication, *Photography, a Middle-Brow Art* (1965), on the other hand, characterized photography solely as an artistically mediocre medium used in family rituals, thereby constructing internal, mostly class-based hierarchies within the practice. Bourdieu’s widely referenced but somewhat outdated conceptualization of photographic meaning, unlike that of Lena Johannesson, lacked insight about the intersectional nature of gender, race, location, and other categories in cultural/visual discourses. Naturally, intersectionality plays a critical role in Chicana art photography, and therefore the purpose of these essays is not only to point out how the discussed images break boundaries between art and documentary, high and low, subject and object, inside and outside, but also to foreground the actual personal as well as collective experiences that inspired the images, a gesture which I deem vital for the understanding of their meaning.

With her two series of photographs, *Stillness* and *Motion*, focused on in the first essay of this chapter, Laura Aguilar activates the politically charged discourses on women, race, and nature in (post)modernist art, rearticulating these discourses through her allegorical visualization of inter-subjectivity and a communal self, two notions radically at odds with the common concept of American individualism. Titled “Comadres Corporation in Labor,” the essay on one level interprets the transformation from “stillness” to “motion” as the artist’s own psychological healing process assisted by a group of her female friends from the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas. On another level, the photographs (modeling naked women of color, including white) are analyzed in the context of the gendered and racialized history of art and photography in the United States, with a particular emphasis on the genealogy of women photographers therein and keeping in mind John Tagg’s contestation of artistic lineages in general and in regard to photographic practice in particular.

In the final argument of the essay, however, Aguilar’s work – with its embodied construction of a female community – is read as fundamentally ill at ease with the aesthetic, historical, or epistemological subtexts it evokes. It seems particularly gratuitous to categorize her as a lesbian artist since nothing in the images themselves unequivocally supports such a statement. Sexual identifications tend to bring about unpredictable complications, as noted in art critic Harmony Hammond’s introduction to the publication, *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History* (2000): “To be lesbian, means engaging in a complex, often treacherous, system of cultural identities, representations and institutions, and a history of sexual regulation.” In terms of interpreting art, Hammond poses some good questions: “Is the quality ‘lesbian’ embodied in the art object, the sexuality of the artist or the viewer, or the viewing context?” And, finally, could difference, just like beauty, be in the eye of the beholder? In my perception, Aguilar’s work aligns quite well with the stance that Chicano queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification, associated with the utopian undercurrent of the queer performance that eschews all fixed identities whatsoever – hence the disquieting power of Aguilar’s images that ostensibly endorse Arcadian ideals of benevolent nature and modernist aesthetics of the last century.
The second essay of this chapter, “Para mijitas y todos los carnales” (For my Daughters and all the Kin), contextualizes Delilah Montoya’s *El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart*, a series of photographic portraits of her friends and family, at the intersection of two spatio-temporal locations: the New Mexican Hispanic village and the urban barrio. Staged as a kind of communal ritual around the indigenous/Catholic symbol of the Sacred Heart, the series employs photographic techniques and popular genres from the nineteenth century, incorporating and subverting the histories of visual representation in its reformulation of the (cultural) nationalist myth of Aztlán, the Chicano homeland. Most of the portraits depict the symbolic or real female figures, including the artist herself, whose dress, poses, and attributes unravel an unbroken undercurrent of mestiza genealogy, epistemology, and agency within the Mexican American historical and cultural narratives. The essay aims to elucidate how the photographic representation of this contested but fundamentally matriarchal heritage involves a manipulation of various sacred spaces and practices as a politically motivated discursive strategy, so as to provide the sign of Aztlán with a viable contemporary referent, configured by racially mixed *coyota consciousness*, structured around hybrid ethno-racial identities, and located in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The intellectual climate of late has expected writers, artists, and other public figures to solely call attention to particularization and difference on the personal level, and, conversely, to the globalization of the world on econo-political level. Therefore, it seems rather daring to talk about community building in art and its prerequisites. In contrast, the most pressing questions about society in twentieth-century philosophical discussion dealt with the issue of community and ethics due to post-war political exigencies. In the aftermath of fascism in Europe, philosophers like Heidegger, who had conceptualized the local in conservative and exclusive terms, were followed by a generation whose questions about the notion of community reflected the trauma of the war. For example, they asked whether it would be possible to define an ethical community without resorting to the construction of its negative opposite; does the logic of exclusion mark all communities that subscribe to a particular ideology, religion, race, or ancestry; and, ultimately, is there a possibility for a consciousness of selfhood that would not reduce its other within itself? Such canonized authors as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Maurice Blanchot inextricably associated their thinking of community and photography with the idea of death, which calls to mind Benedict Anderson’s (1983) seminal study on the emergence of the nation. Anderson’s key concept, an *imagined community*, pops up more than once in this text, too. These broader themes underlie the discussion on Chicana/o community building in this chapter, the discussion that Chapter 7 will then continue in the context of Mexican American cultural nationalism, community building, and their various articulations in art and academia.
Comadres Corporation in Labor: Stillnes and Motion by Laura Aguilar

I would like to propose a new aesthetic category, the Exquisite, [which operates in the] zone where the repulsive and beautiful intersect, or rather in the zone where what is conventionally considered most beautiful – the female body – and what is conventionally considered most repulsive – also the female body – intersect.

Rebecca Solnit (2001) 12

There is something at once calming and disquieting about the presence of Laura Aguilar’s body, or more precisely, about the image of her naked body, so unlike the images of the commodified female body rampant in our daily visual environment. The sense of comfort, for me, arises from the very mundane experience of visiting a public swimming hall anywhere in Finland, and watching women of all ages and sizes undress unhurriedly, wash themselves and their small children, chat quietly in the sauna, have a swim, shower, and then dress and leave to continue their daily business. What is disquieting about the image of Aguilar’s body, as occasionally implied in the critical reception of her art work, has to do with its subtle disavowal of the set categories that commonly circumscribe identity politics, underwritten by the designations of ethnicity, race, and/or sexual difference. For Aguilar, the embodiment of an inclusive identity has been a mixed blessing, though, granting her a provisional status as a Chicana artist whenever exhibition curators wanted also to bring in the issue of sexual difference within Mexican American cultural expression. On the other hand, curators of feminist art exhibitions, trained in multicultural political correctness, have frequently chosen Aguilar to represent the Latina perspective perhaps partly because her nude studies do not conspicuously clash with the aesthetic preferences of contemporary mainstream Euro-American fine art. How Aguilar’s photographs articulate and consolidate this overdetermination of identity in undoing the binary opposition between individual artistic expression and communal sensibility will be the focus of this essay.

Laura Aguilar was born in 1959 in San Gabriel, Los Angeles. She attended the photography program at East Los Angeles City College and continued her studies with the Friends of Photography Workshop and at the Santa Fe Photographic Workshop. 13 As a teenager, Aguilar started to use the camera for observing and documenting not only family occasions, but also herself, her friends, and the whole neighborhood. Encouraged by her art teachers at the community college, she got interested in her ethnic (Mexican-Irish) origins and moved, with her camera, on the fringes of Chicano cultural activism that electrified the non-white neighborhoods in California at that time. Aguilar’s awareness of her mestiza identity developed along with her increasing identification with the Latina lesbian community. These experiences lead her to experiment further with collective self-presentation, which culminated in such portrait series as Latina Lesbian (1987–1994) and Clothed/Unclothed (1990–1994). Both series function simultaneously as affirmations of “otherness,” of an identity politics based
on difference, and as celebrations of multiple communities that counteract racial fault lines. In the series *Plush Pony* (1992), she interacted with a small community of working-class lesbians, who were meeting at the bar of the same name. She documented their mutual relationships and their ways of spending time together within a safe space where they could express their identities, relations, and lifestyles. Thus, even before she enjoyed national or international recognition as a photographic artist, Aguilar moved around in the various communities in East L.A., taking photographs of private as well as communal life, observing the entire “aesthetic environmental morphology” of minority neighborhoods – to borrow art historian Lena Johannesson’s terminology – and thereby engaging herself in the documentation as well as preservation of these communities.

*Looking through the Big Brother’s Eyes*

In a society circumscribed by anxieties and inhibiting models of the moral and the beautiful, the issues of nudity and pornography are particularly volatile in art, an activity which presumably reflects the highest moral aspects of humanity. But what is the larger meaning of the naked, or nude, female body in Western art and how does Aguilar’s work reconfigure this meaning? This is the underlying question of this section. Male artists and viewers alike would argue, according to art historian Paul Karlstrom, that the ubiquity of the nude female as the subject matter of art has to do with sexuality and desire whereas most women see the question entirely in different light: at issue is one’s body and who exerts control over it. Thus for women artists interviewed by Karlstrom, “art becomes the theater (or laboratory) where power relationships are examined and investigated.” 14 Perhaps Aguilar’s initiation into this theater happened when she, as a teenager, was instructed in photographic darkroom techniques by her elder brother. He then enlisted her to develop photographs – shot by himself on the school’s sports field – that meticulously zoomed in on the torsos of high-school girls playing volleyball. As she pulled out her first print from the chemical liquid in the tray, what emerged on the paper were women’s breasts. Aguilar thereby learned the ropes of the modernist grammar of nude photography: fragmented body parts, decontextualized abstract forms, cropped and open poses that make the photographic object an ideal target for the distant, anonymous eye of the camera.

This “grammar” also influenced strongly the visual parameters of most of her self-portraiture until the mid-1990s when she first came to visit San Antonio, Texas, and found her stereotypical conception of Texas as a racist place transformed by friendship and support she received from local people there. Both series of black-and-white photographs discussed in this essay, *Stillness* and *Motion*, were made in 1999 during Aguilar’s two-month stay in San Antonio through the ArtPace Foundation’s International Artist-in-Residence program. The artist herself describes her work process very candidly:

Before I began work on *Motion*, I had done a series called *Stillness*. *Stillness* drew from the experiences I had caring for my father and his dying process. […] As his caretaker,
I was glad for the experience of caring for him, witnessing peace come over him as he surrendered to his illness and finding peace for the relationship between us. [...] In the photograph [see Motion #59, fig. 16, page 281], two women cradle me with their bodies. I feel protected with the support of others as I create my work. [...] It speaks to my feelings about San Antonio and the community I find there.  

Aguilar’s intimate statements seem to be at odds with her reputation as an artist with a “cutting-edge” lesbian and Chicana/o political agenda; indeed, reviewers tend to read the Stillness and Motion photographs deictically, that is, primarily as evidence of her personal spiritual connection with nature rather than as engagements with broader issues of representation. The presence of the personal and spiritual in these images should not be ignored, of course, but nor should one forget the old feminist maxim, “personal is political.” This is particularly valid since Aguilar’s models in these photographs are mostly women whom she had befriended at the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center, a volunteer community organization in San Antonio, whose mission statement includes the following:

We believe that by having a place with resources available we can come together to facilitate and provoke discussions and interactions in a variety of ways among diverse groups of people who believe that together we can bring positive social change to our world and address the inherent interconnection of issues and oppressions across racial, class, sexual orientation, gender, age, health, physical and cultural boundaries.

Besides associating with the Esperanza community, Aguilar has regularly exhibited her work at their gallery, which in 2003 also hosted the show Motion & Center where I first had an opportunity to see her work displayed in public. The reception of Aguilar’s work tended to ride on clichés perhaps because of her penchant for mixing the conventional aesthetics of modernist photography with radical content informed – albeit not determined – by her involvement in Chicano and lesbian identity politics in Los Angeles. Her position as a nude photographer thus appears intriguingly contradictory, on the one hand revealing a strong stylistic linkage to early women modernists, such as Anne Brigman and Imogen Cunningham, for whom the camera offered a means to escape social restrictions of their time, and, on the other hand, teasing forth an allegorical reading of the conjuncture of sex, race, and power through the representation of naked female bodies. The former aspect dominates the Stillness series.

Most of the images in Stillness (altogether some three dozen) depict the body of the photographer herself, posed naked in a natural setting with somewhat biblical undertones: by a lush river, in the desert, among rocks and boulders. Peace and serenity permeate these intimate landscapes, fostered by the subtle tonality of modernist black-and-white photo-aesthetics, the small size of the images (generally about thirty by forty centimeters), and the huddled naked bodies and averted faces of the models. Particularly the images that show Aguilar by herself, as if rising from the ground to worship the light filtering through the bushes and the branches of trees arching over her (#41, fig. 17, page 282), reveal some parallels to the work of the early
twentieth-century Pictorial photographers, who simulated scenes of a wooded grove as a sacred space for the female mystic. In their organic identification with self and nature, Aguilar’s images echo the kind of “pagan” sensibility typical of Pictorialist photographer Anne Brigman, in particular, who liked to stage her naked body against the dramatic backdrop of wind-beaten trees and rugged mountains. The very artifice of Brigman’s highly dramatic images suggests the problem inherent in self-representations of women then and now. That is, in author Judith Fryer Davidov’s words, “how to re-present the ‘natural’ unmasked, undisguised self, unaffected by the cultural constructions they, as social beings, have learned.”

What Anne Brigman had to divest herself of, then, was the long tradition in art – from the classical nude to the modernist abstraction – of representing the female figure as an object, idealized or demonized, which made Brigman turn her own body into a cultural symbol of Woman, i.e., of mythological, essential womanhood emerging from the “vaginal folds” of the earth. About one hundred years later, what Laura Aguilar’s self-images have to deal with is equally incapacitating and hard to tackle: the objectification of a female body as a commercial commodity and the commodification of a sexually/racially marked body as a political sign. For both photographers, though, the camera itself seems to provide a superb means of empowerment, not so much in order to “master” the world but to visualize and hence control one’s own representation in it. These “self-authorings” yield two seemingly contradictory readings, namely those of a quest and parody. From the (post)modern reader’s point of view, Aguilar’s work leans toward the former, as I have already mentioned, and Brigman’s to the latter. Davidov suggests, “we might read Brigman’s photographs as parody of the Woman = Nature equation at the core of both Romantic and Symbolist projects, as acts of masquerade that confront the sense in which the presentation of the self is always in response to the reflection in another’s eye.”

For both photographers, the camera evidently works as a means of transformation and healing. Brigman, however, always designed her pictures to hide the flaw (a removed breast) in her otherwise wholesome body whereas Aguilar hides nothing apart from her face. Provisionally, the heavy folds of her flesh – “unredeemed” by the optics of the camera – convey an indirect parody of erotic voyeurism characteristic of modernist aesthetics (and commercial imagery); without any doubt, they speak about a rather tortuous quest to accept and love one’s own materiality against tremendous odds. By rising up, bending down, stretching out, or holding still in repose, the heavy folds of flesh communicate most powerfully with the photographer/seer herself, eliciting emotional response within.

The ultimate inertia of the photographer/viewer’s look that oscillates between the self and its image on the print is broken by an emergence of another person – not of the opposite sex, though, as in the Garden of Eden, but of another woman. Although Stillness #35 (fig. 18, page 282) depicts the photographer looking at the image of her naked self while looking at the back of another woman with an equally full figure and long black hair, I believe it would be unwarranted to read it simply as a representation of lesbian desire. Rather, as a kind of look-a-like twin, the other woman peers over the river, taking the role of a guide on an arduous road to self-discovery. There had been other guides along the road: Aguilar’s first guide to the world of fine art and photography was Suda House, her teacher at East Los Angeles City College, and then – Judy Dater, a prominent feminist artist. Dater’s famous photograph, Imogen and Twinka
at Yosemite (1974), which shows the elderly Imogen Cunningham with a camera in her hands, confronting a young nude model, stands as the epitome of this female synergy, anticipating the photographs Aguilar dedicated to her friends, including the one titled *Her Spirit Moves Me, A Homage to Judy Dater* (1996). Thus the aesthetic affinities between these women photographers are not at all coincidental but acknowledged, resulting from a shared experience of the empowering potential of photography coupled with an acute awareness of how the same medium has been employed to control both women and nature. Yet in Aguilar’s case, no prerequisites existed for the birth of the high-powered ego of the modernist (or postmodernist) artist, capable of deconstructing the oppressive forces of representation through her self-staged performance; in the end, Aguilar had to listen to a different drummer. Hence her dark twin signals the arrival of more women still, with bodies like spots in the once virgin landscape by the river somewhere near Blanco, Texas.

Next a slim woman, also hiding her face from the observer, enters on the stage of *Stillness*. Together the two women start a slow dance through the archetypal desert landscape, spreading out a veil between their naked bodies, reaching their hands to the ground, shaping themselves after the boulders around them. Like Aguilar’s alter-ego or ideal self or her white (M)Other, the slim woman offers her body to be observed, simultaneously as an ambiguous object of optic desire and as a counter weight against which Aguilar balances the masses of her body. Drawn by the contours of the mountains resting over the earth, the horizontal lines of the landscape in *Stillness #27* (fig. 19, page 283) create a precarious equilibrium, similar to the back-to-back posture of these two women, one leaning forward and lifting the other by her hands like a heavy bag she needs to painstakingly carry or like a sheltering sky that arches over her. Finally in *Stillness #28* (fig. 20, page 283), the women pose in a rocky groove, with Aguilar’s perfectly oval rear end facing the viewer like a furrowed chayote fruit, gently evoking the enticing shapes of natural forms so strikingly portrayed in Edward Weston’s renderings of erotic bell peppers and seashells. This beautiful image perhaps is Aguilar’s homage to the masters of American modernist nature photography.

To avoid sounding dead serious, *LA Weekly* journalist Bill Smith wrote the following anecdote about Aguilar’s working methods and her road trip to Vegas:

One of the women in the car asks how she manages the somber task of finding a location. Spying a dirt road off the highway, Aguilar shouts, “Stop!” Suddenly everyone in the car embarks on an impromptu hike and photo shoot. The resulting images were added to the *Stillness* series […]

In all probability the same method also influenced the appearance of *Motion*, the series Aguilar describes as an immediate follow-up to the process of self-discovery launched by her personal losses and then expressed in *Stillness*. She says that at that time,

I was starting to do more physical movement in workshops, learning about my breathing — asking people how they found their peace. I was struck by how close the
word motion was to emotion. Motion is moving, and in this series I’m moving […] my body is moving, my thinking is moving, my spirituality is moving.24

The Motion series, as I perceive it, depicts in very visceral terms Aguilar’s psychological healing process, but – distanced from its autobiographical origins – it also depicts a radical departure from the representation of the naked female body in fine art at large. As the artist’s depression and inertia draw back, any mundane place in nature appears as uplifting as a mountain vista, any dried up riverbed as refreshing as a waterfall, any thicket of twisted undergrowth as comforting as a wooded grove, and all human bodies around these sites as equally beautiful. The transformation of Aguilar’s mind and body image thus subverts the reading of the landscape from a symbolic space for the negotiations of social and political relations to an unreadable “no-place” with ambiguous meanings and obscure equivalencies, a site where naked female bodies are invited to create their own choreographies, eschewing the pitfalls of social scripts without using the kind of deconstructing masquerades that characterized early postmodern photography by women.

In order to reflect upon these choreographies and understand what is at stake here, it is elucidating (once again) to frame Aguilar’s Motion images by way of reading a little art history. It is no news to point out the ample use the modernist painters made of female models by objectifying, mystifying, orientalizing, and controlling their bodies; however, what or how the painted (or photographed) bodies in fact perform in images has often garnered little critical attention. So, instead of revisiting the quintessential pastoral scenes of lounging females painted by Courbet, Renoir, Cézanne, et al., let us look at the work by some of the best-known American artists engaged in representing the nude and compare it to Aguilar’s work, which technically and aesthetically adheres to the conventional mode of “realistic” photography.25 During the heyday of the realistic mode in art in the late nineteenth century, most prominent American painters were avidly experimenting with photography. A case in point would be Thomas Eakins (1844–1916), the American realist painter par excellence.

Eakins was inspired by Eadweard Muybridge’s photographic experiments, which aimed to prove with scientific exactness how the human body moves when performing certain activities, and he also used photographs as aids for teaching his art classes and for sketching his work in other media.26 Characteristically, his nude studies show men alone or in groups, engaged in brisk outdoors activities typical of an American idea of naturism as a modern recreation (e.g., The Swimming Hole [1885] and Thomas Eakins and John Laurie Wallace at the Shore [1883]). The focus of Eakins’ portrayal of American society and American identity lied firmly on muscular and virile male bodies (dressed or undressed, working or performing in sports, science, and art), on “the absolute male,” as rightfully characterized by the book title of art historian John Esten.27 In contrast, most female nudes of Eakins pose alone, indoors, and with props. Thus, like generally in modern art, the male body in his photographs and paintings expresses culturally specific, historical ideas whereas the female nude inhabits a timeless space outside of culture.28

Obviously, then, the gender differences explicit in photographic nude studies can be viewed through the representations of leisure and work and their ideological underpinnings in
society. In Laura Aguilar’s *Motion* series, women are not only representing a multiplicity of ethno-racial identities, but also enacting in a rather peculiar way the visual narration of work (on the land) deep-seated in the ideological foundation of the United States. In the philosophy of national progress, work became the symbol of the transformation of undeveloped nature into civilized productive society, sustained by the individual freedom of white men and the private property they accumulated. Earth was to be redeemed by labor on land, which was regarded worthless without human improvement, and this objective then became dramatized in paintings and photographs that represented men’s activities as purposeful, goal-oriented, and culturally significant. Women’s work and the appropriation of female bodies for free labor force and for the reproduction of that labor force, for example, are absent from the gallery of national imagery (as well as from contemporary media imagery).

Interpreted through this historical context, the performance of Aguilar and her friends seems to signify nothing; their “meaningless work-outs” on the land presents an anomaly; their bodies enact the invisibility of the activities that fall outside of the sphere of productive masculine work. The anonymity of their performance reinvests with cultural currency the invisible labor done by agricultural workers in the fields, or by native and settler women who were land owners and farmers before losing their property to land speculators. In the *Motion* images, in sum, women recapitulate in unison the condition of alienation from gainful work, property, and leisure – the last being the product of the first two. In a most peculiar way, this kind of alienation has also shaped Aguilar’s own professional career: even after international successes, she has not been able to secure a steady income and barely affords the house where she lives. What these women seem to motion with their bodies reminds me of the alternative trajectory of civilization (and work) sketched by essayist Rebecca Solnit, who, with Marxist undertones, reflects upon the distinction between work and labor:

> Labor has rarely been honored and hardly recognized; it took and takes place in the realm of the female, the domestic, the rural, the private; it maintains and is marginalized with the body. If the work of making is predicated on absence, then the labor of tending is organized around presences.

This is the thematic organization of *Motion*, too; the *comadres* of Esperanza laboring for, tending, and sustaining the art work of Laura Aguilar. In the individualistic economy of (post)modernist aesthetics, though, their “corporeography” creates an eyesore.

Blurring the boundaries of selfhood and the clear demarcation between inside and outside spaces, the comadres stir up the classic formulation of the powers and dangers of the body, deriving from the ability of its orifices and surfaces to symbolize national obsessions at large and to represent the contentious sites of social entries and exits. In view of this wider societal context, it is interesting to consider how persistently the discourse of bodily irregularities and peculiarities has circumscribed not only the career of Aguilar, but also the careers of most women photographers I have referred to earlier in this essay. In high school, Aguilar was placed into a remedial class, mostly filled by Mexican-origin students, because of her “learning disability,” which later turned out to be auditory dyslexia; also, she was not
allowed to take photography classes because of her alleged “inability to focus.” Of the modernist women photographers, both Anne Brigman and Imogen Cunningham were criticized (sometimes even by themselves) for their photographic techniques and their bodies, both of which were deemed equally defective or “lacking.” The male stalwarts of straight photography estimated Dorothea Lange’s work technically “messy”; Laura Gilpin’s “impurity,” in turn, came from her lesbianism. In some cases, it was not technical imperfections or unconventional personal attributes that made women’s photographs suspect but their subject matter. Reflecting upon the negative feedback many of the modernist women received, Davidov concludes by asking:

Why this formulaic, obsessive repetition by photographers that feminine = radical/messy/emotional? What threat did Cunningham, Lange, Kanaga – and also Käsebier and Gilpin – pose that evoked such strong negative response? Quality was not the issue. Rather, to put it in Douglas’s terms, some disruptive power outside the main narrative relegated women’s camera work to the margins of hegemonic culture.32

Working on the impure, disorderly, and transgressive particularly fascinated Imogen Cunningham, but she, just like Aguilar, avoided turning her occasionally rather eccentric models into grotesque figures riddled with deviant afflictions in the style of Diane Arbus or Nan Goldin, for example. Aguilar’s work, while making a photographic artifact out of personal pain, carries an enormous potential for healing, the kind of transformative suspension that turns the pain in her own body into a shared pleasure that can compellingly short-circuit the wirings of representation. Nevertheless, questioning the commonly offered story of women possessing some kind of natural “gift of sympathy,” Davidov calls for a closer examination of photographs, so as to find out to what extent, if at all, it is possible to destabilize the power relations inherent in the media and perceive another as if the lens separating the artist and the photographic object did not exist. After all, the attempts to bridge between the Self and Other, sexually or/and racially marked, by camera have not always been particularly successful, she reminds.

The spaces of transcultural contact, whether discursive or physical, tend to be highly loaded with anxieties revolving around the dangerous nature of this contact, suspended between the predatory appropriations of Western subjects and the resistance strategies of their others.33 Therefore, the tradition of demonization-cum-valorization of cultural/racial difference has continued to hold high the lens of separateness and undermine potential new discursive spaces and verbal/visual exchanges emerging from the practices of collective self-representations. Acting against this anxious reading of otherness, Laura Aguilar turns her body into the object of her own gaze as well as that of the viewers, examining her own otherness within, insisting that there is no secret to protect, nothing mysterious to hide, and that within the morphology of the community-as-a-village, the dangerous boundaries of the contact zone can melt in the air. Women’s bodies, including her own, thus become “the substance” for imagining a sustainable community, and the camera becomes her speech organ through which to articulate the ideological foundations of that community. Gayatri Spivak summarizes the
effects of this kind of cross-over in her sly comment, “If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more.”

*Sagging Breasts like Stones*

So far most of the discussion about Laura Aguilar’s photographs has mulled over the issue of gender and representation in the frame of modernist aesthetics and art practices. This section, in turn, embarks upon those elements of her work that make a direct reference to the visual rhetoric of race, class, and gender in the construction of the U.S. social system. When talking about race, it is essential to remember that we should perceive race as an aspect of human representation, in images and in texts of all kinds, rather than as an illusion or a mere social construction, in spite of the refutation of race as a biological factor (see pages 26-28). Social historian David Goldberg’s practical definition emphasizes the historical context of race as “one of the central inventions of modernity,” manifesting the “liberal paradox” that “as modernity commits itself to progressive idealized principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, there is a multiplication of racial identities and the sets of exclusion they prompt and rationalize, enable, and sustain.” In modernist art, of course, the practices of erotization and racialization went closely hand in hand. In the United States, even the more “democratic” strain of twentieth-century modernist photography, which leaned toward documentation rather than self-sufficient artistry, conformed to the representational tradition that placed the white man (or woman) in the subject position in relation to the racialized/gendered photographic object. Such famous female documentary photographers as Frances Benjamin Johnston, Dorothea Lange, and Laura Gilpin were not exceptions to this general rule.

It is instructive at this point to reiterate Paul Karlstrom’s hypothesis that in certain contexts “art becomes the theater (or laboratory) where power relationships are examined and investigated.” During the era of multiculturalism of the last two decades, a plethora of art work explored human flesh as an autobiographical medium in order to render visible subjectivities formerly marginalized. Aguilar’s *Motion* photographs, moreover, suggest its possibilities as a historiographical medium. They produce an allegorical drama about a multiplication of racialized gender identities that rearticulate and ultimately defuse the working of exclusion and segregation. Thus interpreted as historically and geographically specific subjects that emit (and construct) social meanings, the bodies of women in *Motion* function metaphorically on two levels, namely, the individual and collective. First, as personifications of native, mestiza, black, and white populations, each woman enacts one of the mutually dependent yet disparate narratives of racially inscribed female bodies with their dissimilar positions in the nature/culture paradigm. Second, as a motley group of naked females thrown together amid trees and rocks so as to express the artist’s photographic desire, they seem to be rehearsing mysterious episodes of some kind of cathartic dream play with no apparent resolution. Without falling prey to ethnographic timelessness, they evoke and test (perhaps even satirize) several historical discourses on race relationships, such as the notion of the noble savage, the Jeffersonian ideal of peaceful amalgamation of races, and the twentieth-century separate-but-
equal ideology that sustained a deeply segregated society. All these ideological discourses have relied on reification as well as abjection of women, operations common in the racially mediated praxis that Aguilar’s images undermine.

Motion #54 (fig. 21, page 284) opens a series of three compositionally parallel photographs. Centered in the middle of the image lies a large round rock with a black woman curled up on top, holding on to her knees, looking inward, pressing her head against the rock as if listening to the ground. In the subsequent image (fig. 22, page 284), the camera moves up, draws backward, and now focuses on another woman, who has appeared in front of the black woman, bearing her body in a similar introverted position, self-absorbed within her own corporeality. Thus identically articulated and pulsating the same silent rhythm as the rocky terrain around them, their bodies derive meaning only through a single signifier – the black and white color of their hair and skin. This contrast, as the ultimate arbitrator of racial difference, intercedes between oneself and the other, setting emotion, reflection, and communication in motion. Aguilar’s self-consciously artful mise-en-scène of the racial binary perhaps struggles to encode her own search for the rightful mother; this, however, remains unresolved as she goes on and compromises her superior subject position by modeling herself in the third image (fig. 23, page 285). Her reclining brown body takes over the foreground, its self-contained stance and remarkable volume heightened by the resonance of the white and black bodies, ascending diagonally on the hill behind her back. This “ascent” of (wo)man, customized by the photographer, does not, however, rely on the simple reversal of old hierarchies but on the postures and physiognomic commonalities of the bodies portrayed and the histories inscribed upon their skin.

Liberated from the obligation to act out socially constructed racial difference, the black woman in all three photographs averts her eyes, refusing to assert her subjectivity in the present, but has, instead, turned her face down as if to listen to and remember the past. In the viewer’s eyes, hence, the calculated aloofness and serenity of her disposition sets in sharp relief the construction of the black woman as a locus of sexual violence and racial confrontation, the origin of which, according to playwright Lorraine Hansberry, has for centuries been part of the national meta-narrative, hailing from the colonial beginnings of the nation.

America long ago fell in love with an image. It is a sacred image, fashioned over centuries of time: this image of an unharried, unconcerned, glandulatory, simple, rhythmic, amoral, dark creature who was, above all else, a miracle of sensuality.39

As an impassive object of aesthetic/erotic contemplation, the body of Aguilar’s friend asserts its particularity, ceasing to be a mere image and claiming access into the world of breathing human beings. In that world, says literary critic Michelle Cliff, the experiences of black women in general cannot be dissociated from those of the woman who was a slave. Cliff asks: “Who was she? How did she survive? […] What did she teach to her children? What was her relationship to her husband?” and continues:
She could be lynched, beaten, tortured, mutilated, raped. She could have her children sold away from her. She was forbidden education. She was considered a beast of burden. She was subject to the white man’s power and the white woman’s powerlessness masking as whim. Her womb was a commodity of the slavemaster, and her childlessness, a liability of the slavemaster. [...] She was known to commit infanticide and induce abortion rather than have her child be a slave. She was known to commit acts of violence and rebellion – with magic, poison, force, even with spit. And she sometimes learned to read and write and sustain the art forms she had carried with her.40

In modernist photography, as Davidov points out, the history of slavery was contained within the narrative of “progress,” which domesticated African Americans to represent middle-class American ideals (like Frances Benjamin Johnston’s photographs of the daily life at Hampton Institute). Or it was diluted in the empathetic but rather obsessive exposure of the black body, which gradually turned into a grotesque black mask that we can see for example in Consuelo Kanaga’s close-up portraits of African Americans, whose excessive blackness appears as an alluring sign of “pure essence.” 41 Such contemporary artists as Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson have taken on the task of deconstructing this “pure essence of blackness,” pointing out the complicity of photography in the nineteenth-century racial project. The stark power their work gains by combining images and texts matches the power of Aguilar’s photographs, whose eccentric allegorization of color-coded female bodies produces more ambiguous and compelling meanings still than the postmodern deconstruction technique of the black artists.42

What kind of historical burden does the representation of the white woman carry, then? From early on the sexuality and savagery associated with the black woman acted as the flip side to the reification of the white woman as an emblem of purity, civilization, and sacredness. That way both white and black women were objectified, metaphorized, and segregated from each other by the hegemonic cross-articulations of race, class, and sexuality. In quoting contemporary critical terminology, they both had to “play nature for man’s culture” regardless of their opposite, yet complementary roles. In the nineteenth century, during the formative years of the nation, one of the popular allegorical figures in realistic painting was a thinly-clad white lady in the vanguard of modernization and westward expansion, carrying the insignia of enlightenment and European civilization.43 Her alternate, the sturdy settler woman with a bunch of children at her apron, continues to defy the elements on many state capitol grounds, immortalized in public sculptures that commemorate pioneer families. Thus entangled in the powerful discourses of state, land, production, and reproduction, white women have at certain historical conjunctures chosen to lean on this kind of valorizing symbolic language to secure their own class and race privilege, which further isolated them from women of color, whose assumed moral inferiority marked them as objects rather than subjects of political power and social engineering.

By meticulously aligning the bodies of the black woman and the white woman with almost identical physiognomy and disposition, Motion #55 (fig. 22, page 284) on the one hand
highlights this black-versus-white binary upon which the ideology of patriarchal white supremacy was constructed. Yet on the other hand, the photograph’s straightforward exposition of the racial “master signifiers” – skin and hair – without the decorum of dress or pose, presages a narrative hiatus in the empty space before the receding camera. Finally in the third image (Motion #56, fig. 23, page 285) composed at the same rocky setting, the photographer’s striking physical presence amplifies the identical morphology of the triad, anchoring the composition on the native woman, whose body had been relentlessly appropriated to serve ideological ends since the first Spanish conquistadors landed in America.

The colonial representations of the native woman, in particular, were infused by the polarization between good and evil, between the noble Indian princess and the grotesque witch with sagging breasts, the pictorial dyad whose genesis anthropologist Bernadette Bucher’s study *Icon and Conquest* (1981) investigated thoroughly. Bucher’s somewhat outdated structuralist analysis of the engravings that illustrated de Bry’s *Great Voyages* (a Dutch conquest chronicle from the early seventeenth century) concluded that

> [m]ore than a simple “vision” of the Indian, the mythic system of the native with sagging breasts appears as an unconscious justification of behavior and practices that characterized the history of colonization in North America: the taboo of interracial marriage, with segregation as the first consequence, whether as Indian “reservations” or as black ghettos, slavery, and genocide.44

De Bry’s portrayals of parties of naked Indian women engaged in cannibalistic bacchanalia employed pictorial conventions originating from medieval Christian iconography, which connoted sexual excess, particularly same sex and auto-eroticism, in native religious practices. Thus projecting the Old World tradition of witches onto the New World, the sexualization of natives obliterated all nuances from the dynamics between the European Self and his denigrated anti-Self, the Indian woman, who had to be conquered and controlled together with New World nature. In the long run, according to Bucher, this “vision” of the diabolical native also provided the rationalization for the “appropriation of Amerindian land not only with respect to the Amerindians themselves, but also with respect to the Spaniards, dangerous competitors.” 45

The above narrative of the dark side of the European enterprise overseas emerges as a persistent counter-image to the Arcadian existence that many reviewers of Aguilar’s images marvel at with phrases like “reverence for the sublime unification of nature and self” or “radiant immanence through the fusion with the intense landscape” or “magical landscape – exotic to all but its native inhabitants.” 46 Comments like these betray a profound nostalgia for the pre-industrial idyll traditionally embodied in the artistic representations of Indians (and land), so entrenched in the national psyche that it easily goes unnoticed that for example Texas nature today first and foremost caters to (non-Indian) leisure hunters and fishermen.47 In any case, albeit that the ideologically circumscribed landscape (the theme that will dominate the essay on Aguilar in the next chapter) might appear too grim and remote a subtext to even filter through into the consciousness of many viewers, let us look at the way Aguilar’s images
refashion her own existence and origins from the entangled articulations of roots, rocks, branches, and female bodies.

No doubt, the exquisite aesthetics of Aguilar’s work addresses the yearning for the lost paradise of pristine authenticity, naturalness, unity, and unconditional love, as the artist herself confirms. But while doing so, the photographs also activate a range of deviations from the conventional language of high-minded idealism that often characterizes contemporary ecological as well as art discourses. The crucial point here is that, as such, the images enact neither domination/victimization nor resistance, but constitute a slippage or interruption, which disintegrates the usual parameters of visual representation. The first of these deviations is the break-down of the discrete subject-object opposition. Like Judy Dater, Aguilar measures landscape with her own body – by responding to nature’s whims and fluctuations, instead of solely structuring landscape around the metaphoric meanings generated from a detached vantage point. The similar logic of intimacy applies in regard to her interaction with the models, whose poses are obviously resultant from collaboration and negotiation. Yet the camera itself stays a good distance away from the models, displaying them whole (instead of fragmented into body parts) and well capable of guarding their most intimate selves. Aguilar thus becomes her own maker – at once the subject and the o(a)bject, her own ambiguous “other,” whose relation with alterity does not show any trace of romantic racialism common in early modernist women photographers’ work, for example.

The second deviation has to do with the concept of mimesis, which assumes a correspondence between external reality and the way the world becomes represented in art (and science). In one form or another, this complex and somewhat antiquated problematic invariably stalks artists who use film, video, or photography. Is not necessary in this study to take up the discourse on mimesis as such since I will merely use it as a general frame of reference in discussing the photograph that evidently emulates the moment of birth and that Aguilar herself considers the key image of the series. She says about *Motion #59* (fig. 16, page 281), “In the photograph, two women cradle me with their bodies. The pose is symbolic of how I feel protected with the support of others as I create my work.” In the image, the bodies of the three women fold over each other, Aguilar huddled in the center with her head down like a fetus just before pushing out from the womb. Even the foliage and twisted branches around the women seem to recapitulate the forms of female internal spaces and reproductive organs. The metaphoric inversion of inside and outside, or the projection of the internal onto the external, summons up the scientific visualizations of female fertility from the Renaissance anatomical drawings to modern day ex-rays and ultrasounds of solitary fetuses afloat in empty black space. In contrast with the collaborative labor metaphorized in the *Motion* image, scientific and medical depictions highlight the control of technology over disconnected body parts, erasing the female body as an individual, integrated whole and conflating all the multiple histories and identities of women into the self same category of motherhood.

*Motion #59*, by acting out an symbolical birth of the artist as blatantly physical as well as spiritual, simultaneously repositions the meaning of maternity from the sphere of mysterious, abject, prohibited, and therefore scientifically contained onto the sphere of an active remaking of one’s own relational self. The photograph, in this sphere, does not fix its
subject into a mimetic appearance of realistic modes, but instead establishes an open stage for the bodies where they can seize the full power of the allegory to manipulate meaning. In Rebecca Solnit’s words, “the creative act becomes an unraveling, recouping the old, rather than augmenting the new.” 51 Further, the birth of the artist in this photograph is not represented as a transcendental emergence of a white male, individualistic and self-sufficient, but as a materialization of the physical labor performed by an inter-racial community of women of different ages, sizes, and colors. Resignifying the racially encoded histories of dispossession, enslavement, and sexualization, this labor constitutes the backbone of the Motion series and its struggle to work out the way from stillness and uniformity toward an enabling convergence of variations. Thus, the series challenges the paradigmatic psychoanalytic question of individuation, “Who am I?,” always fluttering around the realm of the symbolic and transcendental, and in its stead proposes another question, “Who are we?” This, according to Donna Haraway, is an inherently more open question, “one always ready for contingent, friction-generating articulations. It is a remonstrative question.” 52

The Portrait of the Artist that is not One

To round up this essay, I wish to extend my analysis a little further by briefly discussing Laura Aguilar’s photography in the context of subject formation, specifically in reference to such conceptualizations that seek to challenge, or reformulate, the unique and unified subject which has been the cornerstone of Euro-American individualism since the beginning of modernity. By and large, this ideology has evolved through various articulations of and assumptions about difference versus sameness, difference being regarded as the essential and primary category of human existence. Drawing from Lacanian understanding of individuation, the cultural critic Stuart Hall, for example, claims that “The cultural practices of looking and seeing, like all fundamental social practices, are organized around these founding principles of the articulation of difference, especially race and gender/sexuality.” 53 The human body, the most visible sign of difference between individuals, thus turns into the site of signification where differences are recognized, negotiated, and – sometimes – reconciled. 54 The dynamic between the viewer and the viewed (even in its radical version where the position of the bearer of the look is reversed) appears predestined to forever oscillate inside the narrow confines of the Cartesian binary. Furthermore, art and media criticism during the last thirty years, while dealing with the proliferation of work on the body, have not so much paid attention to the formal qualities of depicted figures as examined the meanings constructed by the viewer’s gaze, assuming without qualms the naturalized position of the unified subject (always already masculine and thus predatory) in visual representation.

However, as a representation and construction of social meaning, the allegorical performance of Aguilar and her comadres practically disregards the kind of sexual fetishism associated with the male gaze and abundantly theorized in contemporary visual and postcolonial studies. 55 In fact, it is extremely hard to see anything pornographic in these photographs at all. The male gaze of the implicit spectator, sometimes described as the eye’s
erection, is neither challenged by the defiant (female) “counter-gaze,” which would merely acknowledge the “omnipotent power” of the gaze by way of imitation, nor solicited in excess so as to accentuate the constructed nature of gender and race. What we witness in Aguilar’s photographs, then, is a shift of focus from the aesthetics of prescriptive identity politics, which tend to act upon differences of all types, toward the production of radical inter-subjectivity. The subject which is not one, to appropriate Luce Irigaray’s phrasing, would not solely rely on strategic manipulation of feminine (or any other type of) essentialism but, more importantly, on the innovative exchanges that can develop in a multiply contested visual space of non-individualistic self-representation. This kind of “inclusive” arrangement of visual economy I call, tentatively, the *queer gaze* (although the queer look perhaps would be a more appropriate term as it connotes relational sensibility rather than one-way visual penetration implied by the word “gaze”).

How can we approach this kind or gaze, or look, then? In the field of Chicana/o studies, José Esteban Muñoz has most insightfully reflected upon the conditions of identity formation of what he calls “minoritarian subjects.” His study *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) breaks away from prescriptive identity politics determined by the question “who people are” and instead urges the reader to ask “what people do.” Identification, as a process of self-understanding, thus appears a rather passive, albeit at times useful strategy, whereas *disidentification*, active and processual by nature, strives to “envision and activate new social relations,” however fragile. For the critical analysis of art work, this entails focusing on “how the artist practices her art rather than assuming (or expecting) that her identity determines both content and aesthetic.” Laura Aguilar’s photographs engage their subjects in proactive labor in order to disidentify from a number of hegemonic representational practices (or contracts as Muñoz calls them): the male gaze as well as the female gaze. The latter appears as the former’s degraded counterpart which seems to involve only three equally regressive options: masculinization, masochism, or marginality. Also, I believe that Aguilar in her late 1990s’ production actively disidentifies herself from politicized sexual/ethnoracial identity expressions in favor of more open-ended, inquisitive, and partial narratives of self. That Aguilar’s affinity with both communities, lesbian and Chicano, started only in her adult life perhaps explains this impression of reserve. Equally, her expression obviously takes distance from the extreme forms of those postmodern discourses in art that assert the loss of all coherent subjectivity caused by the particularization of self, fragmented, multiple, and dislocated by various imagining technologies. These strategic moves delineate the parameters of her *queering look* in the *Stillness and Motion* series, recovering the subversive potential within modernist photo-aesthetics.

Again, José Esteban Muñoz’s insightful reflections suggest a viable route to expand upon this argument. While charting the genealogy of queer thinking, he brings up the importance of *utopianism* for the project of disidentification, the kind of utopianism that divorces itself from the “somber prophecies of liberation” it is associated with in nationalistic political thinking; that instead “reimagines a radical future replete with humor and desire.” Aguilar’s photographs convey that kind of utopian sensibility and desire: they reimagine – in both form and content – a world of wholeness where her life would not be affected by
imperfections of speech, figure, or skin color; where the body would be exalted instead of marginalized; where even nature would remain unmodified by metaphoric meanings; and where humans could interact through touch rather than vision, through their diverse morphologies and internal circulations.

2 Lena Johannesson, “Photo Exile: On the European Experience and Women Photographers in Germany and Sweden,” in *Women Photographers – European Experience*, ed. by Lena Johannesson and Gunilla Knape (Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2004) 16-91, see pages 47-49. Johannesson states on page 86 that “The concept of “aesthetic environmental morphology” was launched in 1942 by a methodological pioneer, the Swedish art and social historian Gregor Paulsson, in his work *Konsthistoriens föremål* (Objects of Art History), Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 1943:5, Uppsala & Leibzig 1943, p. 90.”
3 Interestingly, both artists mention the name of Gordon Parks (the only black FSA photographer) and Bruce Davidson as sources of inspiration whereas such famous photographers of the Southwest as Dorothea Lange and Laura Gilpin do not seem to have influenced them significantly.
7 By using the modifier *(post)*modern I wish to remind the reader of the permeability and elusiveness of art styles and periods; postmodern in art – owing to the politics of ethnicity, race, and sexual difference – indicates a certain theoretical orientation of the artist (or the interpreter) rather than any specific set of aesthetic features. On the other hand, in today’s art world the institutional practices and notions based on modernism still function to a large extent whether art work itself is called postmodern or not.
8 See John Tagg’s introduction to *The Burden of Representation* (1988).
10 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). I prefer to use Muñoz’s term *disidentification* instead of the more common terms associated with queer theory. For example the much debated term *intersectionality*, referring to the multitude of interactions between changing socio-cultural categories and identities, I find too vague and, as a metaphor, not very successful in describing these amalgams. See http://www.tema.liu.se/tema-n/NORFAcoursesix.htm.
13 Most information about Laura Aguilar’s life is based on the interviews with her on July, 2003 in Los Angeles, September, 2003 in San Antonio, Texas, and May, 2005 in Los Angeles.
16 *San Antonio Express-News* reviewer, Dan R. Goddard, comfortably diluted any trace of politics by claiming that “Aguilar’s photography is her way of coming to terms with her weight problem” (December 10, 2003). This kind of depoliticized reading is rather common among observers, who lack the “cultural capital” (see Johannesson [2003] 22) to decode the historical underpinnings of what has been photographed. Obesity and its semiotic reading fall within the “cultural capital” most American reviewers are certainly familiar with, and perhaps therefore it is so often referred to as the main theme in Aguilar’s images. I do not, however, find the
Theories of the subversive potential of the so-called monstrous-feminine (Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* [1982]) or the female grotesque (Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* [1995]) particularly instructive in this case. 


For example Griselda Pollock (*Looking Back to the Future* [2001]) and Janet Wolff (*Feminine Sentences* [1990]) have extensively discussed the empowering potential of modernism for women artists, particularly for painters who have, more than photographers in fact, suffered from the restrictive gender-related traditions within their trade. 


That is why I find it extraneous to associate her with contemporary American feminist or black artists, who, for the most part, have opted for the postmodernist modes of deconstruction and masquerade. 

The ambiguity of Eakins’ relationship to photography and gender shows in the following quote from him: “Should men make only the statues of men to be looked at by men, while the statues of women should be made by women to be looked at by women only? Should the he-painters draw the horses and bulls, and the she-painters ... the mares and cows” “So Eakins defended his predilection for the nude studies in non-formal settings that make up the bulk of his photographic work. The use of these photographs in the classroom eventually led to Eakins's dismissal as Director of Instruction at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1886. Interestingly enough, his paintings and sculpture rarely included nude figures, and his desire to evoke a realistic classicism was more successfully achieved in his photographs.” Retrieved on October 27, 2004 from [http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/bio/a1729-1.html](http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/bio/a1729-1.html). 


Solnit, 2001, 164-5. Solnit’s discussion about the concepts of “tending” and “attending” describes the loss of women’s power associated for example with healing, mid-wifery, and domestic leadership. From the point of view of social history, the essays in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. by Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki Ruiz (New York: Routledge, 1990) offer a number of examples of women’s inter-racial collaboration in labor struggles (e.g., cannery and garment workers) and of other socially related issues that have acted against the division of class and race. 

See [http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/bio/a1729-1.html](http://www.getty.edu/art/collections/bio/a1729-1.html). 


Michael Taussig and Mary Louise Pratt, the two best known representatives of the recent theoretization on the theme of cultural contact, have on the one hand emphasized the experiential, interactive nature of the transculturation process. Yet on the other hand, their key concepts, “the contact zone” and “the second contact,”
do not come through as completely unaffected by older perceptions, which all but obsessionelly dwelled on the “dark, erotic, and mysterious Other.” See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) where she defines “the contact zone” as a place where “disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (page 38). In *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), Michael Taussig postulates “the second contact” when the other turns the lens to the colonizer and imitates him. In spite of their attempts to construct non-Western subjects as active agents, these publications demonstrate the hardship of imagining any kind of cultural exchange with non-European peoples beyond the prototypes of “predation” and/or “appropriation.” On the other hand, for example Rey Chow’s essay “Where have all the Natives Gone?” attempts to demystify this contact by claiming that the “indifferent” gaze of the colonized does not hide anything – the secret is a colonial phantasm *(Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills [New York: Routledge, 2003] 324-349).


37 See Davidov (1998).

38 My interpretation of Aguilar’s images as an allegorical drama enacted through the color-coded female bodies has similarities with Homi Bhabha’s concept of the racial drama in colonial societies. He says, “Skin, as the key signifier of cultural and racial difference in the stereotype, is the most visible of fetishes, recognized as ‘common knowledge’ in a range of cultural, political, historical discourses, and plays a public part in the racial drama that is enacted every day in colonial societies.” Bhabha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” in *Visual Culture: The Reader*, ed. by Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1999) 370-378, 376. Yet, I do not see the concept of the racial drama as deterministically as Bhabha, who is not talking about U.S. society.


41 Davidov, 1998, chapter IV, “Containment and Excess: Representing African Americans,” 157-214. The similar kind of obsessive exposition of blackness in its formalistic extreme characterizes Robert Mapplethorpe’s controversial nude photographs of black males although his images, of course, belong to the totally different social and political context of the 1980s. Art critic Kobena Mercer (“Reading Racial Feticism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” in *Visual Culture: The Reader* [1999] 435-448) points out Mapplethorpe’s racial fetishism, his omnipotent eye to fix and freeze a solitary black body into a pornographic decorative art object. I would hesitate, though, to say that “[t]he visual is essentially pornographic” (and hence aggressive), ending up in “mindless fascination,” as Fredric Jameson claims about films (see his introduction to *Signatures of the Visible* [1990]), and that watching automatically and inevitably would involve violation.

42 One of Aguilar’s earlier self-portraits shows her in front of an art gallery, holding a sign with the text: “Artist Will Work For Access.” This very ambiguous image – and the text in particular – perhaps somehow reflects her position in terms of postmodern photography and its fundamentals.

43 Examples would be John Gast’s painting, *American Progress* (1872), in which a white thinly-veiled lady floats through the air, carrying telegraph wires and a textbook as a testimonial of civilization; Domenico Tojetti’s *The Progress of America* (1875); and *American Progress* (1867) by Emanuel Leutze. See Carolyn Merchant (2003) 126-132. These paintings seem to resonate with the bare-breasted center figure leading the revolutionary mob in Delacroix’s historical allegory, *Liberty on the Barricades* (1830), where female sexuality converges with political instability and violence. However, since the focus of this discussion is not on the white woman, I deliberately avoid touching upon the virgin/whore dichotomy inherent in the reification of her image and the way contemporary women artists have deconstructed that discourse.

44 Bernadette Bucher, *Icon and Conquest: Structural Analysis of the Illustrations* of de Bry’s *Great Voyages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 117. In fact, de Bry never visited the Americas himself and to acquaint Europeans to the marvels of the “New World,” he used quite freely his imagination, copying iconography from various European contexts and from drawings made by other people. Thus his Indians have a distinctly European flavor.

45 Ibid., 117.
The Western art historian William H. Goetzmann has extensively studied the theme of Indians in art as a romantic expression of mankind in its original state of nature and of a primeval vision of Euro-Americans’ own antiquity. Early photographers (epitomized by Edward S. Curtis) are prime examples of this tendency, which was often inspired by the sincere urge to “salvage” the “dying Indian” in photographic documents. See *The First Americans: Photographs from the Library of Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Starwood Pub., c1991); *The West of the Imagination* (New York: Norton, c1986).

Davidov (1998), for example, finds all white women photographers she discusses guilty of romanticizing their native sitters – to some extent at least – in spite of their good intentions.

In simple terms, the concept of mimesis has to do with the “true,” iconic, representation of nature and reality in arts. Of course, in writings about photography the notion of indexicality also becomes central. See, e.g., *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* by Erich Auerbach (1953).


Solnit, 2001, 164-165. The author speculates about the difference between work and labor, arguing that the former signifies a historically circumscribed act of making something new, whereas the latter implies an act of attending to something already existing, something ahistorical, which involves paying attention and waiting. I see work mainly in terms of wage-work whereas labor often connotes activities outside of the market.


Privileging difference over all other categories of human experience is astutely criticized by Australian feminist writer Vicki Kirby, for example, who explicates her own argument with another writer, Drucilla Cornell, over the relationship between sexuality and the body. Her words seem to carry weight also in regard to the conversation of bodies in Aguilar’s work: “I do not regard our differences as oppositional, as if one body of writing could simply be dismissed and replaced with another. Our differences might be regarded as ‘involvements’: they are conceived together and forged from the indebted tissue of a corporeography that entangles us both.” Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 86.

Luce Irigaray’s foundational discovery that the subject of visual representation is always already masculine was elaborated on in media studies by Laura Mulvey (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” [1975]), who launched the deterministic term, the *male gaze*, which would circumscribe all visual representation. I, rather, agree with artist Mark Little’s assessment that “[t]he work of Aguilar, in particular, is indifferent to the apparently definite power of the gaze which functions to negate it” and “Aguilar hits her targets by essentially ignoring them.” He also claims, rightfully, that for example Cindy Sherman and Maxine Walker’s deconstructive techniques have already been integrated in the art idiom and turned conventional (“Group Exhibition, Laura Aguilar and Maxine Walker, Zone Gallery, Newcastle,” review in *Creative Camera*, April 1997, 44).

The term ‘queer’ does not, however, offer an easy solution as proven by Gloria Anzaldúa’s somewhat contradictory exposition of her own misgivings. She first criticizes the term as “a false unifying umbrella which all ‘queers’ of all races, ethnicities, and classes are shoved under,” and yet she ends up endorsing its relative flexibility compared to other terms denoting sexual difference. See “To(o) Queer the Writer – Loca, escritora y chicana,” in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, Ca: Third Woman Press, 1998) 263-276, 264.

On the mode of identification Aguilar’s well-known early work, *Three Eagles Flying* (1990), has mostly been interpreted from the perspective of Chicana or/and lesbian identity politics, notwithstanding its uncanny resemblances to historical imageries of racial formation and the photographs of lynching scenes, for example, which would have shifted the focus of discussion on the mode of disidentification.

In her essay, “Desperately Seeking Difference” (*Visual Culture: The Reader* [1999] 390-401), Jackie Stacey maps alternative ways to present the feminine subject in the scenario of cinematic spectatorship and comes to the conclusion that sexual difference should be neither destroyed nor valorized but opened to pleasures of ambiguity, making room for both female desire for and identification with the other.
Para mijitas y todos los carnales: *El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart*
by Delilah Montoya

[…] por eso se llama Aztlán; estabá allá en lo que ahora quizá esté muy junto, muy cercano de la muy grande margen, la muy grande ribera la que ahora llaman “Nuevo México” ellos los españoles, Aztlán Chicomóztoc.

Fernando Tezozómoc

“Some say Aztlan is a state of mind,” wrote Cecilio García Camarillo, a civil rights activist, a poet, an editor, a radio personality, and a highly-regarded member of the Albuquerque Mexican American community, who died of cancer in January, 2002. For Chicana photographer Delilah Montoya, García Camarillo was a long time friend, mentor, and a collaborator in several of her art works. In the series of photographic portraits, *El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart* (1994), discussed in this essay, he is featured as a self-styled sage. Wearing black sun-glasses, he muses over a crystal ball, accompanied by a fleeting shadow of his cat, Estrella, and lines of his own poetry that read: *Without Innocence, How Can There Be Wisdom?* (fig. 24, page 286). Like García Camarillo’s, so too Montoya’s life and career as an artist have been shaped by intense self-searching and a search for her mestiza origins. Both of her parents were born and grew up in northern New Mexico, but they moved to Texas after her father was stationed at the Fort Worth military base. Montoya was born in Texas but spent most of her youth in Omaha, Nebraska, before moving to New Mexico in the late 1970s with her daughter Lucy and mother Molly. It was then, at the age of twenty-five, when she started to braid her mother’s traditional *nuevomexicano* heritage with the Chicano political and cultural activism thriving in the barrios of Albuquerque, nurtured by such charismatic activists as authors García Camarillo and Rudolfo Anaya.

Although in Albuquerque Chicano renaissance had started out on the big wave of land and civil rights activism that swept through all southwestern states, in Montoya’s art work it has assumed a special flavor, first, due to her personal history as a mestiza and *coyota* – a daughter of an indigenous mother and an Anglo father – whose skin is no darker than mine. In short, Montoya was not born amid a Mexican community, she did not learn Spanish at home, nor was she raised in *la familia* of a large number of relatives but among migrant workers who provided cheap labor for the stockyards in Nebraska. For her, therefore, Chicana identity is not given but rather a work in progress, self-fashioned over years of dedication to political activism, community work, education, and art. Being initiated to the Chicano movement first in Omaha and then in Denver, says Montoya:

Of primary importance is my view of art as a serious and responsible vehicle for exploring issues of Chicano ideology. […] I work to understand the depth of my
spiritual, political, emotional and cultural icons, realizing that in exploring the
topography of my conceptual homeland, Aztlan, I am searching for the configurations
of my own vision.5

Second, her art work engages the whole breadth of so-called Indo-Hispanic traditions of
northern New Mexico, tapping into the spiritual and political practices that have over centuries
formed a regional culture rather alien and little-known in the country at large, and linking those
practices with the current issues of Mexican American communities elsewhere.

After a brief introduction of some controversial aspects of New Mexican culture, the
first part of this essay will illuminate the construction of what I call the matriarchal lineage of
the mestiza episteme in Montoya’s work. This is based on conceptual relocation of the myth of
Aztlan at the convergence of two geographic locations of Chicana/o culture and identity –
urban and rural, the barrio and the village. My interpretation takes a cue from historian Sarah
Deutsch’s model of cultural interaction and migration as a strategy for survival, the model that
neither the term assimilation nor the term acculturation can adequately describe. Says Deutsch,

The Chicano experiences inside and outside the barrio are mutually illuminating, and
taken together they reveal more completely the dynamics of the Chicano experience in
the southwest, the parameters of autonomy and subordination.6

Affirming this kind of social dynamics, Montoya’s art work aims to remodel the Catholic ideal
of la familia through its invocation of “embodied” Chicana spirituality, disseminated across the
various sacred spaces of Mexican American culture.

Spirituality also is named as a primary means of resistance in the related, yet distinct
argument of the latter part of the essay. This argument springs from the history of photography
as the quintessential representational technology by which the “otherness” of race, class, and
gender has been calibrated in order to establish and naturalize the social hierarchy of
dominance. For this discussion two studies, John Tagg’s The Burden of Representation (1988)
and Shawn Michelle Smith’s American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture
(1999) have been instructive as well as inspiring.7 The overarching purpose of the essay, as a
whole, is to show how Montoya combines the collaborative working method, the familiarity of
vernacular photography, and the aesthetic import of a fine art style to reconcile various divides
within Chicano cultural discourses, and, by doing so, provides the nationalistic myth of Aztlan
with a contemporary, geographically grounded, and politically viable referent.8

Contested Geographies

The topography of Montoya’s conceptual homeland, Aztlan, and her maternal homeland in
northern New Mexico paradoxically overlap the topography of the “Land of Enchantment,” as
New Mexico is called by the promoters of tourist and art industries, whose visions have
fashioned the land as an American Other, a picturesque “pre-industrial refuge” from the ills of
urban alienation. Since the late nineteenth century, New Mexico has provided the American imagination its exotic “Holy Land,” “the land of poco tiempo,” as invoked by travel writer Charles Lummis, whose books conjured up familiar tropes of biblical stories and scenes reminiscent of the Orient. Modernization of the Union required that “Like the Israelites who were led out of the darkness and idolatry of their Egyptian captivity,” in Ramón Gutiérrez’s words, “so too the peoples of New Mexico had to be freed from their ‘paganism’ (read Roman Catholicism) and brought into the modern era.”

On the other hand, the pre-Columbian myth of Aztlán, the place of origin of the Aztecs, was deployed to serve the political goals of the territory’s administration. In 1885, William G. Ritch, the Secretary of the Territory of New Mexico, published a book called *Aztlán: The History, Resources and Attractions of New Mexico*, which resurrected the legend of Moctezuma, the last Aztec emperor presumably born to an Indian virgin in Santa Fe (the state capital of New Mexico). Ritch employed the emperor to spread the message of individualism that would triumph over the communal socio-economic organization of both Pueblo and Hispanic villages and lead New Mexico out of underdevelopment on the wings of Moctezuma’s vehicle, the eagle. According to Gutiérrez,

Aztlan, then, stands as a particularly poignant example of how a mythic complex was selectively transformed, in order to achieve concrete political gain. In 1885, [Ritch] wanted to attract immigrants to New Mexico so that Anglos would outnumber Hispanos, his goal being an Anglo-dominated state.

This, however, makes only part of the historical package weighing upon the notion of Aztlan; the other half originates from a more recent date, namely from the mythic narrative of the Chicano civil rights movement, which re-created Aztlan as the spiritual homeland of Mexican-origin people within the United States.

Taking distance from the political controversies surrounding the myth, author Michael Pina argues that the deeper meaning of Aztlan lies in its ability to reconcile the spiritual and social. He refers to the concept of the “living myth,” which

serves as the ultimate reference point, the touchstone of truth by which facts are recognized as truths. Myth, when it is believed and lived from the inside, does not ask to be plumbed more deeply, i.e., to be transcended in the search for some ulterior goal; it asks only to be made more and more explicit, for it expresses the very foundation of our conviction of truth.

It is clear that the mythic element persists in the imagination of Mexican Americans no matter how passionately researchers of material forces in society struggle to repudiate romanticizing illusions about the past; yet, pre-Columbian heroic narratives were never unanimously adopted by Chicana/os as the very foundation and center of their world view. In contrast to Pina, for example Rafael Pérez-Torres’ conceptualization of the myth is less reconciliatory. He reduces it to an “empty signifier,” devoid of an unambiguous temporal referent and meaningful only as
a trope of discontinuity and rupture that characterizes the history of mestizaje in the United States. Whether unifying or disrupting, myths linger in cultural narratives and popular consciousness long after their ethno-centrifying function has waned and, as a consequence, “the role of the artist, then, proves to be significant and often a more continuous one than that of the political activist,” claims literary critic Genaro Padilla, whose comparative review of the nationalist uses of various epic legends throughout the world lends a global perspective to the discussion of Aztlán.

Evidently, an Aztlán evoked by Montoya does not fit into the confines of the “living myth,” nor does it signify an absence or a “fantastical delusion” suggested by Pérez-Torres. Rather, the myth in her art work is viewed in a pragmatic, “hands-on” fashion, not as a naturalized “touchstone of truth” or an abstract literary trope, but as a vehicle for deploying subversive ideas about social formation. At the same time, it integrates ritual practices and beliefs emanating from Chicano appropriation of Aztec mythology with the very real materiality of mixed indigenous and Spanish cultural expressions found in the New Mexican Hispanic villages, dating back to the colonial times. Therefore, instead of asking what or where exactly Montoya’s conceptual homeland, Aztlán, is, we should perhaps simply consider what it effects in terms of imagining a contemporary Mexican American community at large; how it reconfigures socio-political and gender relationships within it; and what it does to the concept of la familia as the leading metaphor of this community. These are some of the questions I will try to illuminate while interpreting the images at hand.

El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart was first exhibited in 1994 as part of Montoya’s MFA degree requirements for the University of New Mexico. In her statement, Montoya describes the series as

a collection of collotypes that portrays Albuquerque’s Chicano Community. The images explore the manifestations of the Sacred Heart as a cultural icon. Basing my research on my own Mestizo perspective, I have concluded that this Baroque religious symbol expressed shared cultural patterns that connote a syncretic relationship between European Catholicism and Aztec Philosophy. […] My approach to the Sacred Heart was to involve the community in a contemporary manifestation of the heart as a cultural icon. As a photographic printmaker, I photographed members of the Chicano community with an 8x10 view camera. The portraits were shot in a constructed space and reproduced as Collotypes. The constructed space was the result of collaboration with Chicano youth (aerosol artists) who spray-painted images on the studio walls. The murals were used as backdrops for the portraits.

The title in itself sends quite an explicit message: the work does not strive to embrace “universal truths,” but, on the contrary, insists on the specific – local, bilingual, personal, spiritual, and visceral. That is, to go beyond the visual pleasure induced by the “exotic” iconography and exquisite sepia-toned aesthetics of the images, the viewer is expected to know, or find out, a good deal about a number of regional traditions and religious symbols
outside of the sphere of what is considered common knowledge about art. The following paragraphs are intended to cater to this presupposition.

As explained in the chapter about U.S. regional histories, ethnic identity in New Mexico involves a complex hybridization of cultures due to the peculiarities of Spanish colonization, the geography of the region, and the interactions between Pueblo Indians, Plains Indians, and Spanish villagers over several centuries of cultural encounter. Since the end of the colonial period, the northern half of the territory, in particular, developed rather independently from both Mexico and the United States. It never received large numbers of Mexican immigrants, and therefore remained relatively aloof from the consumerist vogue for all things Mexican that later beset many parts of the country.\textsuperscript{16} The artist remembers how, as a child, her mother told her “\textit{[y]ou’re not Mexican, you’re Spanish; we are not from Mexico.” “When my mother says ‘Spanish’ her voice echoes the abandonment by Mexico and refers to our emergence from the Spanish colonial system,” says Montoya, “To call oneself ‘Spanish’ […] is not to make a class distinction but a cultural one.”\textsuperscript{17} The native Spanish speakers of the state thus hold on to their cultural identity as Spanish Americans or Hispanics or, more recently, Indo-Hispanics, so as to recognize their commonly known but formerly repressed mestizo heritage. New Mexican religious practices make up an essential part of this heritage, characterized by regional versions of the Catholic faith with distinct traces of indigenous pre-Christian mentality.

Montoya’s work grows from these village traditions, two of which, I believe, are particularly pertinent to the \textit{El Sagrado Corazón} portraits – namely the multicultural traditions of the \textit{genízaro} communities (see page 64) and those of \textit{Los Hermanos Penitentes}, the order of the Penitent Brothers. The Penitentes, who took over the spiritual as well as social leadership of Hispanic communities after the Mexican government ousted the Spanish priests from New Mexico on the 1810s, have a notorious reputation because of their secret rites that climaxed in self-flagellation (and crucifixion, as the rumor goes) during their Lenten procession.\textsuperscript{18} In Indian religions, too, bloodletting and flagellation as a form of exalted devotion and expiation of sin were used as a means to legitimate socio-political power and, particularly in Pueblo cosmology, to negotiate the struggle between male and female authority.\textsuperscript{19} Earthen kiva houses in the Pueblo villages were strictly male sacred spaces as were equally modest Penitente chapels, moradas, whose ceremonial meetings were not open to women or outsiders.

Armed with a camera and an artistic license, Montoya once broke into an abandoned morada, which used to belong to her grandfather’s Penitente order. An excerpt from García Camarillo’s poem documents the sacrilege:

\begin{verbatim}
the roof of the old morada / has rotted away / the once plastered walls / now reveal countless piled stones / charged with the accumulated power / of the songs / through the frameless window / I sense the lacerated souls / of the brotherhood […] / a blue pickup arrives / with the first rays of the sun / a woman quickly gets out / and props a tripod / by the front door of the morada […] / she carries a large camera / which she places on the tripod / and then photographs / each and every part of the morada / when she
\end{verbatim}
The result of this intrusion was the installation *Saints and Sinners* (1992), which juxtaposed images of the morada’s dilapidated interior with a contemporary political commentary sealed inside glass jars that also depicted the narration of the Passion of Christ. Montoya’s appropriation of the male space of spiritual and political power is recognized by Chicana critics Charlene Villaseñor Black and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano. The former’s essay, “Sacred Cults, Subversive Icons: Chicanas and the Pictorial Language of Catholicism,” discusses Montoya’s work from the point of view of religious visual discourse, and the latter’s essay, “The Contestatory Art of Delilah Montoya: Restructuring Space and Community through Religious and Spiritual Traditions,” in regard to the production of gendered space. But both essays fall short of following up the traces that lead from the morada chapel of San Isidro into Montoya’s tiny studio on the University of New Mexico campus. There the passion of Christ became tempered, through photographs, by the body of *la indita*, the little Indian mother, who anchored the Hispanic villages against the tide of the Anglo economic and cultural intrusion described in Sarah Deutsch’s perennial study.

¿Quién es mi Mamá? 

The main part of *El Sagrado Corazón* consists of portraits of women, of varying ages, alone or together, acting out the roles and poses they have themselves helped to create inside the artist’s studio space. The corporeal styles of these women assert an identity through repeated and interrelated performances, or rather, through a repository of specific cultural expressions that conjure up the contradictions, inconsistencies, and violations inherent in the history of New Mexico’s racial mix.

Montoya’s depiction of *La Malinche* (fig. 25, page 287), for example, does not represent the revered mother of *La Raza*, rehabilitated by contemporary Chicana feminists, but the older, taboo version of her: an eroticized young woman, alone, helpless, and appealing to the male gaze. She is clothed in a traditional Mexican *quinceañera* (a coming-of-age ceremony) outfit as a symbol of innocence—a little virgin bride in all white, carrying a veil and a rosary, looking very Hispanic in her European dress and very Indian with her dark complexion, her white shoes immaculate against her dark legs. She lacks the emblems of her Indian heritage as well as the signifiers of linguistic and political éclat associated with the emancipated Mother Malinche. Nothing connotes her ancestral legacy or her renowned diplomatic expertise—there are no obvious signs of agency, speech, strategic articulation, or interpretative powers. She stands still, as the demure, silenced body of *la indita* in New Mexican folksongs, muffled amid lace, veils, candles, and flowers in her bedroom parlor. This Malinche invokes voyeuristic desire and fantasies of seduction, thereby constructing the viewer as male and the family psychodrama as an incestuous relationship between an abusive (white) father and a victimized (mixed-blood) daughter. Yet her eyes speak out loud. They
vacillate between submissiveness and anger. Her hands hold on to the rosary, as firmly as La Genízara (fig. 26, page 287) – Malinche’s “dark twin sister” clad in a buckskin dress – holds on to her Indian token, the dream catcher.25 The often repressed issue of widespread slavery in the colonial Southwest lies just under the surface of these images. Immanent in the visually constructed confinement of La Malinche and La Genízara loom the autobiographical stories of Hispanic captives, mostly women and children, taken by raiding Indians as well as the undocumented voices of Indian slaves sold to Hispanic villages during the colonial period.

More conspicuously still, the Foucauldian subtext of the body (as an object, target, and instrument of institutionalized power) emerges in the portrait of a “real” person, titled El Aborto-Homage to Frida Kahlo (fig. 27, page 288). Kahlo’s individuality all but disappears into the vortex of societal and cultural powers playing havoc on her body.26 The kaleidoscopic composition of the image operates relentlessly through a heavy arsenal of cultural and religious representations of bodies and spaces, which cut through the image field by way of looks, reflections, and frames. Rather unexpectedly, the interior arrangement and composition of El Aborto resemble those of Rudolfo (fig. 28, page 288), which portrays Rudy Anaya, the author, modeled by the man himself. Yet, the images connote two very different worlds and two distinct value systems: male and female, a study and a hospital, self-containment and abnormality. First, the sets around the two figures look rather like ordinary rooms: we see a corner with a window, curtains and framed pictures on the wall, and one person on a chair in the center of the image. While arranged in an analogous manner, however, the objects and attributes delineating these spaces contrast two opposite workings of meaning.

Kahlo’s space is almost white, clinical, and brightly lit. Besides the eye of the camera, she is also keenly observed by three figures around her: the image of her husband Diego Rivera on the wall, the distorted reflection of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the mirror, and a reproduction of one of her own, commercially commodified self-portraits. Each of her “observers” represents an institution of power: art market, marriage, religion, family, or self-surveillance. The actress modeling in the portrait appears to be locked in a painful upside-down position. Her head hangs down, eyes staring at the viewer; her mouth is open; her legs are apart and point up toward the window. She is half-naked, bound in straps entwined around her torso and one leg, holding a heart-like object in her hands. Also dressed in white, her whole body turns into a performance, a fetish; yet it is not an object of desire like La Malinche or La Genízara, but an irrational symbol of female abjection out of control. She embodies sexual transgression, insanity, and infertility, making a travesty out of the ideal image of a family. What is Kahlo’s strange liaison with Anaya, then? As opposed to the convulsions of her body, his posture appears remarkably calm and self-assured. His gaze is directed slightly off the lens of the camera, toward some distant goal. His air is intellectual, meditative, reassuring, and his clothing plain, not out of the ordinary. His symbolic attributes are a stuffed owl (the symbol of wisdom, witchcraft, and – death) and a lamp on the desk. At ease and perfectly composed, his body belongs to the unified subject of the classical type, starkly different from the awkward, fragmented, bleeding body of Kahlo. Verging on an ignominious satire, this contrast of the workings of power on the female body versus the male body leaves the viewer with rather ambivalent feeling about the parameters of gender within the Sacred Heart.
Reminiscent of the *la indita* laments and the *genizaro* legacy of slavery, the signs of violence and victimization discussed above make one facet of a construction of a matriarchal, mestiza cycle of meaning. Rather than being lone victims of female physiology, most women portrayed in *El Sagrado Corazón* use their bodies as means of self-inscription and intersubjectivity. The two teen girls in *La Loca & Sweetie* (fig. 29, page 289), for example, stand close together in an interior filled with Valentine’s Day paraphernalia. Comfortable in loose pants and skimpy shirts, they fashion their bodies after the style of subversive “barrio monikers,” such as *chola* and *pachuca*,27 stare down the viewer, act out their *comadrasco* sisterhood, and romanticize their environment with soft toys and heart-shaped balloons; yet they do not romanticize their own bodies, which appear rigid, protective of themselves as well as of each other. Thus asserting the sovereignty of their bodies, the girls look masculine and seductive at the same time. In Butlerian terms, their gender act becomes rather like “trouble” and a “scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency of a female ‘object’ who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position.” 28 The erotics of self-fashioning as an emancipatory performance becomes even more compelling in the portrait of Eva Encinias Sandoval (who models in *El Grito de la Gitana*, fig. 30, page 289), an Albuquerque-based flamenco dancer, whose formal body posture and elaborate costume reflect the high status of the Spanish cultural tradition she has successfully implanted in the University of New Mexico dance program and in the entire cultural scene of Albuquerque.29 Her face averted from the viewer, Encinias Sandoval allows full expression to her torso, whose scream, *grito*, joins into the chorus of hollering women featured in the literary works by, for example, Chicana authors Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo.30

When men left for war or to drink or to look for work, women stayed behind in the village or the barrio, taking care of the family, transmitting traditions, and protecting their children.31 So did Celia Álvarez Muñoz’s mother and so, too, Montoya’s mother, Molly Garcia, who brought up her three daughters practically alone and regrets only that she failed to pass on to them her native tongue. Mexican and Mexican American popular lore, however, invests motherhood with an ambivalent valence. Seen through the lenses of Mexican “grand narratives” (see pages 44-45), not only are women supposedly betraying the nation and their men, but mothers are also betraying their daughters – as Malinche’s mother did by selling her daughter to the enemy – and girl friends are betraying each other while competing for males. The portraits named *Mom’s Angels* (fig. 31, page 290) and *Madonna and Child* (fig. 32, page 290) focus directly on the bond between mothers and children (mostly female or of an unspecified sex). They subvert the myth of the evil mother by portraying a trusting, protective relationship between children and mothers, who would not sell their female offspring to benefit the son.32 The complexity of the mother-daughter relationship, of course, relates in multiple ways to the issue of power dynamics within the community. Without resorting to the depoliticized version of earth goddess imagery that conflates women’s societal status with their regenerative capacities (*Coatlicue, the sole goddess figure appearing in the series, is paradoxically designed and modeled by a male dancer!*), *El Sagrado Corazón* affirms the everyday spiritual practices of ordinary Chicanas, who reclaim authority by healing rather than
breeding. The mature women depicted in *El Corazón de María* (fig. 33, page 291) and *Curanderisima* (fig. 34, page 291) thus close the generational cycle of specifically mestiza communal knowledge, in which the practice of healing plays a central role.

Within the female cycle depicted above, the artist’s role in the community portrait remains somewhat emblematic. In the image titled *El Misterio Triste* (fig. 35, page 292), Montoya models herself, kneeling on the floor with her back turned to the viewer. Her hands are tied together and reach up toward the image of Christ, which looms on the wall behind a grid of wrought iron. The rest of the wall is covered with elaborate sprayed glyphs, which repeat the tattoo-like patterns of the Sacred Heart of Christ on the woman’s naked back. Another, almost identical image, *El Misterio Triste Suéltame* (fig. 36, page 292), shows her body collapsing sideways, its outline merging with the fluid lines of gyrating graffiti on the wall, symbolically positioning her at the interstices of the visible and invisible, as a mediator of the unspeakable, orgasmic, and ecstatic. Both images are highly eroticized. The tattooed skin, rather untypical in mainstream European cultures, intensifies the surface of the body to the point that the significance of the interior as the locus of subjectivity seems to deteriorate. In these two images, instead of clothing or any other outside markers of individualization, the skin carries the signifiers of identity. It becomes a “written page,” in a Foucauldian sense, heavily invested with the “great code of meaning,” i.e., the Bible (or perhaps the flayed skin that covered the Aztec priest in sacrificial ceremonies). In the guise of a *santa loca*, an enraptured bride of Christ, Montoya’s act of appropriating sacred symbols asserts the legitimacy and power of her mestiza heritage. Interfacing the sacred and sexual, a vital duality of Pueblo thought, the images also call forth the slow process of hybridization between the native rituals of authority and the Christian rituals, which were imposed over the Pueblo cosmic cycle. The Sacred Heart icon superimposed on her own skin, Montoya thus positions herself squarely in the center of this field of power, as a symbolic heir of her Penitente grandfather’s social status, on the one hand, and as a successor of her mother’s matriarchal Indian heritage, on the other.

A similar logic applies to other portraits of *El Sagrado Corazón*, which show women not as receptacles of the observer’s gaze, nor as ignorant of or indifferent to the observer, but something else instead, something that is quite hard to pin down. These women simply seem to act their gender roles badly. They, too, seem to be “woman” only in disguise, by imitation, in drag, all of which reveal inconsistencies that are typical of performative acts and create a kind of interval through which a possibility for new transformations of meaning appear. Searching for this interval, the quest for female episteme expressed in *El Sagrado Corazón* seems to explore a route different from Montoya’s earlier work on the similar theme, titled *Codex Delilah: A Journey from Mechica to Chicana* (1992). This artist’s book subverted the Campbellian hero’s progress by tracing the mythic journey of Six Deer, a fictional Indian girl, from past to present, from pre-Columbian Central America toward her spiritual homeland in the north, her final destination being the nuclear weapons laboratories of modern New Mexico. *Codex Delilah*, presented in the form of the pre-Columbian accordion-folded codex manuscript, ends on a pessimist note as *La Muerte*, the solitary death figure sitting on top of the Sandia Mountain, tells the heroine that her journey was futile because “[t]he scientists have
implanted missiles in my breasts. … You have arrived too late.” The standard Chicano mythology of Aztlan, in short, appeared too unyielding to accommodate a gender subversion suggested by *Codex Delilah*.

In *El Sagrado Corazón*, on the contrary, the heroic quest for communal healing takes place spatially and temporally closer to home, although the mental journey covered is equally long and arduous. The bridge between past and present is built through the contribution of Montoya’s relatives, friends, and neighbors, who sat as models and helped design the images; thus the narrative construction of self and community turns into an intimate collaborative effort to remember, excavate, and reconstruct the New Mexico mestizo/o village identity. The visual articulation of this identity draws mainly from local folklore (instead of the pre-Columbian past) and cultural expressions reminiscent of the *actos*, short dramatic tableaux depicting scenes from the Bible and the Spanish conquest, which in colonial times were staged by the Franciscan friars but today continue to be part of the Pueblo ceremonial circle. While contemporary Pueblo ceremonies honor the patron saint of each village, they at the same time incorporate features of matriarchal native religions, in which the Corn Mother deities played an important role. To interpolate the title of Ramón Gutiérrez’s title, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away* (see pages 61-62), one could conclude that when Jesus came, the Corn Mothers did not really go that far. They went underground and continue to wield influence through the mestiza consciousness that informs the survival narratives of *inditas*, *coyotas*, *rezadoras*, and *curanderas* and their contemporary visual representations, such as *El Sagrado Corazón*.

*The Unholy Family*

To date, sociological discourses on the Chicano family have milled around rather worn models of Mexican/Catholic family infrastructures built upon such concepts as *marianismo* and *machismo*. According to María Herrera-Sobek, these two “are thus seen as a kind of yin and yang of Mexican social inter-sexual relationships, existing side by side in a more or less symbiotic relationship.” The unquestionable and absolute supremacy of the father is complemented by the absolute self-sacrifice of the mother. To Montoya, the sociological construction of a family with its updated permutations that foreground women’s domestic agency do not seem to offer a more persuasive community model than does the Catholic ideology of the holy family. It does not seem to be quite enough for her simply to concede that men inhabit a different sphere, and that women, in order to survive, have to develop a double consciousness, a double vision, a double language to gain voice in the community. Negotiating around this double bind can become a precarious business, indeed, which in *El Sagrado Corazón* is managed through subtle iconographic inclusions and exclusions. For example, there are very few signs of the Virgin of Guadalupe—the master symbol of the Mexican Revolution as well as Chicano civil rights and labor activism. This absence, rather unusual for those Chicana artists who prefer to work on religious iconography, makes narrative space for the
development of other symbolic images that are less fixed with certain visual conventions and more open to articulating multiple meanings.

Instead of the Virgin, the core image of the series is the Spanish colonial symbol of the Sacred Heart, which functions as a means of self-reflection for the community and as a catalyst to research for the artist herself. Montoya explains that

[the Baroque Sacred Heart in the Americas is an icon that resulted from an encounter. It was not purely Indian in content and never completely Eurocentric in its form. Rather it was a hybrid of two diverse cultures that clashed and bonded in a particular historical moment and created a foundation for religious syncretism.]

In Montoya’s reinterpretation, then, the Sacred Heart not only symbolizes syncretic spiritualism and the unity of a mestizo community, but it also acts as a discursive trigger and a device through which to rework the politically loaded imagery of blood and corpus mysticum of the Catholic faith. Portrayed by a cow’s heart and surrounded by butterflies and flowers – the Indian symbols of fertility – the sacred heart that appears in the namesake image of the series (fig. 37, page 293) bears an uncanny resemblance to another organ, namely the womb, which in modern medical imagery often floats alone, disconnected from the mother’s body (as does the sacred heart of Christ in religious imagery). Thus, like in Laura Aguilar’s art work discussed in the previous essay, the birth of the communal corpus in Montoya’s series is firmly located within female physiology but beyond the institutional discourses that aim at controlling it.

La Familia (fig. 38, page 294) – the only portrait in the series which explicitly introduces a traditional nuclear family – is invested with a heavy ideological weight of heterosexual reproductivity, religious symbolism, blood, kinship, heritage, and the social production of space. Yet, if we perceive the body as a historical situation, as proposed by Shawn Michelle Smith (1999), the kind of situation produced by the models of La Familia does not fit into any coherent social, racial, or historical category. The husband sits symmetrically in the very center of the image field, in front of a young woman, who stands on his right side and holds her hands protectively on his shoulders. The man, in turn, holds a naked newborn in a fetal position against his chest. However, there is something atypical, slightly disturbing about this tightly-knit “holy family”; it does not quite seem to collapse with the iconographic conventions and ideological underpinnings attached to the corresponding religious/nationalist symbol. With his long hair and soft features, the man cradling the naked baby appears strangely effeminate and vulnerable, dissimilar to the generalized male body that traditionally represents the “universalized human” and at the same time hides the individual specificities of masculinity. His body seems to perform awkwardly its assumed proprietary role in regard to the child and the mother, whose corporeality contains the man rather than vice versa. Meanwhile the erect pose and determined facial expression of the woman (as well as of those women in the framed photographs decorating the wall) seem to proclaim strength, absolute control, and ownership. Hers is the defiant, “no-nonsense” aspect of barrio masquerade
although her dress reflects middle-class style rather than working-class *rasquache* (see page 87) typical of such perennial Chicano art forms as murals and prints. On the other hand, the husband also wears a rather formal suit and necktie quite at odds with his flowing “Indian hair.” The poses and appearances of the models are obviously characterized by sovereign individuality and upward social mobility (or at least its simulation, as often was the case in nineteenth-century studio portraits\textsuperscript{42}); yet the couple seems to feel ill at ease in their fine costumes.\textsuperscript{43}

Besides problematizing the construction of class and race, the image also dramatizes a rather obvious reorganization of gendered ideals and sexual dynamics within the patriarchal, heterosexual family. Thus in *La Familia*, unexpectedly, it turns out to be the male body which appears veiled, enigmatic, and scripted as a symbol.\textsuperscript{44} Other depictions of men in the series also express a social order worlds away from the stern religious patriarchy which legitimized its authority with sacrifice and penance associated with the Penitent Brothers. Needless to say, the Mexican revolutionary figures that frequently punctuate nationalistic discourses are absent from *El Sagrado Corazón*, as they also are absent from New Mexican Hispanic history and folklore for the most part. The portraits pay homage to those male symbols and real men whose demeanor lends a gentler aspect to Chicano machismo, evoking the face of the ideal lover/father figure that gains authority from other kind of prestige than from aggressive self-assertion. Thus, instead of enacting the separatist, subversive identity played out by, say, such a rough-edge barrio designation as *el pachuco*, the legendary Chicano rebel youth from the 1940s era,\textsuperscript{45} the male self-image in these portraits frequently relies on professional signifiers, mostly referring to the fields of arts and crafts. Thereby the male body becomes associated with predominantly positive and sustaining roles men perform within the community.

Furthermore, the rigidly polarized gender hierarchy of Anglo-American as well as Spanish religious/political ideology is subtly inlayed with Native American cosmological thought, in which “feminine” and “masculine” energies co-exist in all nature, including the concept of the supreme god. Not surprisingly, then, gender consolidation inherent in *El Sagrado Corazón* does not lack sly humor; it is, after all, ultimately bound to the female gaze that uses male figures as a resource of reflection, as the “red blood of resemblance,” so as to draft its own metaphysical image. *Jesús’ Carburetor Repair* (fig. 39, page 294), for example, immortalizes the artist’s car mechanic, working on the auto part that he regards as the heart of an automobile. The workshop scene and the man’s humble pose amid tools and cans resemble the representations of St. Joseph, the archetypal ideal husband,\textsuperscript{47} as well as the image of Christ, not as a sacrificial victim but as a builder and fixer. According to Montoya’s view, anyhow, the most important man in a woman’s life is not her husband, but a good car mechanic, who keeps her car running and does not over-charge. Yet another alternative Christ figure appears in the image, *God’s Gift* (fig. 40, page 295), which shows a long-haired male, covered from waist down by a white loin cloth, whose pose reenacts the crucifixion scene in a rather peculiar manner. With his back to the camera and soft arms languidly stretched out on the studio wall, his appearance invites mental images of erotic submission rather than of the assertion of power associated with the profusely bleeding body of Christ nailed on the cross.\textsuperscript{48}
Perpetuated in the transubstantiation ritual of the first Communion, the blood sacrifice’s absolute power to decide over who shall be included in or excluded from the community gets diluted by the images of Chicano youth posing for the viewer (fig. 41, page 295). The group portrayal of the members of the spray painting team who decorated the walls of Montoya’s studio acknowledges the contemporary, “American” aspect of hybridization. With their mundane poses, jeans, and caps, these young people demonstrate a relaxed convergence of everyday and spectacular, of the casual U.S. everyman outfit and the exotic baroque of their self-fashioned aesthetic space. Thereby the modern “self-identity” of the Chicano family becomes inscribed primarily through the young generation, on the one hand acculturated in American ways and, on the other hand, acting out its “otherness” to Anglo-American culture without misgivings. Their poses seamlessly incorporate different facets of identity: the bodily self and its self-styled material representations; the relational self with its communal parameters; and, most explicitly, the narrative self with its capacity of self-reflection and invention. Conceived as a kind of generational chronicle, the communal self – la familia – constructed in El Sagrado Corazón thus keeps the narrative of Chicano cultural nationalism renewing itself by envisioning the concept of Aztlán in the image of the Albuquerque barrio as a rural Hispanic village. This community, according to Sarah Deutsch, retained its autonomy and independence from Anglo society during the time of a violent industrial transformation of the country by means of expansion, trade, migration, and selective acculturation.

While studying for her undergraduate degree in Omaha, Montoya became interested in documentary photography, particularly that of Bruce Davidson, and in the problematic of representation therein. Davidson’s series titled East 100th Street (1970) shows the plight of the “Spanish” community in Harlem during the time of the Civil Rights Movement. Informed by a political thrust firmly grounded in the leftist agenda of El Movimiento Chicano (see pages 45-47), Montoya became convinced that Latinos needed to be documented not only by white photographers but by themselves. Modeling herself after Davidson and receiving advice from the Chicano poet Alurista (at that time a visiting professor in Omaha), Montoya produced a series of documentary photographs, La Gente (1978), about Nebraskan Mexicans and then a photo-journal titled Inca Street (1979), which depicted daily life in the barrio in Denver, Colorado. However, she was not happy with her own work because it emulated the aesthetic conventions of Anglo-European documentary photography. Hence she started to fashion a style that would agree better with her ideas about a pertinent representation of the community, and, consequently, she moved farther and farther from the ideals of social documentary toward an explicitly artistic construction and manipulation of photographic meaning. Thus, instead of observing the community from a distance, through the lens of the camera, in the one-way manner characteristic of the established modernist documentary style, Montoya started to invite her models behind the camera to have them look at themselves. She has written:
As an artist who is committed to revealing the topography of Aztlan through synoptic judgment, my viewpoint as the photographer, subject, and observer is a combination of insight and blindness, reach and limitation. Impartiality and bias together do not achieve omniscience, nor a unified master narrative, but rather a complex understanding of ever-changing multifaceted social realities. Since culture shapes reality, we must recognize that the reality being addressed is filtered through the photographer’s viewpoint. A question of paramount importance, then, is: How is the community’s reality represented? 52

In short, there is no easy escape from the perennial problems of representation inclined to gloss over discrepancies. There is no return to the innocence of the pioneers of early photography, whose enthusiasm about the seemingly infinite possibilities of the new technology to “capture reality as it is” also resonated in the deliberations of one of the most influential twentieth-century art critic, John Szarkowski. His publication, Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960 (1978), reflected on the relative proportion of subjectivity versus objectivity in photographic images, with subjectivity marking the index of artistry.53 The El Sagrado Corazón portraits, like most contemporary photography, render quite absurd the conjecture of artifice versus accuracy. For one thing, hand-printed with soft sepia inks on rag paper, they do evoke the aura of a precious, unique art object, invested with the artist’s “genius” and “unambiguous signature.” 54 For another, all the sitters in El Sagrado Corazón, both male and female, participated in the planning and composition of the portraits, a method which definitely disagrees with the ideals of independent auteurship in art as well as with the mimetic ideal of a “true” documentary portrait. In spite of a degree of collaboration in play, it must be taken into consideration that their vision of themselves and their community were filtered through a number of decisions made by the artist, who selected, printed, organized, and contextualized the photographs by exhibiting them publicly. One might ask whether this undercuts the agency of the sitters and/or the originality of the artist.

To consolidate the inherent tension between the individual volition of the artist and the “ideal” community represented in these portraits, I suggest that we look back at Sarah Deutsch’s “middle ground” thesis about the dynamics of power and community survival in the early twentieth-century rural Southwest. In the conclusion of her study, Deutsch contends that flexible sexual patterns of labor, leadership, and ownership “gave room to individualism within the community,” yet the village economic and cultural independence always superceded the independence of its individual members.55 I argue that Montoya’s photographic gallery of a Chicano community resurrects this kind of ethos of communal individualism (obviously at odds with the common concept of American individualism and personal autonomy). Further, her work also reverberates Deutsch’s call that the inhabitants of village and barrio should not be seen as two distinct, or even antagonistic, groups, but that the disparate sites of Chicano experience should be linked together in spite of their obvious differences.56 New Mexican Hispanic regional culture, after all, was never as “pre-modern,” insular, and economically stagnant as implied by the mainstream stereotype of “passive Mexicans.” And, conversely,
contemporary Chicano writers are far from being unanimous about the primacy and unequivocally beneficial role of the urban barrio as the privileged site of Chicano culture.57

The effort of El Sagrado Corazón to retrieve communal ideals of the past and wed them with contemporary Mexican American corporeal expressions and urban lifestyle involves several significant artistic choices, the most important being the release of the artist’s control, which was so overpowering in the majority of the nineteenth and twentieth-century photographic production. Blurring of the separation between the subject and the object, between the positive and the negative space, aims to undo the grip of perceptual mastery that constitutes the focus of the lens and the center of the frame. Achieving this remains tricky, though. With their assertive looks and self-constructed environments, the persons portrayed indeed defuse easy objectification; nevertheless, the commanding presence of the apparatus – the camera – outside of the image itself, with its urge to “catch and fix the object,” remains in place and therefore posits a conceptual problem in terms of the integrity of the collaborative process.

Other women artists of ethnic background have grappled with the same difficulty. The Vietnamese writer and filmmaker Trinh Minh-Ha, for example, considers space the key concept in dealing with the problem of the objectifying gaze. She talks about a hybrid place, about the stretching of the limits of things, which could resist categorization by insisting on shifting boundaries.58 She ponders the possibility of “negative space,” that is, absence as an alternative way of conceiving representational space, a way not defined by the “object-orientated camera” that focuses only on catching its target. Referring to Asian philosophy, she sees void and absence not as the opposite to fullness or objecthood but as the very site that makes forms and contents possible.59 The effect she seeks is a less intrusive and more encompassing, dispersed perspective through which to view her subject. Rather than lending the spectator a centered vantage point, the eye of Trinh Minh-Ha’s camera moves around margins and lingers in details, which smoothly integrates filmed individuals with their environment. In Montoya’s tactic of representing a mixed, ambivalent, and materially laden location to bond a heterogeneous community, I detect the emergence of the “third eye,” the “autoethnographic” female gaze similar to that of Trinh Minh-Ha’s. This gaze is able to yield a more fluid, self-reflective view of the subject matter than the “cannibal-eye” of infinite authorial vision, associated with photographic representation in general. The next question, then, is, what kind of eye is this “third eye,” through which we are invited to look at the spaces and bodies within El Sagrado Corazón? How does it shape our perception of a social self, polarized between identity and otherness, familiar and strange, exterior and interior? Is its construction of the past (and the future) more flexible than the preclusive fatalism of the social documentary mode, and is it more inclusive than the hermetic autonomy of an art object? How does it re-member its subjects?

The portrait titled El Matachín/Moro (fig. 42, page 296) re-members an absence: that is, the suppression of an African, Moorish element in Mexican American culture. Modeled by a Nigerian runner, El Matachín shows a tall black man, whose half-naked body is decorated by religious insignia, overshadowing the Guadalupe figure behind his back. His face is covered by a traditional New Mexican Matachines headdress, which simultaneously highlights and
protects his individuality by activating a symbolic signification that effectively blocks the spectator’s scrutiny of the man himself. The fiesta of the Matachines, reminiscent of trans-Atlantic colonialism but still performed in Pueblo and genizaro villages, re-enact the story of slavery, the role of which in Mexican American self-identity continues to garner little academic attention. As a striking image of black power, El Matachin taps into a long history of conceptual “Europanization” of non-European peoples, whose strangeness became familiarized by means of Western representational conventions. According to anthropologist Leila Koivunen’s study on Victorian-era images of Africa, the portrait genre was traditionally used to represent royal or upper class families and, conversely, avoided in the representation of those of non-European origin. Non-Europeans, instead, were depicted by using ethnographic conventions initially designed to yield scientifically comparable images of criminals, prostitutes, and the mentally handicapped. Juggling palmas (wooden tridents) in his hands, Montoya’s Moor, El Matachin, also juggles with these highly ambivalent discourses, which tacitly circumscribe visual representations of race in America, too.

The erotic, exotic appearance of El Matachin, however, stands in a sharp contrast to post-Depression, modernist photographic styles (artistic as well as journalistic), which tended to celebrate non-white ethnicities by neutralizing their “otherness” under the rubric of human diversity. Since the late 1970s, with diminishing demand for socially conscious documentary, the images of ethnicities have been largely determined by omnipresent market and media forces, driven by celebratory but politically inert discourses of multiculturalism. Interestingly enough, in the arena of the most conspicuous (albeit least researched) representations of racial otherness today, El Matachin – modeled by a professional athlete – intersects with the representation of the black male rampant in American sports broadcasting where the commodified black body (in boxing, also Latino) produces paramount spectacles of high tech visual pleasure. His body shrouded by a thick web of religious symbols, El Matachin’s strategy of resistance is not defined by willful self-commodification – often interpreted as the superior means of empowerment for people of color – but by syncretic spirituality.

Again, spirituality is conceived as the single most potent weapon available for minorities as a means of resistance. A lot has been and is written about the way Latina/o artists use spirituality and religious iconography to take distance from and challenge the pressures of assimilation to mainstream culture. For Chicana/os, as for blacks, the use of religious material is marked, first, by secularly motivated innovative subversion and, second, by the spiritual quest to eschew institutional dogmatism and strengthen ethno-racial identity. In the hands of Chicana artists, writes Villaseñor Black, Catholic imagery serves a variety of ends: to articulate, record, valorize, and validate; to question anachronistic racial and gender ideologies; and to propose political change. Montoya herself makes a rather practical point by stating that saints’ images are seemingly safe since “they aren’t highly politically charged in the outside culture” and easily pass as quaint specimens of the “Catholic other” in the secular, more reserved aesthetic sphere of the Protestant mainstream. Although I can hardly add much to the overall discussion of spirituality in Chicana/o art, already attended by many insightful scholars, I believe that the sacred space depicted in Montoya’s series deserves some special
consideration, again, because of its regional character quite deviant from the orthodoxy of the Roman Catholic Church.

There seems to be a gender divide in the way Chicanos and Chicanas perceive spirituality and the sacred space. Art historian Holly Barnet claims that women experience sacred not as mediated through the “text” but as embodied in themselves, the Chicanas; men do not feel the same, and that creates mixed feelings about spirituality, more complex than in the Anglo world. 69  If in the barrio devotional practices circulate quite freely through domestic spaces in the form of pictures and statues of saints, home altars, capillas, and nichos,70 the sanctioned sacred space par excellence in New Mexico was the morada, “the house of the Lord,” as explained earlier. After transforming her own studio into the interior space reminiscent of the morada, Montoya orchestrates a change of power from the master of house to its mistresses. The name of the mistress superior seems to be La Muerte (see La Muerte y Infinity, fig. 43, page 296). The figure of Death, La Muerte, represents the ultimate arbitrator of power, the mediator between the living and the dead. The dark, cavernous, tomb-like spaces of the La Muerte image suck in, tempt, and assert that “time’z up,” rendering nil even the conception of time, frequently gendered male. The Apollonian sun of reason is submerging into the chaos of feminine vanitas, sex, sin, immorality, grotesque humor, and the ultimate disintegration of the body.71

Influenced by Meso-American somatic cosmology, Chicana spiritual space is thus envisioned as residing inside the mortal body, in the heart and the womb. This also is the nature of the interior space depicted in El Sagrado Corazón, which, according to Montoya, functions in a symbiotic relationship with the sitters: “The space cannot be fully understood in the absence of the sitter, and the understanding of the sitter is dependent on the space which contains them.” 72 The images assert the primacy of interactive relations in the formation of subjectivity and isomorphism between the body and space, one ritualizing and thus resignifying the other. Rather than providing privacy and stability as the conventional domestic interior ideally does, this morphing space relates to its occupants (as well as to its viewers) quite aggressively, enclosing and displaying, directing gazes and gestures, playing with texts, and transforming the sitters into powerful social subjects. The aspect of sacrifice (in a sense of being absolutely subjected to a higher power) correlated to the concept of the Sacred Heart thus declines with the emerging fusion between political, carnal, and spiritual. Consequently, what is generally described as a masculine or public space, or an outside space, seems to dissolve altogether since even the portraits of male sitters retain the air of intimacy and self-containment, regardless of the fact that the spray-painted walls display tags and murals that typically demarcate the public space of the barrio.73

In sum, though spiritually circumscribed and profoundly maternal, the interior of El Sagrado Corazón does not segregate the sexes but engages men and women alike, recapitulating the findings of Sarah Deutsch, and other historians, who emphasize that in Mexican American communities, rural or urban, there never was any separate refuge for women.74 At the frontier, all women worked, some owned sizeable property, and many acted
as legal agents, taking care of their own business.\textsuperscript{75} Men did not permanently leave their villages, but commuted between home and seasonal wage work. Likewise, Mexican American communities were never isolated, resigned, and passive (as persistently complained by contemporaneous Anglo writers) but, instead, practiced constructive autonomy through their own social organizations and resistance movements.\textsuperscript{76}

Of course, Montoya’s ambivalent representation of an “ideal” Chicano community has little to do with the representation of any “real” historical site in New Mexico, Colorado, or California – as little as old portraits have to do with any “real” human beings who once upon the time posed before the camera. Its constituency is illusory, narrativized after the stories about her mother’s family in northern New Mexico and recontextualized by her own active involvement in the Mexican American civil rights struggle. Her claim to the “native” Hispanic voice thus merges with the voice of Chicana/o indigenismo as a proactive discursive strategy which, rather than naturalizing essentialist notions about the community, celebrates it as an artifice, elaborately choreographed by her scavenging, recycling, mischievous \textit{coyote consciousness}. Montoya raises art against Anglo assimilation for the sake of Mexican American cultural survival as her Penitente ancestors raised the blood of Christ against Anglo economic takeover to preserve Hispanic/vernacular Catholic culture.\textsuperscript{77} This hybrid construction of Aztlán, therefore, does not lack political analysis or materialistic historical basis; it is not merely a hallucination or a state of mind, as some say, but a catalyst of thought that insists on the generative power of the symbol, of a “mutant” sign capable of becoming its own referent.

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\textsuperscript{1} “[…] therefore it is called Aztlán; located very far it now seems, very close to a grand river which is the boundary to ‘New Mexico,’ called Aztlán Chicomóztoc by the Spanish.” Free translation by Florencia Quesada and Asta Kuusinen from Fernando Tezozómoc, \textit{Crónica Mexicáyotl} (México: Imprenta Universitaria, 1949) 21-22. According to Michael Pina (“The Archaic, Historical and Mythicized Dimensions of Aztlán,” in \textit{Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland}, ed. by Rudolfo Anaya and Francisco Lomelí, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press [1989] 14-48), Tezozómoc, the writer of this chronicle, was of indigenous ancestry and his intention was to weave an epic account of indigenous history in order to assert his noble status and the privileges associated with it.


\textsuperscript{3} “Known as the ‘Chicano Nation's cultural attaché’ and the ‘Chicano Renaissance Man,’ Cecilio García-Camarillo served as a central figure in the flourishing of artistic creativity in the late 1960s and the 1970s known as the Chicano Movement. As a publisher, editor, and radio personality, he brought to the public’s attention literary works and people that have since become legend, lore, and canon. He exerted cultural leadership not only through his editing of \textit{El Magazine, Caracol,} and \textit{Rayas,} but in this total dedication to his own poetry, which appeared sparsely in his magazines, but largely in his own hand-stitched chapbooks and through his preferred medium, oral performance.” Retrieved on March 25, 2004 from http://www.arte.uh.edu/view_book.aspx?isbn=1558852816.

\textsuperscript{4} Although today the endearing image of a coyote with a bandana scarf basks in every tourist brochure of New Mexico, its historical origins are less charming. Gutiérrez describes: “Two zoomorphic racial categories were used widely in colonial New Mexico to refer to the half-breed children of Indian slave women born in captivity – coyote and lobo. In many cases the slave’s master was the child’s father, a fact rarely admitted but suggested in baptismal registers as ‘father unknown.’ […] Pueblo, Apache, and Navajo animal myths portray the coyote and lobo as marginal animals, misfits obsessed by uncontrollable sexual desires and wanderlust.” (1991, 197) On the positive side, however, is the amelioration of the coyote’s status as a trickster figure in art and


8 This argument is inspired by Barb Bolt’s essay, “Working Hot: Materializing Practices,” in Different Aesthetics: Art Practices, Philosophy and Feminist Understandings, ed. by Penny Florence and Nicola Foster, [Aldershot, Burlington USA, Singapore and Sydney: Ashgate, 2000] 315-331) where she ponders whether in some cultural contexts “the portrait is not just a sign, a representation of a person, but actually becomes them” (315) in some ways. Says Bolt, “In western philosophy and western art, it is now very difficult to think outside the paradigm in which representation is conceived as involving a gap, an absence or as Kirby says a ‘not here’ or ‘not now’” (322). Could a visual act work performatively, filling in a gap between sign and referent, and thus be itself productive? Could the material practice of art have real material effects? These questions (intriguingly politically incorrect) challenge the assumption that representation is always and completely mediated, “secondary,” and distinct from the “original.” In interpreting visual art, however, the possibility of the merging of text and matter brings in view a wide spectrum of complex relations between the artist, technologies of production, objects represented, and the representation itself.


15 The quotation is from the Artist’s Statement attached to the El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart portfolio (1993), kept in the Fine Arts Library of the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. “The collotype process is a nineteenth-century photographic printmaking technique that makes use of a negative that is fist inked and then printed. Resembling a photogravure, the printed images appear to possess a full tonality without the use of a halftone screen.” In Delilah Montoya’s Artist’s Statement in exhibition catalogue Intersecting Identities/Señas de Identidad (Los Angeles: Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California, 1997) n.p.


17 Ibid.

18 According to E. A. Mares, “Penitential rituals date to at least the early Middle Ages in Christendom. Regardless of the exact route or historical agency that brought such practices to New Mexico, they arrived as early as don Juan de Oñate’s colonizing expedition of 1598, when his soldiers whipped themselves before crossing the Rio Grande. As several scholars have argued, the Brotherhood developed from about 1790 to 1810.” Mares, “Padre Martínez and Mexican New Mexico,” in New Mexican Lives (2002) 106-130, 121. Provocatively, Charles P. Carroll’s The Penitente Brotherhood: Patriarchy and Hispanic-Catholicism in New Mexico (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2002) aims to undermine the previous argument as part of politically motivated “fantasy heritage” by claiming that “this prevailing emphasis on continuity has led previous
commentators to overlook the fact that in many ways the variant of Catholicism that emerged among the Hispano population of New Mexico during the early nineteenth century was qualitatively different both from the variants of popular Catholicism that flourished in Mexico and Spain (or other areas of the Catholic world) and from the Catholicism that their own Hispano ancestors had practiced previously in New Mexico itself” (page 6).

19 See Arthur Campa, Hispanic Culture in the Southwest (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993) 205-216; Jeffrey Smith, “Cultural Landscape Change in a Hispanic Region,” in Geographical identities of Ethnic America: Race, Space, and Place, ed. by Kate Berry and Martha Henderson (Reno & Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2002) 190-199; Ramón Gutiérrez, When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) 89-91. The following quotation from Gutiérrez’s study lends an interesting perspective to Mel Gibson’s film, The Passion of Christ (2003), in regard to current international power politics in the Middle East: “The ritualization of Christ’s crucifixion and the penitential flagellation, especially the bloodletting associated with it, seems to have been interpreted by the Indians just as the friars meant it to be, as a rite of political authority” (page 88).


22 La Quinceañera is a Catholic coming-of-age ceremony for Mexican American girls when they turn 15 years. It has lately attracted some scholarly attention partly because of its increasingly lavish celebration, partly because of its controversial nature as simultaneously a religious rite of passage, an affirmation of a Mexican communal tradition, and a mark of personal life-cycle changes. See Karen Mary Davalos, “La Quinceañera: Making Gender and Ethnic Identities,” in Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture & Chicana/o Sexualities, ed. by Alicia Gaspar de Alba (New York: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2003) 141-162. Some scholars have drawn links between quinceañera and the adulthood rites of passage among the Natives, but it should be noted that in Native American cultures both girls and boys go through the rituals and tests that prepare them to assume their responsibilities in the community.

23 La Indita is a popular song form that originates from the Spanish colonial time in Mexico. Brenda Romero writes that “[w]hile the Mexican indita focuses on erotic images and love, the New Mexican indita is more typically a lament,” arguing that the latter relates accounts and emotions of Hispano captives taken by the Indians. Romero, “The Indita Genre of New Mexico: Gender and Cultural Identification,” in Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change, ed. by Norma Cantú and Olga Nájera-Ramírez (Urbania and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 56-80, 65.

24 Plains Indians use dream catchers (a ring decorated with feathers with a leather web woven inside of it) to expel bad dreams and induce good visions: “When Iktomi finished speaking, he gave the Lakota elder the web and said ... ‘See, the web is a perfect circle but there is a hole in the center of the circle.’ He said, ‘Use the web to help yourself and your people to reach your goals and make good use of your people's ideas, dreams and visions. If you believe in the great spirit, the web will catch your good ideas – and the bad ones will go through the hole.’ The Lakota elder passed on his vision to his people and now the Sioux Indians use the dream catcher as the web of their life. It is hung above their beds or in their home to sift their dreams and visions. The good in their dreams are captured in the web of life and carried with them...but the evil in their dreams escapes through the hole in the center of the web and are no longer a part of them. They believe that the dream catcher holds the destiny of their future.”


25 The Mexican artist Frida Kahlo was “found” by Chicanas and Chicanos during the 1970s. Her rise to a Mexican American cultural icon was largely due to her multiple mestizaje of Jewish, German, and Mexican blood, her physical handicap, and her struggle as an artist who had to carve out her self-identity and career in the shadow of the legendary Diego Rivera. See Gannit Ankori, Imagining Her Selves: Frida Kahlo’s Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2002).

26 The Spanish word chola refers to young, transgressive barrio women with gang affiliation, who sport heavy make-up and generally have a bad reputation. Their predecessor, pachuca, inspired moral resentment in Catholic, patriarchal Mexican American families during and after World War II. See, e.g., Catherine Ramírez, “The Pachuca in Chicana/o Art, Literature and History: Reexamining Nation, Cultural Nationalism and Resistance,” UMI Dissertation Services, 2000.

In her MFA thesis, Montoya gives a fascinating overview of the historical details associated with the Sacred Heart of Christ. Interestingly enough, the relationship between Christ and the women worshipping him appears overly sexual (whereas the tattoos of the Virgin on male skin mainly seem to connote the deep emotional tie between mother and son, one of the themes appearing in the second essay on Montoya’s work). Montoya writes:

“Emerging between the eleventh and mid-fourteenth century, the European analogy of the sanctified heart revolved around the concept of the ‘Exchange of Hearts,’ a series of apparitions where the crucified Jesus appeared before a cloistered nun. The visitation in every story is almost identical. Each nun had experienced a series of frustrating romances in her youth and entered the cloister. Suddenly the crucified Jesus appeared and an intense dialogue of love soon developed between the secluded nun and her newfound divine husband, the crucified Christ. The nuns all experienced in one form or the other ‘a ritual exchange of hearts’ through the lesions on Christ’s right side. […] This cult presented a serious problem for the church. The corporeal image of the cavity where the heart emerged could be interpreted as ‘an uncontrolled sensuality that bordered on the obscene.’ [endnote no. 13] Depending on the political and moral climate of the times, the vision was defined as a divine revelation or a perverse experience. The nuns were either declared a saint or accused of witchcraft.”

Montoya, “Corazon Sagrado, Sacred Heart,” unpublished manuscript, made in partial fulfillment for the Master of Fine Arts Degree at the University of New Mexico, 1993

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Montoya, 1993.

41 Shawn Michelle Smith’s analysis of the 19th-century family portrait gives a hint of what is “wrong” with Montoya’s family depiction. Smith says, “Ultimately, then, the artist and the subject of the artistic photographic portrait, as well as professional art critics and middle class viewers, were posed on the same side of the divide that distinguished middle-class Americans, imbued with ‘superior’ superiority, from their cultural others. [...] Debates about the artistic quality of photographic portraits also addressed the ‘sacred character’ of middle-class identity and the ‘essential nature’ of cultural exclusivity.” Smith, American Archives (1999) 61.

42 The project to elevate middle-class identity by means of public visibility is also discussed in Miles Orvell, “Presenting Self,” in American Photography (Oxford History of Art series, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 19-38. “The photograph begins to function during this era – from around 1860 through the early twentieth century – as a key element in the project of modernity in a society where the self could be constructed as a public object in order to achieve upward mobility” (page 27).

43 This makes a particularly poignant visual statement about the social construction of identity against the historical backdrop of the marriage institution in colonial New Mexico where Christian marriages were a European privilege not granted to slaves or genízaros. Paradoxically, on the other hand, Ramón Gutiérrez states that “[f]or the landless freed genízaros, Christian marriage was a symbol of social status and an index of acculturation. Since many genízaros held no property to transmit and their alienation from kin through enslavement had made the perpetuation of family name virtually impossible, marriage meant little except to status climbers.” Gutiérrez (1991) see page 127, quotation on 231.


45 The classic interpretation of the barrio masculine monikers, such as vato loco, cholo or veterano, is found in Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino and John Tagg’s essay, “The Pachuco’s Flayed Hide: The Museum, Identity, and Buenas Carras,” in CARA. Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-85, exhibition catalogue ed. by Richard Griswold de Castillo, Teresa MacKenna, and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, Univ. of California, 1991) 97-108.

46 Luce Irigaray claims that women, in male discourses of transcendence and abstract knowledge, function as corporeal props for man’s subjectivity, as a means to reach out for something removed from matter and mortality. Woman in this maneuver is “the resource of reflection – the red blood of resemblance” and the “living mirror” for man’s self-reflection. This Sex which is Not One (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) 151, and Speculum of the Other Woman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985) 221. Irigaray’s theory helps understand such representations of the Chicano community as Rudolfo Anaya’s novel, Heart of Aztlán (1976), which relies on rigid patriarchal gender roles and the mystification of “Mother Nature” in attempting to use the symbol as a catalyst of political activism.

47 Villasenor Black, 1999, 156.


49 They also embody the conception of blood, heritage, and communal coherence divorced from the ideals of purity and a fixed social class hierarchy maintained by pureza de sangre, marriage, property, and the signs of royalty and status that characterized colonial Spanish society in New Mexico. In his publication, The Myth of Santa Fe (1997), Chris Wilson discusses – from the point of view of urban environment, tourism, and public art discourse – the “invention of Hispanic Santa Fe,” based on the successful deployment of an illusion of cultural authenticity, historicity, and the purity of origin.


51 Trans., You are my Other Self.

52 Montoya, 1993.

53 For an excellent discussion on John Szarkowski’s publication, Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since 1960 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art; distributed by New York Graphic Society, c1978) and the accompanying exhibition, see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Photography after Art Photography,” in


55 Deutsch, 1987, 16.

56 Ibid., “Introduction,” 3-12.

57 In his essay, “Images of Penitente Ritual and Santo Art: A Philosophical Inquiry Into the problem of Meaning” (Nuevomexicano Cultural Legacy [2002] 270-282), Michael Candelaria depoliticizes and romanticizes nuevomexicano culture by arguing for its essentially emotional and alienated nature devoid of political rationality. His interpretation of Penitente ethos is in sharp contrast with, for example, Sarah Deutsch’s (1987) argument about the historical/political role of the Brotherhood. Deutsch’s study also gives a helpful overview of the controversy among Mexican American writers in regard to the meaning of the barrio (see pages 7-9).

58 Trinh Minh-Ha, Framed Framed (New York: Routledge, 1992) 137-139.

59 Ibid., 141-142. It is tempting to see the absence Trinh Minh-Ha talks about in reference to our discussion about the myth of Aztlán, particularly as it has been theorized as an empty signifier (see Péres-Torres [2001]). How these ideas might resonate with each other would be a topic for another essay, however.

60 The term “autoethnography” is used in Mary Louise Pratt’s Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London, New York: Routledge, 1992) to refer to the “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the other constructs in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan descriptions” (page 7). Of Mexican American writers, Tey Diana Rebolloledo (1995) and Jennifer González (1995) have expressed related ideas.

61 Discussing the images of Nangoro, king of the Ovampo, and other African rulers, Koivunen asserts that “On the one hand, the use of the portrait convention serves to raise these persons as African supermen, positive exceptions of the ‘Dark Continent’. On the other, however, by referring to ‘real’ royalties in Europe the same convention serves to ridicule the African rulers.” Leila Koivunen, “Alterity or Familiarity? Europe’s Encounter with Africa and the Visualizaion of the ‘Exotic,’” unpublished paper for The Sixth Summer School of the Graduate School on Cultural Interaction and Integration, Turku, Finland, August 24, 2000, 11.

62 For a personal account of New Mexican Indo-Hispanic culture and the Matachines dance, visit the website, http://www.unm.edu/~abqteach/ihc/00-03-03.htm.

63 Culminating in The Family of Man exhibition of art photography in the mid-1950s, this trend also gained publicity and nation-wide popularity through the Look and Life magazines, whose photo-documentaries portrayed ethnic communities with empathy and respect, but often obscured the social exigencies and historical causes of their blight. Interestingly enough, all four photographers in this study mentioned the importance of these magazines and their documentary style in the development of their own aesthetic expression and political agenda.


65 This is particularly common in regard to black and Latino sports and entertainment celebrities, whose successes often come with a high personal price. The names of Selena (Quintanilla Perez) and Michael Jackson, of course, come to mind first.


68 Montoya, 1993.

69 For many insights about Chicana spirituality, I owe thanks to Holy Barnet’s lectures at the University of New Mexico in the late 1990s. See also, e.g., Amalia Mesa-Bains, “Chicana Bodily Aesthetics,” introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Body/Culture: Chicano Figuration, ed. by Richard Kubiak. Rehnert Park (CA: University Art Gallery, 1990) 6-13.


71 These same misogynist notions, rooted in the time-honored religious discourses and thinly veiled in the sumptuous drapes of the El Sagrado Corazón images, serve very well the ambitions of another witch-like protagonist, though. She is the beloved nuevomexicana folklore persona, Doña Sebastiana, who debuts in Montoya’s multimedia piece, San Sebastiana "Angel de la Muerte" (2002, enter www.uh.edu/~dmontoy2). Depicted as a gossiping telephone operator and the village beauty, Sebastiana barter for sainthood with God, who wants to hire her to be Death. However, a death figure that functions as a comical relief, rather than as a token of the horrors of mortality, is only one of the redeeming aspects in Montoya’s construction of the feminine sacred
space. Montoya’s tongue-in-cheek foreword speculates whether the complementary Western icon, Saint Sebastian – the arrow-pierced martyr of the early Christian era – once he crossed the ocean, per chance received a gender transfer in New Mexico. Do we perhaps hear in her words *la coyota* appropriating the voice of *el penitente*?

72 Montoya, 1993.

73 The sexualized nature of space metaphors and the dogmatic divisions between inside and outside in architecture is discussed, for example, in Beatriz Colomina’s study, *Sexuality and Space* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992). As an example, she takes Adolf Loos’ ideas about a radical difference between interior and exterior: “The exterior of the house, Loos writes, should resemble a dinner jacket, a male mask; as the unified self, protected by a seamless facade, the exterior is masculine. The interior is the scene of sexuality and of reproduction, all the things that would divide the subject in the outside world. [...] The suggestion that the exterior is merely a mask which clads some pre-existing interior is misleading, for the interior and exterior are constructed simultaneously” (94). In her discussion on Chicana social identity in the film *Mi Vida Loca* (1993), Rosa Linda Fregoso points out the simultaneity of the public and the private sphere in the textual depictions of subject formation. “Re-Imagining Chicana Urban Identities in the Public Sphere, Cool Chicha Style,” in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalism, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, ed. by Karen Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoo Moallem (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999) 72-91.

74 The term *separate refuge* refers to the socio-psychological construct that underlies the conventional, originally Victorian, middle-class Anglo-American family model where women stayed at home protecting the moral values of the family while men dominated public life outside of the home and were less concerned about morality.


76 This “invisible” history of early Mexican American civil activism consists of *mutualista* social organizations, self-help groups, community centers, press associations, magazines and newspapers in Spanish, labor organizations, etc., which paved way for the mid-twentieth century civil rights struggle. See, e.g., Etulain (2002).

77 Carroll goes even farther in reaffirming the modern, socio-political foundation of Penitentes by drawing a conclusion that, in reality, “Penitente membership engendered a strongly internalized compulsion to obey authority figures charged with enforcing written rules – and in doing so, it helped to change the ‘churlish’ and ‘independent’ settlers of the previous century into citizens who quite willingly accorded legitimacy to a U.S. legal system even when that system so obviously worked against their interests” (2002, 186).
CHAPTER 6. THE BODY POLITIC OF CHICANA REPRESENTATION

A self that becomes a crossroads, a collision course, a clearinghouse, an endless alterity who once she emerges into language and self-inscription, so belated, appears as a tireless peregrine collecting all the parts that will never make her whole. Such a hunger makes her recollect in excess, to remember in excess, to labor to excess and produce a text layered with inversions and disproportions, which are effects of experienced dislocations [...]. Chicanas want to textualize those effects.

Norma Alarcón (2002) ¹

This chapter is inspired by the above passage by Norma Alarcón, perhaps the most theoretical of the writers engaged in reconfiguring Chicana subject formation in the context of feminist psychoanalytical theories. Alarcón’s words capture the range and complexity of issues circumscribing the evolution of Chicana subjectivity and also the intensity with which Chicana writers and artists have committed themselves to providing it with its due voice/visibility. Like historian Emma Pérez, whose thoughts bear upon the discussion of history in this study, Alarcón situates her thinking, influenced by Freudian concepts, in the contested field between European critical theories and Chicana/o academic discourses. In this chapter, however, I do not pursue a psychoanalytical interpretation of the art work, but instead try to interpret them in the continuum of their historical and socio-political contingencies, as part of the negotiations of Chicana/o identity vis-à-vis American identity in various images and texts.

The central concept in contemporary discussion of subjectivity is that of the body, which Michel Foucault et al. have retrieved from the domain of the natural sciences and philosophy to take the leading role in postmodern and feminist theories of society, politics, and power. In capitalist societies, according to Foucault, the mechanisms of control work through the body, producing, organizing, and perpetuating social differences. Thus the organization and disciplining of bodily behavior become the foundation of social order with its gendered, racialized, and class-based hierarchies.² However, in its sole emphasis on embodied differences regulated by institutions and political technologies of the body, Foucauldian argumentation tends to displace the subject and overlook the interaction between the particularities of the body and the agency of the subject. This interaction between the mind and the body in the process of articulating the parameters of the social body, i.e., the body politic, is the main focus of the essays to follow. Thus the discussion will emphasize the individual agency of the artists as well as of their models and the significance of their subjectivity in the articulation and representation of the body. If generally “[a] society is a space and an architecture of concepts, forms and laws whose abstract truth is imposed on the reality of the senses, of bodies, of wishes and desires,” as maintained by Henri Lefebvre,³ then the imaginary spaces created by Chicana photography accommodate and nurture these desires, aligning with the more dynamic
understanding of the body advocated, for example, by contemporary feminist theorists, particularly Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 1995).

Though arguing from a predominantly Euro-centric position, I do not wish to compromise the validity of those interpretative approaches that primarily focus on the expressions of racial, sexual, and cultural difference. Instead, these essays, in identifying the traces of the “Course of Empire” in America, simultaneously build upon and depart from the perspectives of ethno-racial identity politics, amplifying the scope of the interpretative appraisal of Chicana art work through the complexity of the photographic medium. I claim that this approach corresponds to historian Eric Avila’s proposal for the future avenues for Chicana/o studies so as to further the understanding of the Mexican American past and present. These avenues include, first, “Further attention to the racial ambiguities underlying the historical construction of Chicana/o identity,” second, “A deeper understanding of how the making of Chicano identity has been contingent upon the presence of diverse social groups,” and third, “More attention to the role of space in the shaping of Chicana/o identity” (italics in the original text). The third consideration points to the rather limited attention given to the spaces outside of the theoretically drenched tropes of the borderlands and the urban barrio, for example to the corporate spaces of national and global economy, such as the prison and the factory. The bodies inhabiting these marginal spaces are considered abject – immoral, criminal, antagonistic – that is, anomalies in the privileged American imagery, whether “high” or “low.” The bodies represented in the art work under discussion in this chapter mostly fall under this category.

In the first essay, “Queering Walden Pond,” I propose a reading of Laura Aguilar’s photographic self-portraits through two overlapping narratives: first, Anglo-American discourse about the nation, landscape, and nature, historically constructed through paintings, photographs, and writings; and secondly, through Mexican American cultural expressions that arise from the concept of la tierra, the land. Both nationalistic narratives build upon pastoral ideals, which rely heavily on woman-as-land symbolism springing from pre-Colombian (and European) earth goddess mythology and recurring throughout the texts and images of the Spanish conquest, the early agrarian ideologies of Anglo-European America, the land rights struggles of Mexican American people since 1848, and so forth. Moreover, both narratives have played a foundational role in the construction of heterogeneous communities as a socially and politically uniform body, i.e., a nation, complete with an “ideal” national identity generally embodied by a white male. The essay will look at the superimposition of two distinct photographic genres – landscape and portrait – and pose some questions. How does the photographic representation of nature in Aguilar’s self-portraiture inflect such socio-political issues as place and territory, land use and its ownership, progress and modernization in invoking the notorious depiction of nature as the female body? And further, what is Aguilar’s take on the “national landscape,” i.e., the frontier, and the system of values it incorporates?

I will argue that, while “queering” the pastoral nostalgia of present and past conservation movements, Aguilar does not unambiguously endorse Cherrie Moraga’s imaginary concept, “queer Aztlán,” a mythic community that could embrace gay people and heterosexuals alike. For example, her enactment of sexuality and ethno-racial identity differs
considerably from those of Latina performance artists examined in *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* (1999) by Alicia Arrizón, who sees the process of coming out outrageous and scandalous by definition. Rather, I regard Aguilar’s queering act as an articulation of silence, absences, and gaps that politicize her art despite her own perceptions of it. In short, her art work as such does not call for an interpretation based primarily on queer theory, nor does it call for particular attention to the size of the body depicted. Instead, it inscribes self-identity through “[t]he desire to center, to originate, to fuse with the feminine/maternal/lover in the safety of an imaginary ‘third country,’ ” as elaborated by Alarcón in her study on Gloria Anzaldúa. Therefore the essay neither ponders the complexities of Chicana lesbian identity, nor the racial, sexual, or political implications of overweight bodies maligned in American society.

The second essay continues to decipher Delilah Montoya’s powerful reinterpretation of Chicano politics and mythology springing from New Mexican indigenous/Catholic heritage and Mesoamerican cultures. Of the artists studied, Montoya’s images in particular are so entrenched in the cultural specificity of Chicana/o visual politics that they seem to ridicule any attempt of an appropriate contextualization by the writer. With this excuse, the first part of the essay titled “The Pinto’s Flayed Skin” embarks on a longish detour from the art work itself in order to relate it to some scholarly theoretizations about the pinto (Mexican American ex-convict), and situates Montoya’s work within the larger discourse on the proto-subject of La Raza (to use Marcos Sánchez-Traquilino’s expression), the pinto being one of its reified embodiments. This section goes under the title, *The First Skin*, which is meant to implicate the essentializing notions of the physical body as natural, unalienable, and readable on either the materialist or idealist configurations of its existence. In other words, the installation is first scrutinized by setting up a conversation between three critical voices – Montoya’s plus two researchers’ – each enhanced with the “political conscious” explicit in their respective versions of the pinto discourse. The following questions constitute the overarching theme of this part: how does the tattooed pinto articulate the body politic of the Chicana/o community? And, consequently, how does the conceptualization of the Chicana/o subjectivity – as embodied by a convict – alter when we move from a theoretically delineated academic environment into the space of art expression, which, presumably, tolerates more ambiguity of meaning due to its greater freedom to appropriate from other modes of (photographic) representation?

In the section *The Second Skin*, the essay shifts from the locus of the individual body to that of the vernacular home altar. The section reflects upon Montoya’s method and motivation to extract the pinto imagery out of its confines within the language of either cultural idealism or social materialism, and to spirit his body into the sacred space of European and Mesoamerican sacrificial practices. Expounding upon the writings about the significance of gender in religious mysticism, the latter part of the essay argues that by ritualizing the male body (as opposed to the female) as a site of suffering – conceived by a witness-voyeur (i.e., the artist/viewer) – *La Guadalupana* engages in a bi-gendering ritual performance that converges with the embodiment of the Chicana/o subjectivity within the domain of indigenous/Catholic faith. Finally, *La Guadalupana* is juxtaposed with Montoya’s portrait of Frida Kahlo in order
to argue that both art works use the classical conventions of visual representation in order to position the artist herself as the empowered “Eye” of the Chicano community and a spiritual leader on a par with the Penitente brother, the leading member of the traditional Hispanic religious order.

This circle of seven essays opened with a discussion on *El Límite*, a photo-mural Celia Álvarez Muñoz dedicated to her father, a first generation Mexican American who fought in World War II. It will close with a discussion on her art work honoring Mexican and Mexican American women factory workers – including her own mother, Enriqueta Limón Álvarez. Titled “Presence in Absence,” the essay studies the 32-page artist’s book, *If Walls Could Speak / Si Las Paredes Hablan* (1991), that Álvarez Muñoz wrote and designed as her contribution to a larger project called “The Power of Place.” The project was initiated by Dolores Hayden, professor of architecture, urban history and American Studies, and carried out by teams of professionals from various fields. Together with artist Rupert García, urban planner Donna Graves, architect Brenda Levin, and historian George Sánchez, Álvarez Muñoz collaborated on commemorating the history of community and labor organizing at the Embassy Hotel and Auditorium building (851 Grand Street in downtown Los Angeles), which was one of the nine sites selected for the project (fig. 44, page 297). A cultural-historic landmark, the handsome 1914 building was a venue for musical performances and also used to serve as the site for early twentieth-century labor organizing efforts of various ethnic groups and women.

The stories of empowerment through work and political activism incorporated in *If Walls Could Speak* contrast drastically with the grim reality of contemporary women in Ciudad Juárez, just across the U.S. - Mexico border from Álvarez Muñoz’s hometown, El Paso. Since 1993, over three hundred females – a lot of them *maquiladoras*, assembly plant employees – have disappeared without a trace or been found murdered in Juárez, and mutilated corpses of young women continue to be carried from the litter-strewn desert ravines on the outskirts of the city. While investigations conducted by the local and national officials have resulted only in increasing bewilderment, fear and anger, the sustained efforts by a multitude of grassroots and international activist organizations to pressure the Mexican as well as U.S. governments to take concerted action have availed little. Artists on both sides of the border have reacted to the situation, protesting and spreading information internationally.

Since 1996, versions of Álvarez Muñoz’s multi-media installation, *Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in Vogue*, which deals with this subject, have toured at art venues in both Mexico and the United States. These poly-form installations diverge stylistically from most of Álvarez Muñoz’s art work, whose signature style tends to rely on subtle irony and wry metaphoric twists, rather than on direct political criticism. Its approach, too, is rather atypical because this time the artist is drawing neither from her personal or family experiences nor from any direct contact with or contribution by the subjects of the art work. Although she grew up in El Paso, where her parents still live, these extremely violent killings started a long time after she had left the border area. Thematically, though, there are several intersecting lines that connect her earlier work, *If Walls Could Speak*, to *Fibra y Furia*. First, both works are organized around the trajectories of women’s lives amid the modernization, industrialization, and globalization of the U.S. - Mexico borderlands. Second, they deal with the (im)migrant
worker experience from a female point of view. And third, they talk about the invisibility (and vulnerability) of women within the global economy and international politics – about their brutal exploitation perpetuated by the system at present as well as about their successful maneuvers to resist and organize in the past. The essay will first look at the way Álvarez Muñoz’s installations relate Chicana subjectivity to the anonymous maquiladora worker – named by Norma Alarcón as the paradigmatic neo-colonial subject – and conclude with the stories of the artist’s mother and of those labor organizing Mexicanas whose names, indeed, have entered history books.
Queering Walden Pond: *Nature Self-Portraits* and *Center*

by Laura Aguilar

*Americans were expected to love the land, the physical materiality of their geography, and to identify that land […] with nationhood and with their own identity.*

Estelle Jussim (1985) 17

*So, nature is not a physical place to which one can go, nor a treasure to fence in or bank, nor as essence to be saved or violated. […] It is not the “other” who offers origin, replenishment, service. Neither mother, nurse, nor slave; nature is not matrix, resource, or tool for the reproduction of man. […] Nature is, however, a topos in the sense of a rhetorician’s place or topic of consideration; nature is, strictly, commonplace. We turn to this topic to order our discourse, to compose our memory.*

Donna Haraway (1992) 18

Who could remain unmoved by the stunning beauty of the great American outdoors? In the national forests and state parks, the sentiments of sublime awe overwhelm the visitor, who most likely is well-versed with the imagery of the historical encounters with the “howling wilderness” of the past. Today, devoid of “savage” Indians, wilderness has turned into a sanitized “Eden,” complete with pristine waterfalls and snowy mountain tops, and made safe for middle-class vacationers in their campers and SUVs.19 The access to enjoy adventure, relaxation, and spiritual solace in nature is open to anyone whose financial, educational, and cultural assets can afford it. As an unlettered woman from a working-class Mexican American family, Laura Aguilar does not fit well into this “Sierra Club” category, predominantly Euro-American, and her memories of family outings are tinged with mixed feelings.20 Yet she has taken the opportunity to depart from her native urban environment in California and photograph herself in nature – that is, within the quintessential space of the American frontier hailed by Frederick Jackson Turner as the symbolic site for the evolution of the American character. Thereby she has positioned her self and her body in a perpendicular angle with the master narratives of the nation and national identity, and their representations in modern art which still dominate popular imagination.

The series titled *Nature Self-Portraits* consists of a number of black-and-white photographs, taken in 1996 during Aguilar’s “shooting” trip to the El Malpais and Gila Mountains areas in New Mexico. Some photographs show Aguilar’s naked body reclining by a pool of water and interacting with the shapes and textures of rocks and stones, with the reflections of water and the rays of high-noon sunlight (#4, #11, figs. 45 and 46, page 298). Two years later, fifteen of these images traveled to Barcelona, Spain, as part of a cycle of art
exhibitions named *El yo divers*, The Diverse Self, designed to address the issues of multiple identities. In this essay, I will look at the same fifteen images some five years later from another point of view, rather disturbed by the curatorial essay of the exhibition catalogue, which argues that “[Aguilar] lives in a no-man’s land, a solitary navigator steering her way through the plurality of self.” 21 Unfortunately, the poetry of the metaphors does not cancel out their actual meaning, which effaces the fact that the land depicted is not no-man’s but the white man’s (in this case a national monument belonging to the federal government). Though the only human in sight, also Aguilar is not an existential, solitary figure in the barren landscape but a member of a large and heterogeneous community of Mexican Americans, which collectively – albeit not unanimously – is configuring alternative representations of the land too, not only of their own bodies or of the socio-political body politic being negotiated in their cultural expression.

Of Mexican and Irish ancestry, Aguilar initiated her process of “photographic self-re-creation” by acknowledging her ethnic background. This motivated a series of portraits featuring some members of Chicana/o and African American communities in her native Los Angeles, along with nude self-portraits where she posed her body to respond to the modes of self-surveillance and her estrangement from the normative ideals of beauty, femininity, and citizenship. One of her best-known self-portraits (fig. 47, page 299), a large black-and-white photograph titled *In Sandy’s Room* (1990), can be seen as a precursor for the self-portraits discussed here. This image shows a spacious room where Aguilar is reclining in an armchair, naked, in full profile, facing a fan which relieves her from the summer heat. Through the large window behind her, one can see trees and leaves bath in sunlight also caressing her torso. As visual metaphors, the wide open window and the spacious interior thus replace the mirror of introspection that dominated her other self-portraits of the early 1990s, thus indicating a shift beyond the interlocked gazes of the self and the spectator, toward a more complex and open-ended enactment of subjectivity.22

“In the fall of 2000,” says Aguilar, “I once again returned to San Antonio [Texas] to do new work, which later became the series Center. […] But […] there was a lot of rain, flash floods, and monsoons, so it wasn’t the best time to photograph.” 23 Instead, she traveled again to New Mexico, this time to the Jemez Mountains area, taking over one hundred photographs to be then printed in Texas. About one dozen of these black and white images were displayed at the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center in San Antonio in the fall of 2003, and I mainly focus on these original prints that I have seen exhibited and presented to the audience. Again, the images themselves and the meanings attached to them by various reviews seemed somewhat incongruous. The introductory essay of the exhibition brochure summarizes Aguilar’s art work as emerging “out of the ruins of urban existence in 1990s Los Angeles,” attending “the psychic effects of loss.” 24 With this statement, the body of the artist slides outside of the image field to carry messages and express concerns that the photographs themselves do not explicitly maintain. Aguilar’s own reflections on her work guide to a different trail of thought:

My work for *Center* finds me becoming more rounded and finding the importance of kindness, how powerful kindness is to take in and give. I don’t like to name things, so I
try to give my work one word names, and at this time I kept thinking about gravity and my own body in relation to gravity, and I came to the word ‘center.’ 25

Of course, it would be pointless to argue about the “correct reading” of a particular photograph; rather, what is revealed is the contingency of any interpretation, including that of the artist herself. So, it behooves to first look at the demeanor of the subject posing in these photographs and then try to locate it in a larger context. In the foreground of the six sequential images of Center (#79-82, figs. 48-51, pages 300-301), Aguilar is crawling naked amid fallen leaves, holding her head almost hidden between her shoulders as if she were looking for a place to rest. The landscape seems rather anonymous: a small canyon or a riverbed with unremarkable low mountains in the background. The last image depicts her curled up and still, as if peacefully asleep, her body occupying the center field from where the mountains and the sky have been cropped out. Another sequence of images (#93, fig. 52, page 302) shows Aguilar’s naked body in its fullness, supine on a large boulder close by the river. Her dark hair lies over the rock, her face is turned away from the camera toward the swirls of water, and her arms and hands move as if beckoning to the river and the sun, which washes her body white against the dark waters and the bushes across the river. This heavy female body (in my mind reminiscent of seals basking on rocks off the California shore) is blatantly not an embodiment of the quintessential Chicano subject26; nor does it bear any resemblance with the ideal “American identity” debated over for the last two hundred years. Nor does the landscape look like anything we are so accustomed to seeing in Western art and photography. (“Western” in this essay refers to art that depicts the American West, not western in the sense of being of European origin as it is generally used.)

It seems that the canon of this art genre is less exclusively European and male today than it used to be. Yet, one would hardly expect to see Laura Aguilar’s work in the company of predominantly white Western photography even though the artist indisputably is native to the territory where her ancestors have lived for generations. In addition, she certainly deals with the contemporary themes of the genre as they were laid out for example in the book-format exhibition catalogue, Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West (1992). According to the editor of the publication, these themes are, first, the discovery of the continent, second, the erasure of landscapes, peoples, and pasts that did not conform to the ideological vision of the artistic eye, and third, the invention and reconstruction of alternative views that eschew the spectacle of violence and conquest in favor of accommodation and home-making.27 How Aguilar’s portraiture revises these three themes is the focus of this essay.

*Paradise Lost*

The first theme looms large over the landscape, colored by the biblical notions of Eden and the Promised Land transported from Europe. Complementing Leo Marx’s classic criticism of American pastoral imagery (*The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in*
environmental historian Carolyn Merchant analyzes the origins of the master narratives informing this imagery. She adds depth and scope to Marx’s literary discussion by taking into consideration two critical aspects omitted in this 1960s’ study: the role of visual images and their ideological coding by gendered figures of speech.

The Christian story of Fall and Recovery begins with the Garden of Eden as told in the Bible. […] The initial lapsarian moment, or loss of innocence, is the decline from garden to desert as the first couple is cast from the light of an ordered paradise into a dark, disorderly wasteland to labor in the earth. Instead of giving fruit readily, the earth now extracts human labor. The blame for the Fall is placed on woman.29

Aided by the Christian doctrine of redemption and the inventions of science, technology, and capitalism, the long-term goal of the recovery project has been to turn the entire earth into a vast cultivated garden. […] Human labor would redeem the souls of men and women, while the earthly wilderness would be redeemed through cultivation and domestication.30

During the Scientific Revolution, the Christian and modern stories merged to become the mainstream Recovery Narrative of Western culture.31

These master narratives thus prepared the ground for the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, whose ideology of progress was articulated, visualized, and reproduced in fine art paintings, popular printed images, and – toward the end of the century – ever more increasingly in photographs.32

In the context of the ongoing story of the troubled relationship between nature, culture, and industrial progress in the United States, Laura Aguilar’s photographic self-portraits can be regarded as part of the construction of a counter-narrative dating back to the mid-nineteenth century philosophical texts by transcendental writers. (In the visual arts, though, environmental consciousness emerged much later.) New England nature, the native environment of transcendentalists, was perceived as a place akin to earthly paradise. The photograph, Geddes Brook, a Tributary of Tohican, Pennsylvania (c. 1855-65)33, by John Moran (brother of painter Thomas Moran) shows a male observer of nature, comfortably clothed and a stick in his hand, lounging by a secluded brook shaded by a canopy of leaves. The picturesque scene suggests harmony and peace between humans and nature parallel to the contemporaneous philosophy of Henry David Thoreau, whose view of the blessings of technology, according to Leo Marx, was after all quite skeptical.34 Unreserved skepticism, on the contrary, is expressed by contemporary feminist thinkers and landscape artists, whose photographs often aim to make visible the power structures embedded in the scenic vistas of nature. In their work, “A culturally inclusive (or culturally specific) landscape aesthetic is only beginning to be revealed,” says art critic Lucy Lippard, who in recent years has made home in New Mexico and written extensively about Southwestern art and environment.35
Though Aguilar’s *Nature Self-Portraits* ostensibly resemble John Moran’s photograph in their picturesque treatment of a place in nature (enhanced by the subtle black-and-white tonal gradation of modernist landscape photography), they nevertheless betray the radical order of thinking described by Lucy Lippard. The romantic harmony between man and nature is disrupted by the commanding presence of a woman whose body does not emanate the sensuous signs of innocence and virginity awaiting impregnation and motherhood. Instead, she offers her body to the viewer as starkly material, singular, and lacking any signs of a transcendental deliverance; a spectacle of opaque matter, it falls short as a repository of abstracted, spiritual meaning. Instead, brought very close to the viewer, the folds, masses, and precipices of her body usurp the visual space of the sublime mountain sides and far-away canyons that appear in the dizzying panoramas of such eminent nineteenth-century photographers as Carleton Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge. The spectacle of a well-shaped, auto-erotic, yet asexualized, body thus displaces the spectacle of the trans-continental epic of nation building. Moreover, the god-like eye of the masculinized spectator, scanning wide-open vistas over a huge distance, is substituted by an intimate gaze of the artist-as-viewer observing her own painstakingly slow progress on the face of the earth (*Center #79-82*, figs. 48-51, pages 300-301). The obsessive progress of modern society seems to halt and turn inward to contemplate upon itself. This, in a kind of mundane mode, recapitulates Thoreau’s vision of individual consciousness in art as a means to repair the corruptive effects of modernity on nature as well as on the individual psyche; yet it also reverses transcendental sentiments by subtle irony that springs from her gender-specific, embodied experience of nature and art.

The serial images of *Nature Self-Portraits* and *Center*, taking after the narrative tropes and “realistic” style characteristic of Western art, thus engage in the worn discourse on culture versus nature in a rather unusual fashion. After playing with and eventually abandoning the idea of woman as a passive womb-in-nature, these images then refute the symbolic quest for earthly paradise by ultimately leaving the landscape unaltered, unimproved, and signifying nothing in particular. Without visible territorial markers, this land does not bear fruit for the Chicano homeland Aztlán either, affirming Rafael Pérez-Torres’ concept of Aztlán as an empty signifier (see pages 170-171). As a metaphor for land, it lacks a concrete referent and yet is replete with overdetermined meaning, rearticulated by Cherríe Moraga as the following:

> For immigrant and native alike, land is […] the factories where we work, the water our children drink, and the housing project where we live. For women, lesbians, and gay men, land is that physical mass called our bodies.

Eventually, Henry David Thoreau returned from his escapade to Walden Pond to his home town Concord; Aguilar from New Mexican mountains to San Antonio and then back to Los Angeles. But their sojourns through the liminal space between nature and culture, in spite of some rhetoric parallelisms, obviously belong to entirely different cultural orders. As a new “American Eve,” who never knew the garden of plenty, Aguilar’s body does not deliver promises of unlimited opportunities and individual fulfillment in nature, embodied in
American literary infatuation with a lone male humanizing the wilderness-as-female. The spell of the Christian dichotomy of fall and salvation is broken as the protagonist refuses the burden of the original sin and eventually invents, through meditation, her own garden of earthly pleasures in the backyard of her modest house in Rosemead, Los Angeles.40

The linear trajectory of the discourses of national progress, which worked to transform land into real estate, thus bends and cracks in Aguilar’s images. The images demonstrate a visual U-turn – from the West back to the East, from the garden of California back into the wilderness – ironically reversing the famous line, “Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free,” in Henry David Thoreau’s essay, “Walking” (1862), blithely oblivious about the gender and race aspects of cross-country trekking.41 Then the photographs claim right for the land, without litigation or labor, by the sheer weight of the physical human presence on it. And finally, they let go of this claim, too, leaving traces not on the land but on the mind of the viewer. Departing from the land thusly, without inscribing an unambiguous text upon it, Aguilar leaves more latitude for strategy than, say, the advice of some critics to strip off all human signification from the renderings of nature (envisioned essentially as disordered and chaotic).42 In the end, both approaches are in harmony with the ideas of those contemporary environmentalists, who emphasize the re-envisioning of nature as an independent actor and a partner at the table where the future of the planet is being negotiated.43

Read as a kind of visual mock-epic, which appropriates the aesthetics of high modernism and then twists the narrative conventions of great American mythologies, Laura Aguilar’s work can be called postmodern, if necessary. On demand, it can also be called feminist for it undoubtedly privileges female agency. Eco-feminist? Hardly, although it does touch the common ground of ecological justice and human rights.44 I too rather dislike naming; yet feminist and ecological politics undoubtedly inform her work due to the history of the camera, the perennial medium of documentation, commodification, and consumption. Although the nineteenth-century documentary photographs mentioned earlier were never meant to stand as art (i.e., independent of their practical purpose)45, their sharpness and attention to minute detail were later valorized by modernist artist photographers – for example, by Ansel Adams and Albert Stieglitz – as the paragon of aesthetic beauty embodied in so-called “straight” photography, fittingly enough.46 The form and style of Aguilar’s photographs, albeit drawing aesthetically from this high-brow “straight” tradition, contribute to the retelling of the story of the land as a temporal, erratic process of human involvement.

Aguilar, without romanticizing nature, calls for a moment of quiet deliberation over some seemingly inconsequential, even irrelevant details rather than going for shockingly eschatological scenes of land decline in the West (as for example photographers Lewis Baltz and Richard Misrach have done by focusing on man-altered and “raped” landscapes).47 The presence of pollution and debris, not visible in these photographs at all, becomes glaring through their absence, due to the common knowledge about the imperceptible existence of chemicals, toxic substances, and other pollutants in air, water, and soil. While hiking in nature preserves, though, one easily fails to remember this forbidding presence; whereas in some poor neighborhoods of a city like Los Angeles, urban degradation and its dire consequences on environment and people parade at every turn. In Aguilar’s images, however, the cruel irony of
a utopian ideal gone awry is embedded in the representation of innocuous nature, rendered ambiguous by the imaginary reading of a signboard so common in this part of the country, ‘Private Land. No Trespassing!’ on top of a barbed-wire fence, also invisible, or perhaps left just outside of the photographic frame. Framed out, what is most disturbing makes an inroad back to the meaning of image.

This kind of reading of Aguilar’s portraits does not ally with backward-looking nostalgia, which has characterized Western art since the Turnerian closure of the frontier in 1893. Nostalgia’s more dynamic equivalent in contemporary thinking is desire. Formulated in opposition to some basic biological need, desire aims to conjure up a satisfaction of a need arising from lack or absence. Thus, in contrast to nostalgia which dwells upon reconstructing the idealized past, desire implies a proactive imagining of something that does not yet exist. So let us now review the story of Aguilar’s photographs through the notion of desire. The artist is not a landowner in a common sense. Neither does she fish, hunt, explore, or work the land with tools; she only restages its presentation, which traditionally relied on the image of land as pregnant and ready for insemination. Unleashing the land from the proprietary claims that focus on productivity parallels with the letting loose of the female body (as it has been conscripted in various modes of photographic representation) by way of making it an individual, expressive only of its own desire and braced against appropriation and commodification. Thus the relationship between the land depicted and her body remains transient and non-instrumental by definition. It lacks both practical purpose and symbolic meta-narrative, the kind of heroic meta-narrative that unfolds, say, in the art work of the British earth artist Richard Long, whose photographs reenact the movement of colonial discovery by measuring distances, marking sites, and “mapping” the ground he walks through and documents. His disembodied gaze captures the view, transforming it into another sublime landscape enticing for crusading appetites.

As a sovereign bearer of her own look through the lens of the camera, Aguilar is not subjected to the controlling, desiring gesture of the artist/photographer, historically a white male. Symbolically, she becomes “unnatural,” a no-man’s Woman, who has appropriated the master’s tools (as well as his aesthetic) to dismantle the master’s house, to quote Audre Lorde, and then to undo these tools as well. Does she succeed in representing the female body that is not recruited to amplify proprietary (nationalistic) desire and its visual discourses? Do we see there an unfolding of some clandestine act that unfreezes her representation from the deeply-rooted metaphorical confluence of woman, land, and nation? Or does her body, as an object that apparently invites voyeuristic pleasure through its exposure of intimate detail, at the same time dare commodification in all of its forms by transmitting a sort of shared agency between the viewer, the viewed, and the artist? Somewhat comparable potential for a conspiracy against the reductive reading of gendered scopic desire is suggested by photo-historian John Pultz, who interprets Alfred Stieglitz’s modernist nude portraits of the painter Georgia O’Keeffe not as mere expressions of his patriarchal power over his wife body, but – more ambiguously – as a means to promote her public persona as a legitimate, archetypal artist, conjoining this image with her material body, gender, and sexuality. Such a bold gesture could be read into Aguilar’s work, too, and that would certainly not contradict with her
aesthetic style either, but I doubt whether this approach would yield deeper insight into Aguilar’s photographs, taking into consideration the particular circumstances of O’Keeffe’s life and career, which, nevertheless, is firmly established within the canon of Western art. Instead, a closer look at Aguilar’s photographs invokes another question, which has to do with the convergence of gender and race in her images, soliciting more complex layers of meaning – and desire.

*The Native Woman*

Thus far this essay has interpreted Laura Aguilar’s photographs mainly through their renderings of nature and the landscape within the Euro-centric narratives of art and nation building. Narrowing the focus on the human figure both in the picture and in front of the picture shifts the parameters of the discussion. The representation of landscape, even of the most beautiful, is never innocent, as concluded. The same applies to the representations of the human body. At the intersection of the history of modernism and photography, portraiture proved to be the most efficient ideological tool in affirming commonly accepted norms and values, and in creating social coherence, the fuel of nation building in the Andersonian sense. And, conversely, it produced a canonized social hierarchy by marking out the “other” of the “American identity” – that is, those bodies the presence of which disrupted the “Course of Empire” outlined in nineteenth-century epic paintings. In short, photo-portraits took part in social formation by creating a public awareness of social/racial similarities and differences.52

The majority of nineteenth-century American photographs, in fact, were portraits of ordinary people. They were taken in commercial studios, privately commissioned, controlled, and deeply meaningful for their subjects, yet vague as historical documents beyond displaying the material environment of the time period. However, what these photographs convey generically is a visual construction of self-identity mainly based on class and profession, signified by the sitter’s clothing, pose, and setting. Most of the portraits depicted Euro-Americans, who could afford to buy them, but other groups as well cherished visual memorabilia of themselves and their loved ones.53 Aside from this private function, portraits also entered public space in order to serve various functions of social engineering. One of the earliest examples of their use as a counter-narrative to the racially codified American identity was W. E. B. DuBois’ portrait album titled *Types of American Negros* on display at the Paris Exposition of 1900. These formal portraits of self-confident and elegantly dressed black persons supported DuBois’ philosophical and political argument for the inclusion of African Americans in the nation. His argument interrogated the contemporary scientific discourse on “race” and “national character” dominated by eugenics. In this scheme of things, nevertheless, the Native American body came to represent ultimate otherness, well captured in a nineteenth-century photograph that shows a group of black students gaping at an Indian chief in full plains-style regalia brought into their American history class.54

Unlike the nineteenth-century eugenics doctrine, DuBois’ conceptualization of difference was not based on essentialized, “inherited” racial properties but on such contingent
cultural factors as political ideals, religion, and language, an argument compatible with photographic representations of ethnic individualism since the post-civil rights movement era. Laura Aguilar’s early portraits of the members of Chicana/o and African American communities in Los Angeles bear stylistic resemblance to DuBois’ photographs. Their subjects interact with and confront the camera with frontal poses and direct looks, which return the gaze of the presumably white viewer/photographer and undercut his privileged position, forcing him to meet the “oppositional gaze” of the other.55 In some of these images, the subjects pose naked, yet in absolute possession of their own bodies. Without clothing, they conjure up and contradict with another powerful photographic tradition, which was developed by nineteenth-century anthropologists in order to illustrate an evolutionist, hierarchical matrix of human races based on the presumably fixed physiological features called phenotypes. The subjects of these photographs, mostly people of color, were stripped of their individuality and forced to pose naked, as stereotypical specimens for scientific observation.56 It was this eerily ambiguous quality, connoting both empowering and demeaning histories of portraiture, that made Aguilar’s images of Chicana/os so successful in the battlefield of identity and self-representation in 1990s’ California. Her subsequent self-portraits, though, multiply the range of possible readings in conflating the symbolically laden concept ‘nature’ with the ideological import of ‘portrait.’ Yet in style they strikingly deviate from the genre-specific conventions of both landscape and portraiture.

This excessive overlay of photographic meaning, circumscribed by race and class, interfaces with the historical representations of the Native woman in Euro-American arts and letters. Despite the fact that Aguilar’s personal history has nothing to do with indigenous American experience today, the signifiers of miscegenation, Native heritage, and hybridity print multiple meanings on her body, too. Psychologically, that involves a highly personal acknowledgement of a “racial” identification, initiated by concrete everyday experiences of social stratification based on one’s physical appearance only. This physical appearance per se situates her body and its image within the discursive space of the “primitive woman” in “virgin land,” wherein racial difference has relentlessly been infused with eroticism, sexual desires, and their prohibitions typical in nation-building projects. In Euro-American white imagination, black women especially have symbolized sexuality, savagery, primitivism, and animality at least ever since a Hottentot woman named Saartjie Baartman was paraded stark naked for European audiences in 1810s’ London.57 The Native woman, as a nationalist symbol, appears more ambiguous still, though not exclusively in a negative sense. In either case, nevertheless, the sexual energies released by a female symbol marked by racial otherness carry a great deal more sinister meanings than, say, the blue-eyed Finnish Maid, always depicted young, fertile, “radiantly healthy,” and potentially at risk of rape (in most cases by Russians).58

Due to its ample shape, it is easy to see Aguilar’s figure as a symbol of Mother Earth, as a kind of embodiment of Venus of Willendorf, the clefts and fissures of whose exuberant body ensure the health of soil and humans. An amorous encounter with earth was already fantasized by Walt Whitman, who, in 1876, characterized his retreat to nature as “the chance to return to the ‘naked source-life of us all – to the breast of the great silent savage all-acceptive Mother.’” 59 And, about the same time, Rev. John Todd evidently felt much the same,
affirming that “From the bosom of mother earth all draw their nourishment.” Although today an invocation of nature as uniquely feminine always falls under suspicion of making an equation between female identity and the generative, reproductive powers of the female body, I argue that the usage of this trope is not automatically essentialist. That Aguilar is lesbian rather complicates a reductive reading of her images simply as a celebration of reproductive forces of nature (vis-à-vis productive forces of culture); there exists a possibility for an interpretation that does not categorically annul the symbolic link between motherhood and nature. The contested right of lesbians to have and raise children might seem like a far-fetched theme by merely looking at Aguilar’s self-portraits, but her earlier photographs that depict lesbian couples, some of them pregnant, speak for this possible interpretation. Just as mother earth is capable of conceiving in multiple fashions, so do humans too, a message that would not only naturalize lesbian sexual desire, but also justify their desire for motherhood, parenting, and family life with its full societal status. This twist of meaning reverberates in a most peculiar way when it crosses over to the discourse on the Native woman specifically in Mexican American cultural memory.

Therefore, even without obvious narrative cues or iconographic guises in the images themselves, I believe that it is not unwarranted to contextualize Nature Self-Portraits and Center within Chicana/o mythology and scholarship interpreting it. In fact, the images seem to even solicit this contextualization, in spite of the fact that their value as aesthetic objects does not rely on it. So, the silence that historical meta-narratives have attributed to the woman-as-mother-earth as well as to the Native woman turns into many voices when Aguilar’s self-portraits enter into dialogue with Chicana archetypal figures charged by symbolic/political controversy. These figures produce narratives not so much about the individualistic self, but of the relational self, defined by and expressive of communal values and beliefs rather than by the aspirations of the sovereign subject. In Aguilar’s images, these two selves merge through her individualization of nature as a partner and of herself as an artist, and through her enactment of the relationship between the two within the multifaceted subtext of Chicana/o female icons (see pages 77-83).

Most of the images in both Nature Self-Portraits and Center include water as a central element of composition. La Llorona, the crying boogie woman of Mexican American lore, wanders at night near bodies of water, looking for her murdered children and seducing men. Interpreted in various ways from a symbol of a dysfunctional heterosexual family to a trope of communal mourning, La Llorona most readily yields symbolic resources to reconcile loss, death, and sexuality. Interestingly, the Finnish national epic, Kalevala, also weaves a close net of meaning between women and water, sometimes suicidal, sometimes transformative. For Kalevalan women, though, the state of equilibrium mandatory in the didactic tale becomes restored in the end – there are no ghosts of crying women haunting Finnish children today – whereas La Llorona’s agony appears unrelenting. The state of fear and disequilibrium is never corrected, as observed by folklorist and performer Bess Lomax Hawes, who studied urban ghost lore told by inmates of Las Palmas School for girls in Los Angeles. According to Lomax Hawes, these teenage girls, judged delinquent for sexual offences or habitual truancy, “must somehow find something – lost somehow, somewhere: a road, a door, a mother, a child, a place
in the world.” 62 Similarly, Aguilar’s negotiations with water engage not only her own search for a functional identity as a dark daughter of a fair mother – whose differences in appearance accentuated her sense of alienation as a mestiza child – but also the generational burden of physical as well as structural violence inflicted against Native American women. Water, the circular forms folding in, and particularly the muted tones of some Center images strongly suggest an allegorical presentation of the abandon associated with the original connection with the body of the mother, or the mythological mother, Aztlán. Inhospitable as this homeland is to female representations outside of the pure place of origin, the story has to be recomposed by the “unnatural” artistry of the artist, whose well-grounded body is able to transform the nationalistic landscape of myth into scenes of self-birthing, self-mothering, and self-love denied from La Llorona and her lost children.63

The maternal imagery in Laura Aguilar’s work seems to bypass altogether the paramount idol of the good woman and mother in Catholic iconography, perhaps because the Virgin of Guadalupe appears sadly mute (as noted by Kathy Vargas) and only voices what others, mostly men, want her to say. Instead, Aguilar trains her eyes through and beyond Guadalupe’s venerated figure that stands in the center of the blazing sun aureola. Although life-supporting, the sunlight can be blinding and cut into Aguilar’s body, sometimes flattening and fragmenting it into a sharp, abstract shape, so as to turn it into just another formal element in the composition of the picture field. The symbolic union of la tierra, the woman, and the sun therefore looks less promising in these images than, say, in Rudolfo Anaya’s novels about the Mexican American communities in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The author’s invocation of sun-based spirituality hardly validates his inclusion into the contemporary canon of ecological literature, at least if gender awareness counts as one of the criteria. 64 In Aztec cosmology, it should also be remembered, the sun stands for Huitzilopochtli, the war god and the decapitator of his sister, goddess Coyolxauhqui, whose dismembered body reclines carved on stone in the foundations of Tenoctitlán, the imperial Aztec capital and present-day Mexico City. 65 That the excavation of pre-Colombian concepts of a holistic worldview offers no guarantee against sexism embedded in the woman-as-nature perplex has been proven by numerous Chicana scholars.

The lights and shadows emitted from the material body of the photographic subject thus evoke volatile socio-political associations, resisting some of its ideological personifications while validating others. Outside of the garden of plenty, the Virgin Mother thereby disqualifies in a survival test. It is not surprising, then, that the multifaceted apparitions of a real historical figure, the “Indian maid” Malintzin Tenepal, keep surfacing in Aguilar’s photographs, too, like a force of nature well described by historian Emma Pérez:

Just as Oedipus is everywhere, always, reinscribing sociosexual and cultural relations, for Indias/mestizas/Chicanas La Malinche is always everywhere, reinscribing women’s agency. In Chicano/a myths, histories, tropes, taxonomies, and so on, La Malinche cannot be avoided. La Malinche encodes all sociosexual relations and there is no way out. 67
But what is the “essence” of the Indian maid Malinche’s persona in the Chicana body politic today and what is the source of her power in popular imagination? It has to do with her power over language(s), I believe, in her ability to name and hence give meaning to her own life as a Native woman and to the world she lived in. To achieve this privileged position of speech is the predicament of Laura Aguilar, too, who has struggled hard to learn basic reading and writing skills and whose auditory dyslexia perhaps made her ask the same questions that tormented another mestiza, Gloria Anzaldúa, the author of the poem describing the “Coatlicue state” of destructive emotional disorder:

She has this fear that she has no names that she has many names that she doesn’t know her names She has this fear that she’s an image that comes and goes clearing and darkening the fear that she’s the dreamwork inside someone else’s skull […] She has this fear that if she digs into herself she won’t find anyone that when she gets “there” she won’t find her notches on the trees the birds will have eaten all the crumbs She has this fear that she won’t find the way back

Her Figure of Speech

Can women’s bodies be the sites of cultural politics in spite of their enduring commodification and repression? Is a bodily transgression from the mainstream ideals of feminine beauty and its proper place always inherently radical? These are some of the issues pondered at length by art historian Janet Wolff, who finally endorses the potential of body politics by arguing that

[t]he female body, as discursively and socially constructed, and as currently experienced by women, may form the basis of a political and cultural critique – so long as it is one which eschews a naïve essentialism and incorporates the self-reflexivity of a recognition of the body as an effect of practices, ideologies, and discourses.

In the light of Wolff’s speculation, Aguilar’s photographs yield at least two readings: they can be seen as straightforward celebrations of the essentialized feminine body akin to nature, or as a critical commentary on the white hetero-normative construction of the national/ethnic/feminine identity. Without commenting on the academic controversy over essentialism versus anti-essentialism, I like to argue that having it both ways does not necessarily dull the political edge of the images.

Some of Aguilar’s earlier works offer more explicit clues for politicized, deconstructive interpretations. For example her 1993 portrait, Don’t Tell Her Art Can’t Hurt (fig. 53, page 302), serializes four images with four texts below them where she refers to herself in the third person:
The t-shirt said ART can’t hurt you, she knew better. The problem was she placed value on it. She believed in it too much. She wanted to believe it was hers to have, to own.

You learn you’re not the one they want to talk about pride. They decide who we were supposed to be and taught us to be it.

[…]

So don’t tell her art can’t hurt, she knows better. The believing can pull at one’s soul. So much that one wants to give up.

Aguilar frames her own body as a perpetrator as well as a site of violence. But the gun in her hand is obviously not the same gun that works as a master symbol of male resistance in the Mexican American border corrido (epic folksong), *With His Pistol in His Hand*, immortalized by the pre-eminent Chicano folklorist Américo Paredes (1915-1999). Pointing at her mouth in the last image of the series, the gun instead turns into a suicidal phallic weapon, espousing redemption through violence and ironically making public her inability to gain empowerment from a sense of belonging with the overarching mythology of guns in the West. Menacingly powerful in its multiple meanings, the gun in this self-portrait also stands for the camera (commonly associated with aggressive terminology), making the latter appear powerful but rather ambivalent as a means of self-reflection, or community building, as we have already found out in Chapter 5. This symbolic (self-)expulsion (and -annihilation) from nationalist narratives of the West thus also demonstrated Aguilar’s sense of alienation in the art establishment at large, not particularly welcoming for aspiring women artists of color.

In contrast, the self-portraits focused on in this essay transpose Aguilar’s quest for self-identity and meaning from the discourse of violence and victimization onto the discourse of self-discovery. They suggest an antithesis to the national landscape constructed as an empty mirror reflecting nationalist desires or aestheticized transcendentalism. Although her images are by no means devoid of purely aesthetic qualities, they do not allow for segregation between humans and the landscape (a prerequisite for the imperatives of “absolute freedom” and “pure art”). With this implication, Aguilar’s work stands against the western system of thinking that stipulates a sharp demarcation between humanity and nature, also underlying the reification of national parks as supreme icons of national identity. By blurring the boundaries between her body and the natural world, Aguilar’s images do not speak for nature but about nature in a way that effectively subverts Henry David Thoreau’s categorical ideology of wilderness as expressed in the opening paragraph of his essay, “Walking”:

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school-committee and every one of you will take care of that.
Stylistically, Aguilar’s style resembles less the aesthetics of contemporary landscape photographers than, say, the extremely intimate visual sensibility of Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), whose work is most often categorized as feminist body art. If the landscape is a textual trope and a state of mind, then the images of both Aguilar and Ana Mendieta construct an ideology or mentality that necessitates very little distance for the subject-observer from the subject-matter. Both artists insistently spiritualize the representational surface with cultural signs and personal meanings, both culturalizing the concept of “natural” and naturalizing the concept of “cultural.” As a kind of embodied “ethnoscape” inhabiting within the abstract symbolic space of the nation “stranded in the desert,” Aguilar’s body queries the boundaries between these often incompatible and antithetical spaces that, all the same, are wedded by geopolitics. A visual metonym of La Raza, her body can thus be read at the same time empirically and textually, as an elaborate material document of (multiple) otherness within, and as a counter-text to the feminized/racialized construction of the imperial nation state.

However, rather than claiming the “authenticity” of the body through her psychological pain (like Mendieta or Arno Rafael Minkkinen, another contemporary photographer who poses his naked body in nature), Aguilar uses her figure as a mutable mediator between a private body and the body politic, visualizing a personal quest for an inhabitable space in-between. Aware of being a potential object of fetishist desire, she neither submissively averts her eyes from the camera, nor returns the gaze in invitation, but instead appears to completely ignore the presence of the observer. In some images (Nature Self-Portrait #8, fig. 54, page 303), she blocks the view by turning her broad back to the camera; in others (Nature Self-Portrait #9, fig. 55, page 303), she is engaged with the reflection of herself on the surface of water in a narcissistic gesture that proclaims self-sufficient sensuality and yet – paradoxically – denies access to the privileged eye of the viewer. In sum, pregnant with individual meaning rather than cast in the shape of a sexual/racial/national stereotype, Aguilar’s body claims public recognition, acting against the grain of the exotic imagery of otherness. Identifying the viewer’s gaze with her personal point of view as a photographer/observer, she also identifies the viewer’s body with her own body in the picture.

This is an unexplored territory of subjectivity, geared to trace a viable conceptualization of a world view, or a paradigm, or a methodology, or even a single metaphor capable of overcoming the stalemate of radical relativism or totalizing universalism, the demarcation line between postmodern deconstruction and older ideologies of knowledge. Aguilar’s own words about her Center series capture beautifully this enterprise.

I am doing a lot of movement and really going inside my body in a visual sense. Through visualizing my breath, seeing it go into my body, down my spinal column, […] I am starting to feel more centered: physically, spiritually, and philosophically.

Is this center the “middle landscape” between wilderness and civilization Leo Marx attempts to formulate in his study on American transcendentalism, or is it Nepantla, the in-between space
derived from Aztec epistemology by Chicana writers, or Chela Sandoval’s “differential consciousness” set to deconstruct hegemonic patriarchy, or simply a new sense of self, \textit{consciencia de si}, theorized by Ramón Gutiérrez? In each of these radical reconceptualizations, the change of epistemology inevitably also points to a change in language, that is, to a different way of coding the space between “I,” “us,” “them,” and amid.

Moreover, I would add, her self-portraits also “queer” queer practices while engaging the contested discourse on the national landscape, while looking for an inclusive middle ground and thus destabilizing even those identities her body most readily affiliates with. “Women’s bodies lack nothing,” says Griselda Pollock, “have not been mutilated or castrated. But their position in the world is constantly subject to castration, symbolically, as a denial of being, a denial of speech, a denial of the means to figure the subject by means of its body.” 76

In 1872, a group of Indians in Utah endowed a white photographer with the name “Myself in the Water,” metaphorically reaffirming the process of photography as a process of self-inscription fluid enough to overcome its technological power to dematerialize landscape, history, and the human body.77 The self-portraits made by Laura Aguilar, posing on ancient Pueblo land, incorporate this kind of unassuming volatility. The powerful image of the Aztec goddess \textit{Coatlicue}, according to the author Gloria Anzaldúa, depicts the contradictory and fuses the opposites.78 Symbolizing the crossing-over, \textit{travesía}, into a new territory, Coatlicue’s image also fuses the geographical configurations of identity with the language of poetry, which perhaps is better able to elucidate Aguilar’s photographs than the language of academic argumentation, after all.

And suddenly I feel everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center. \textit{Completa}.79

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2 Michel Foucault (1966, 1969, 1975) developed further Antonio Gramsci’s ideas about hegemony and the controlling power of the state over individuals. His studies on the institutional power of the state (e.g., legal, medical, religious, etc.) to physically discipline and control its citizens have influenced feminist theorists, in particular, who focus on the issues of difference, embodiment, and inter-subjectivity. His method of historical inquiry, named \textit{genealogy}, excavates the nature of Western scientific knowledges in shaping their objects. He claims that “[t]here is no power relation without correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.” Paul Rabinow, ed. \textit{The Foucault Reader} (New York: Pantheon, 1984) 175. Therefore, all Foucault’s main arguments are relevant to this study, too, but only as a subtext rather than as a primary frame of reference.


4 \textit{The Course of Empire} is the name of the famous series of five mural-size paintings by Thomas Cole, which today decorate the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C and echo the ideology of manifest destiny from a critical viewpoint. Although, on the one hand, Cole’s painting series warns about the outcome of manifest destiny, it on the other hand depicts the course of the U.S. Empire as something spectacular, predetermined, and inevitable. See \url{http://www.aoc.gov/cc/cc_art.htm} for a full listing of Capitol art and informing links to research made on the topic.
appropriated to perpetuate the hegemonic ideology of masculinity. Discussion like this follow up the criticism equal resistance; that private desires and public fantasies expressed through queerness can be commodified and

Moraga’s concept “Queer Aztlán” (Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage (“My Aztlán: White Place”), Louis Alfaro (“Orphan of Aztlán”), and Alicia Arrizón in her elaboration on Cherríe against sexist forms of Chicano cultural nationalism expressed by such gay and lesbian authors as Gil Cuadros have seldom had access to that privileged position in order to view it. Their gaze has been absent, and along with

The nature of queer politics and style was recently discussed in the “Chicano Manual of Style of North Carolina Press, 1975). The beginning of the ecological movement in the U.S. Northeast goes back the early phase of modernity. In the mid-19th century, Henry David Thoreau, one of America’s most fertile thinkers and writers, spoke eloquently on the importance of nature and natural systems. The “transcendental” view of nature promoted by Thoreau and his peers helped spread and popularize awareness of conservation, eventually leading to the establishment of the US National Park System. See, e.g., The American Renaissance: New Dimensions, ed. by Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg, Pa: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, c1983).

As an ideology, cultural as well as state nationalism is often grounded in the idea of soil and land. Since 1848 in particular, the issue of land ownership became central to Mexican American self-identity. At that time, the Hispanic land grants given by the Spanish crown as well as the traditional communal lands, ejidos, were lost to Anglo speculators. Inspired by Emiliano Zapata, a campesino leader who fought for agrarian reform in revolutionary Mexico under the rubric Tierra y libertad, a Texan Reies López Tijerina founded Alianza Federal de Mercedes in 1963 in an attempt to restore the lost lands in New Mexico. See John R. Chávez, The Last Land: The Chicano Image of the Southwest (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993). This ethos was also expressed in El Plan de Aztlán (1968) as well as in the farm workers and mural art movements in California.

It is rather interesting to look at Aguilar’s work through the theoretical lens well-honed by historian Johanna Valenius, whose publication, Undressing the Maid: Gender, Sexuality and the Body in the Construction of the Finnish Nation (2004), analyzes how the collated imagery of “the Finnish Maid” and “the national landscape” was used at the turn of the 20th century to construct the social, racial, and gender hierarchy of the nation. Valenius stresses that national landscapes generally are visualized as grand panoramas, containing a formula that “enables the reproduction of imagery according to pre-ordained rules of representation” (page 92), which reinforce the power relations embedded in landscapes. Like the iconographic Finnish landscape – a lake amid hilly forests – so too in the United States the national landscape is a masculinist one (the frontier), circumscribed by the “master subject,” who is “[a] no-body, who does not recognize that the existence of certain other bodies, especially those of the gay, the lesbian and the black, of women and children, is not welcome in some spaces […] The master subject recognizes only one body – his. This body, in accordance with the demands of western rationality, is disembodied” (page 93; Valenius’ formulation is based on Gillian Rose, Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge [1993]). Therefore, equally important to what is present in the image is to study what is absent from it. Although the national landscape has been conceived through feminine symbolism in the form of an idealized “Woman,” women artists generally and women artists of color in particular have seldom had access to that privileged position in order to view it. Their gaze has been absent, and along with it everything else that would breach the canon of the national imagery.


The nature of queer politics and style was recently discussed in the “Chicano Manual of Style Symposium” at UCLA, the Chicano Studies Research Center, April 13, 2005. The crucial question concerned the perceived conflict between the theory and practice of queerness: When is queering subversive and when is it just an affirmation of the same? Richard T. Rodriguez, for example, pointed out that queerness does not necessarily equal resistance; that private desires and public fantasies expressed through queerness can be commodified and appropriated to perpetuate the hegemonic ideology of masculinity. Discussions like this follow up the criticism against sexist forms of Chicano cultural nationalism expressed by such gay and lesbian authors as Gil Cuadros (“My Aztlán: White Place”), Louis Alfaro (“Orphan of Aztlán”), and Alicia Arrízón in her elaboration on Cherríe Moraga’s concept “Queer Aztlán” (Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage [Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999]).


Several enlightening panel sessions at the 2005 PCA/ACA Conference in San Diego dealt with the issue of fat in America. The topics of presentations included Hollywood actors using fat suits or “fatting up” (and then “thinning down”) compared to black minstrelsy; distancing and containment of fatness by desexualization and humor; sexualizing fat bodies through camp and carnevalesque à la John Waters and Rikki Lake; and the anxieties about otherness inside (“fatsophobia”), i.e., fatness as part of the enemy symptom reborn with the arrival of every new group of immigrants to the United States. Nevertheless, I do not take up these topics in my discussion on Aguilar’s work because I deem other approaches more interesting.

“From the 1920s through the 1950s, the Embassy played a significant role as a gathering place for nearly every labor union in LA, including primarily Mexican American unions of garment, cannery and furniture...
workers. It was also the site for early meetings of El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Español [sic] (Spanish Speaking People’s Congress), one of the earliest Latino civil rights organizations in the United States.” From Donna Graves’ foreword to Álvarez Muñoz’s artist’s book, If Walls Could Speak / Si Las Paredes Hablan, The Embassy Auditorium Project, The Power of Place (Fort Worth, TX: Lone Star Posters, 1991).

Katharina A. Díaz defines maquiladoras as “largely foreign-owned assembly plants that import materials to Mexico for assembly, then re-export the finished products. The advantage to the companies – an inexpensive Mexican workforce and no, or reduced, tariffs. To attract these businesses, Mexico began building large industrial complexes along its 2,000-mile border in the sixties and seventies. Hundreds of maquiladoras are now found along the border. The majority of the employees in the factories are young women from Mexico’s rural areas.

Despite an average workweek of 60 or 70 hours and wages that pay between $4.25 and $5 a day, they continue to flock to the maquiladoras. But low wages and long working hours are not all they confront. They also are exposed to sexual harassment in the workplace and hazardous working and living conditions.” Díaz, “The Border-Murders Mystery. Someone is killing young women along the U.S.-Mexico frontier,” in Hispanic, October 2003, 14.


In her publication Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), Carol Merchant relates the development of the nation-wide state park system to the appearance of “urban Edens,” i.e., gigantic malls complete with indoor waterfalls, palm trees, and zoos. Both cater to the nostalgic longing for nature among city dwellers. See also Rebecca Solnit’s discussion on “spiritual strip-mining” of Native lands in As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2001) 12-13.

In Landscape as Photograph (1985), Estelle Jussim criticizes insightfully the mainstream environmentalist movement for relying on imagery and pursuing an agenda that singularly reflect middle-class values and concerns. In spite of her working-class background, Aguilar’s childhood was not deprived of family excursion outdoors, albeit that her memories of them are colored by tragicomic events caused by her father’s habit of combining nature excursions with drinking.


This is the route Aguilar followed in the late 1990s, after first trying out the mode of self-portraiture that relied on rather blunt self-objectification through multi-panel repetition and grid-like composition (e.g., Five Lauras, [1991] and Twelve Lauras [1993]). The artist as a viewer of his/her own image of course is a traditional trope in art history, and the subversions of this conventional way of seeing by feminist artists have significantly influenced the concepts of art. See Kaja Silverman’s discussion on the ideal-ego, the bodily ego, and the gaze in The Threshold of the Visible World (New York: Routledge, 1996).
23 Laura Aguilar, “A Journey to Center,” photocopied artist’s statement to accompany the exhibition Motion & Center: New Bodies of Work by Laura Aguilar at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, San Antonio, Texas, fall 2003.


25 Aguilar, 2003. Coincidentally, the Center images were photographed at the Jemez Mountains, behind the Buddhist retreat by the Jemez River.

26 A quintessential Chicano body, according to Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, is conceived as male, working-class, heterosexual, and racially marked as Indian/mestizo in order to counterpoint the ideal white body of “American” identity. Both concepts categorically exclude female and/or homosexual bodies. Yarbro-Bejarano, “Laying it Bare: The Queer/Colored Body in Photography by Laura Aguilar,” in Living Chicana Theory, ed. by Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, Ca: Third Woman Press, 1998) 276-305.


29 Merchant, 2003, 12.
31 Ibid., 22.
32 Martha Sandweiss’ elegantly illustrated and thoroughly researched study, Print the Legend: Photography and the American West (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), offers an excellent account of the interconnected development of different printing techniques, their modes of production, and the effects of the market in the history of Western photography.


36 The nationalistic undertones of the discussion of land as a pregnant woman is a widely studied topic also discussed in Johanna Valenius’ reading about the Finnish Maid ( Undressing the Maid: Gender, Sexuality and the Body in the Construction of the Finnish Nation [Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2004]). In American Studies, one of the first, but still quite enlightening, publications on this topic is Annette Kolodny’s The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters (1975).

37 Orvell, 2003, 43.
38 Marx, 1974, 264-265.
40 While I visited Aguilar’s home in July, 2003, she took me to the backyard of her house where she had set up a sizeable platform on which she was building a miniature beach for her collection of toy characters. In Los Angeles, of course, the real beaches are far away from low income neighborhoods.

41 Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” in Excursions (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1890) 266. The essay on walking was first published after Thoreau’s death in Atlantic Monthly, June 1862 (http://www.bartleby.com/73/657.html), visited on October 23, 2003). The aspect of travel and mobility plays a central role in contemporary theory, which has been criticized by some writers-of-color for overlooking such involuntary relocations as enforced migration, enslavement, and deportation. During Thoreau’s lifetime, for example, the longest walks were made by Native Americans, who were forced to leave their lands, and the freed slaves, who migrated from the South to the urban centers of the Northeast. In journeys like these, women and children participated in large numbers, but their stories have failed to attract much interest until lately. See, e.g., the author bell hooks, “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination,” in Cultural Studies (1992) 338-346.
42 Estelle Jussim, whose otherwise commendable publication, Landscape as Photograph, completely ignores “genderization” of landscape, criticizes Rosalind Krauss for her categorical resistance against

Carolyn Merchant (2003), in particular, has called for stewardship of nature versus private ownership and control. With radical feminist bias, the similar ethos in the natural sciences is represented by Donna Haraway (2003, 1991, 1989).

44 The main problem about labeling any artist of color as an eco-feminist concerns class. The movement is commonly associated with white middle-class values as explained in Maria Herrera-Sobek, “The Nature of Chicana Literature: Feminist Ecological Literary Criticism and Chicana Writers,” in Re-emerging Native Women of the Americas: Native Chicana Latina Women’s Studies, ed. by Yolanda Broyles-González (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2001) 550-562. Also, Aguilar’s activism is, indeed, entirely centered on the social issues concerning her urban communities, which she has not dealt with in her art. The kind of meditation over the postmodern/human body in the postindustrial landscape is practiced more commonly by Chicano performance and media artists, for example Willie Varela (e.g., videos “The Burning World,” “Thoughts on 9/11,” “Detritus, the Remix,” and “Night Walking”). See also Jane M. Jacobs’ discussion on eco-movements in “Earth Honoring: Western Desires and Indigenous Knowledges,” in Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader, ed. by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003) 667-691. Focusing on the situation in Australia, she concludes that “...analysis on the eco-centric and ecofeminist perspectives uncovered their colonialist and patriarchal subtexts, borne of a rearticulated desire of the West to posses indigenous knowledges held within a primitivist stereotype of the environmentally ‘valid’ and ‘useful’ indigene” (page 685).

45 The most salient functions of late nineteenth-century documentary photography were to attract settlers and tourists to the West and to promote scientific exploration, which aimed to produce a kind of exhaustive topographical inventory of the continent for the use of industrial technology. The triumphantly optimistic stance of these photographic surveys (often singularly associated with the name of photographer Timothy O’Sullivan) translated into a dynamic visual style that idealized the utilitarian view of nature and made use of the characteristics of scientific representational style: grids, maps, lines, concentric circles, geometric perspectives of fields, geographical formations, and man-made structures.


47 The kind of low-key style has also been adopted by such artists as Masumi Hayashi, Carrie Mae West, and Sharon Steward, whose work deals with power politics and the traces of ecological destruction of the West. See, e.g., Rebecca Solnit, Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) and Lucy Lipard, The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society (New York: New Press, 1997).


49 Another world-famous artist who focuses on nature in his photographs is Andy Goldsworthy. His deftness to highlight aesthetic malleability of landscape, though, reflects above all the artist’s total control and transformative power over nature rather than any independent creative capacity of nature itself. Similarly to the nature photography by Ansel Adams, for example, Goldsworthy’s projects turn landscape into a desirable fetish, objectified and put on the pedestal.


In her essay “Chicana Lesbians: Fear and Loathing in the Chicano Community” (*Chicana Critical Issues*, ed. by Norma Alarcon, Rafaela Castro, Emma Perez, Beatriz Pesquera, Adaljiza Sosa Ridell, and Patricia Zavella [Berkeley, Ca: Third Woman Press, 1993] 117-126), Carla Trujillo notes that “Motherhood among Chicana lesbians does exist. Many lesbians are mothers as by-products of divorce or earlier liaisons with men. Anecdotal evidence I have obtained from many Chicana lesbians in the community indicates that lesbians who choose to become mothers in our culture are seen as aberrations of the traditional concept of motherhood, which stresses male-female partnership. Choosing to become a mother via alternative methods of insemination, or even adopting children, radically departs from society’s view that lesbians and gay men cannot ‘successfully’ raise children” (page 121).


This interpretation is inspired by Emma Perez’s provocative and insightful Freudian reading of Chicano history related to the histories of and fantasies about women. *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

I consider quite misguided Carmen Flys-Jungera’s argument on Anaya in “Nature’s Voice: Ecological Consciousness in Rudolfo Anaya’s Albuquerque Quartet,” in *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 27:2 (Fall 2002) 119-138. Personified, nature’s voice in Anaya’s work sounds rather patronizingly masculine to me. Generally the sun, the major symbol of Anaya’s nature philosophy, has been conceived as male; for Donna Haraway, for example, it represents the deadly rationalism of science-cum-religion deriving from “Plato and his heliotropic son’s blinding star” (1992, 296-297).

Art historian Amelia Malagamba explains that “In the Mexico myth, Coyolxauhqui is killed by her brother Huitzilopochtli, the God of war because she had plotted to kill their mother, the Earth Goddess Coatlicue. The assassination of Coyotl occurs in the precise moment of the birth of her brother, dressed in his war attire. […] The dismembered body of Coyolxauhqui becomes a powerful representation of cultural, political and social losses of women not only in the distant past, but in the present day.” Curatorial statement for the exhibition *De mujer a mujer: photocopy, n.p.*

Such Chicana scholars as Rosa Linda Fregoso (1993) and Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez (1994) have also criticized another Chicano cultural icon, author/film maker Luis Valdez, for blatant sexism. His philosophy, too, relies heavily on the masculine idealization of pre-Colombian mythology which informs his drama and film production.

Perez, 1999, 122. Again, the image of the Native woman resembles that of the Finnish Maid. Johanna Valenius shows striking similarities – in both content and composition – between two mid-19th-century paintings, John Cadsby Chapman’s *The Baptism of Pocahontas at Jamestown, Virginia, 1613* (1840) (on display in the Rotunda of the United States Capitol) and R.W. Ekman’s *The Baptism of the Finns* (1854), which depicts Bishop Henry with his crusading army civilizing the Finnish Maid and her pagan folks. In both paintings, the figure of a young woman functions as a point of entrance for the takeover of the desired territory. Valenius (2004) 124-126.


See Shifra Goldman, chapter “Ana Mendieta: A Return to Natal Earth,” in *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 237-238. As a child, Mendieta was shipped from Cuba to the U.S. by the CIA and the Cuban Catholic Church plan to “rescue” Cuban children after the revolution (Campaign Peter Pan). Her art work was shaped by a close contact with the feminist movement in New York and driven by the desire for self-healing and a new identity that she pursued through performances in nature. She used her body, earth, fire, and blood to carve her
“mark,” or signature, on “mother earth” and to connect with the archetypal female presence in the extinct Taíno Indian culture of Cuba. Although self-healing is an essential aspect of Aguilar’s work, too, it does not involve violence or making visible marks on nature that characterized Mendieta’s work. Rather than immersing her body with the elements through a gesture of near self-annihilation, Aguilar’s way is to articulate her body with natural forms and let them shape her response.

74  Jussim, 1985, xiv.
77  Sandweiss, 2002, 222.
78  Anzaldúa, 1987, 47-49.
79  Ibid., 51.
Everything was being nourished to destroy. Nothing was being nourished to discover and create, and I finally destroyed myself in this huge cemetery called the prisons of America. When I went to prison I no longer existed. I was a non-entity.

Jimmy Santiago Baca (2005) 1

An ex-convict (pinto) from Albuquerque’s South Valley, Jimmy Santiago Baca taught himself to read and write during his six years’ stint in prison. Writing helped him stay alive while doing time, and later he became an acclaimed Chicano poet, scholar, and educator. 2 Raúl Salinas, an ex-convict from the La Loma barrio in Austin, literally “wrote” himself out of the prison, became a poet, a political activist, and the owner of Resistencia Bookstore in his home town in Texas. Baca’s and Salinas’ survival stories are, however, exceptional. Such a happy ending did not fall on Chicano inmate Felix Martínez, a South Valley veteran like Baca, who modeled for Delilah Montoya’s photo-mural titled El Guadalupano (fig. 56, page 304). 4 He was found dead in his cell, suffocated by a pillow, about a year after his photography session with Montoya in the Albuquerque Detention Center where he was being held under arrest for a drive-by shooting in his barrio. Who murdered him was not discovered.

The black-and-white photograph of Martínez’s heavily tattooed back and arms is featured as the centerpiece of the La Guadalupana installation (fig. 57, page 305), conceived for the exhibition, Ida y Vuelta: Twelve New Mexican Artists, which took place in 1998 at the Musée Denys-Puech in Rodez, France. After finding out that the Rodez cathedral housed a colonial Mexican easel-painting of Guadalupe, Montoya decided to bridge time, space, and representational convention by transporting overseas an altar installation enshrining Chicano prison tattoos of the Virgin. Historically and globally, tattoos are perhaps the most politically loaded form of visual vernacular, nurtured in the United States of today for example by gang members in Mexican American barrios, which notoriously provide an outsized proportion of the incarcerated population throughout the country. The grim experience of prison life behind the statistics is not immediately readable in Montoya’s aesthetically compelling installation. The Virgin of Guadalupe decorating the inmate’s back is encircled by smaller color photographs that depict patches of the blue sky, bunches of red “Castilian” roses, and tattooed religious signs on the backs and arms of other models. At the base of the 305 x 91 centimeter photo-mural, Montoya has assembled a typical Mexican American home altar, complete with a hand-woven blanket, votive candles, and testimonial offerings. After the exhibition in France, the installation was purchased by and put on display in the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. There it turned, indeed, into an altar for the memory of the dead inmate when his relatives frequented the museum to leave offerings at the foot of the installation. 5

First part of the essay discusses Montoya’s photo-mural and the whole installation in the context of so-called pinto discourse, drawing specifically upon two studies: Ben V.
Olguín’s “Tattoos, Abjection, and the Political Unconscious: Toward a Semiotic of the Pinto Visual Vernacular” and Susan A. Philips’ “Gallo’s Body: Decoration and Damnation in the Life of a Chicano Gang Member.”  

Olguín defines the Spanish masculine colloquial noun *pinto* as an “in-group moniker used to distinguish one’s self from the general convict population. It is racially, ethnically, and culturally specific.” So as to theorize his topic as an efficient counter-hegemonic practice, he employs various oppositional discourses related to Fredric Jameson’s concept, the *political unconscious* (1981), claiming that

*Pinto (Intellectuals)* deploy their prison-enhanced oppositional consciousness – a sensibility linked to the political unconscious of the Chicano community through such specific signifying practices as *Tatuteando* – in the service of the subordinated populations located in *barrios*, prisons and various other sites of struggle throughout the “Southwestern” and other parts of the United States, and the world at large.

Informed by various theorists of color as well as by Michel Foucault, Olguín thus syntheticizes the pinto discourse – including tattoos, poems, drawings on envelopes, and *pañol* cloths – under the rubric, *theory of praxis*, i.e., a collective form of resistance by an underprivileged ethno-racial community. Meanwhile he skims over the grimmest underpinnings of this political unconscious and the less savory every-day practices that mark gang solidarity in barrios and prisons.

Susan Philips, on the contrary, views the practice of prison tattooing in a completely negative light, as “self-damnation” and a dire obstacle in the social world outside of the prison, emphasizing the social setbacks and the impossibility of the expected “reformation” of ex-convicts “decorated” with tattoos. She contends that

Gallo’s tattoos emerge as agents of damnation most clearly in the final stages of his story, when he was striving to move beyond the gang and prison life. I met him during a time when his tattoos had finally brought him to his knees. He was considering somber options that included suicide by overdose. It was just eight days before another incarceration would engulf him, an eight year stretch to which he felt his own body had condemned him.

Philips asserts that Michel de Certeau’s concept, “machinery of representation,” which he uses to explain bodily marking in its socio-political context, can become a self-made “machinery of repression,” that “tattoo creates aliens, where symbols are oddly cast as both self and other on a surface that mediates inside and outside worlds.”

Both Olguín and Philips formulate their arguments around the life experiences of those (ex-)pintos, Salinas and Gallo, respectively, with whom they had been in touch over a longer period of time. This circumstance has its pros and cons. On the one hand, the tattooed Chicanos introduced in their studies address the reader as real individuals, whose art and life stories poignantly articulate the political complexity of permanent bodily marking that simultaneously challenges and reinforces social stratification. On the other hand, how much are these stories,
almost at the opposite extremes on the spectrum between good and evil, able to translate the suppressive mechanisms affecting Chicano prison experience, including the practice of tattooing, and to extrapolate the paradoxical import of tattoos to the people involved? How do they configure the Chicano community, its dynamics and location in the larger society? How do the essays relate to Delilah Montoya’s relocation of the pinto discourse?

Pinto tattoos are part and parcel of the communal barrio imagery, and therefore, remembering Montoya’s sustained interest in imagining and documenting the Chicano community, it appears perfectly consistent that she chose to use the tattoo theme, with all of its paradoxes, to further elaborate on her ideas about communal representation. Her art work, however, does not highlight the pinto depicted as an individual or even as a personification of his community; even though we know his name – Martínez, his face, age, and “voice” remain suppressed. Instead, he “lends” his skin, complete with hair, nails, and pores, to the photographer, enabling her to appropriate de Certeau’s “machinery of representation” and, while eschewing reification as well as defamation, to explore the spiritual power of mythological/religious metaphors of her choice.

The First Skin

FRANZ KAFKA

Franz Kafka’s short story, “In the Penal Colony,” describes the plight of a well-meaning explorer who, by invitation, has to witness the tortuous end of a sophisticated execution apparatus, which kills the condemned by slowly piercing his body with the needles writing his crime on his skin. The scene takes place on an anonymous colonial island under an eroding military rule. Designed by the old Commandant, the apparatus is now operated by his last devoted disciple, who knows its sophisticated functionings. This time, however, due to the lack of new parts, the machine fails to perform its task, and the disgraced officer turns in his own body to serve as parchment for the needles’ inscriptions. His hopes for spiritual redemption by way of painful death fail in a gruesome way as the machine starts to clatter and then falls into pieces, leaving his body hanging above a pit of blood. Thus the promised transcendence illuminated only the face of the unwitting victim of the machine, who deciphered the script with his wounds, while its operator missed the secret knowledge of the code. So, according to Kafka, the body can be written on and it can also do the reading; yet it cannot mediate transcendental knowledge while alive.

Like in Kafka’s penal colony, so too in Michel Foucault’s prison (a panopticon building designed for the sole purpose of surveillance), the docile, inert body replaces the subject in a social system based on obedience regulated by social institutions rather than by the
power of ideology. Olguín’s well-meaning essay, while making use of Foucauldian metaphors, purports to reverse the philosopher’s utterly deterministic view on subjectivities and their meager prospective to dodge the watch tower of the panopticon. In short, Olguín’s strategy aims to halt the grinding of the machine by setting up a system of correspondence where the omnipotent eye of the watch tower, geared to exercise total control over the prison community, is undercut by the “counter-surveillance” operations of the prisoners themselves, engaged in a sustained collaborative effort to provide the adequate tools, protection, and concealment during the process of tattoo making. However, the regimented organization required for a successful execution of a tattoo and the ensuing enhancement of the convict’s currency, his body, within the material as well as social economy of the prison turns the tattoo practice into the mirror image of the same system of repression. This system works to maintain itself through the appropriation of convicts’ bodies for economic profit and to perpetuate its power structures through the insemination of the image of the convict’s body permanently “criminalized” by signs of inherent deviancy and immorality.

Therefore, any attempt to unambiguously elevate prison tattoos as the paramount vehicle of political consciousness and empowerment is inevitably ridden by the paradox caused by their dualistic nature. Historian Mark Gustafson describes this double bind in the following:

It is precisely this ambivalent nature of tattoos – first applied as punishment and intended to signify criminality and degradation, but then seen by those so marked and their comrades as positive group symbols – that brings us back to the present day where the discussion began. In modern Western society, the association of tattoos with defamation – the perpetual stigma – persists, in the eyes and minds of many if not most of those on the outside. For the insiders, the tattooed and their sympathizers (who have yet to submit to the needle), it is a mark worn with pride, a sign of belonging, the positive connotations of which are strengthened by the negative opinions of the majority.

Taking a cue from anthropological studies on tribal tattoos, Olguín, nevertheless, proceeds to prove that their role as sophisticated communal identifiers and self-inscribed sign-posts of personal histories would counteract their detrimental effects in the larger social world. By doing so, he also relocates Chicano communities from their mostly urban, post-industrial environment to the territory of the “tribal” other, determined by antiquated notions of originality and inherent difference. The iconic Pinto, in his writing, is thus singled out as the prototypical subject of the Chicano struggle for social justice.

Though otherwise oppositional to Olguín’s interpretation of pinto tattoos, Susan Philips’ argument is grounded in the similar individualistic premise. This anchors the subjectivity of the convict in his own personal choices and qualities, ultimately spinning his life toward either empowerment through “reaching a higher level of political consciousness,” like Salinas, or recurring incarceration due to an inability to reform, like Gallo. In short, according to Philips, Gallo damned himself – his tattoos “brought him to his knees” – and for that reason he was again “engulfed” by the prison. Consistent with this rationalization, the
essay focuses on his physical wounds and mental “pathology” (i.e., excessive interest in porn and drugs), further marking his body with abject and illicit morality. Thus identified, his failure to employ his artistic talent for successful assimilation and redemption through economic integration seems only natural, rather than due to the disciplinary forces coding his body. Rather like the Mexican Nobel-prize winner Octavio Paz, offended by the “pathology” of the pachuco youths’ flamboyant sartorial style, \(^{16}\) Philips gets quite mesmerized by her own repulsion and – instead of presenting an analysis of how the institutional system regenerates itself through the convict’s body – ends up asserting the normalcy of an “unmarked” body, devoid of the blemishes of undesired identifications.

Olguín and Philips rely on the assumed verification of “truth” by the factual pinto body, already established in widely circulated images and texts about Chicano convicts and their art work, and on the reading of their subjects’ personal testimonies as fixed signs of identity capable of unambiguously accounting for their personal triumphs and failures. Instead of focusing the viewer’s attention on the victims of incarceration, Montoya turns her lens to confront the apparatus itself. Therefore, she composes her work around mixed signs of empowerment, reification, and repression, so as to recontextualize and thus recode the inscription made by the needles. Like her El Sagrado Corazón portraits discussed earlier in the study, the photograph of Martínez implicates (and attenuates) several early traditions of photographic representation, confusing the assumed coherence between photographic form and content. The pinto’s wide shoulders are turned to block the controlling look of the conventional police mug shot, which thus becomes deprived of its privileged access to decipher every little feature of the inmate’s face for the sake of identification and classification. Also, the hidden face makes it impossible to read into his facial physiognomy any generalized, empirical proof of human character as a self-evident arbitrator of a social “margin” versus the “center,” the implicit objective behind the present day frenzy to identify people by a means of imaging technology. The inmate and the photographer share the same dimly lit space with a heavy grid of bars in the background; yet it is unclear whether they stand behind or in front of those bars. It also remains unclear whether the inmate was handcuffed when he left his cell or for the sake of the picture to be taken. The latter case seems more probable since the top part of his prison attire is pulled down over his waist.

Most interestingly, the inmate’s representation also shares some common strategies with the tradition of anthropological and ethnographical fieldwork photography, which associates it with the discourse of the European sciences in the service of the colonial expansion to exotic territories. With their erotic connotations, ethnographic photographs of tattooed, scarred, pierced, or otherwise modified indigenous people appear particularly unsettling for a contemporary viewer. The inmate in La Guadalupana also seems to be framed as if for inspection, disconnected from his natural social environment, and exposed half-naked to the voracious “colonial gaze” unanimously condemned by postcolonial theory. Sometimes, however, the “colonial gaze” fudges. Sometimes it perhaps resides partially in the eye of the beholder, and we are beaconed to take into consideration that there also exist ways of seeing, strategies of representation, and parameters of knowledge other than the one girdled by the most common stereotypes of otherness. This paradigm shift is explored by the publication,
Photography’s Other Histories (2003), which includes a perceptive analysis of the topic by Christopher Wright, writing on Captain Francis R. Barton’s “ethnographic” photography of Papuan girls around the turn of the twentieth century.17

Emphasizing his intention to produce photographs for purely ethnographic usage, Barton not only hand-painted over existing tattoos to make them stand out better on the dark skin of his subjects, but he also altered his glass negatives by drawing squares around the tattooed body parts so as to isolate the skin surface for specifically scientific observation. About a century later, Montoya uses similar interventions in order to create artificial contrast on the inmate’s back. His tattoo of Guadalupe is first traced with a crayon that accentuates its outlines, and then, during the printing process, the Virgin’s background is tanned to “lift up” that particular part of the skin from the otherwise black-and-white surface of the photograph. Thus the image reads not only as a representation of the inmate himself, but also as a recording of a certain kind of performance, the outcome of which is the La Guadalupana installation. So, the question emerges: what is the meaning of this performance and how did it actually happen since it does not seem to emit the kind of signs of looking, fixing, and classifying commonly associated with the processes of photographic appropriation, whether documentary or artistic? What comes out of La Guadalupana if we look at its technical scheme instead of its appearance only?18

Those who try to interpret and recontextualize old photographs often have no choice but to just speculate about the circumstances surrounding the physical act of taking them; we, on the contrary, have the benefit of being able to use informants. Montoya did not herself engage in the over-painting of Martínez’s tattoo; the reinforcement of the Virgin’s contours was made by Mike Ipiotis, a young South Valley aerosol artist who came with her to the Detention Center to help set up the shooting gear. This external detail, I believe, carries vital information about the meaning of the installation as well as about Montoya’s representational strategy as a whole. Throughout her career, Montoya has frequently engaged a number of carefully selected collaborators from her own social environment, who then participate, in various ways, in the planning, modeling, and executing of the art work. Although the final piece always expresses the artist’s personal process, the residue of these relations, negotiations, and common energy that went into the piece lingers on, having a sort of life of its own. In spite of his young age, Mike Ipiotis is a highly regarded community member due to his success as a self-educated mural artist and poet, who escaped the snare of gang life, la vida loca (the crazy life), and therefore uses the barrio autograph, “360º” – a full-turn. Thus his role during the photography session was not only to assist, but also to mediate between the camera and the body it was to capture, to alleviate the possible repercussions of gender dynamics in the situation which, symbolically, reiterated the moment of the actual needle work, and to discharge the positive energy of the tattoo as a sign in a specific system of communal signification of which both men were part.

The repercussion of gender is a glaringly under-analyzed and suppressed area in the studies about pintos and pinto art perhaps because the writer easily winds up blaming the victim.19 Philips, stricken by physical discomfort, does not know what to make of it, whereas Olguín recognizes the rampant sexism of the pinto imagery in a “politically correct” manner
but soon drops the topic without finding any convincing way to account for it. Instead, the individuality of the convict and the aspirations of the U.S. penal system to suppress it – to turn him into a non-entity, as Jimmy Baca puts it – is consistently identified as an attack against and a loss of the convict’s personal sovereignty-cum-masculinity in such expressions as “the emasculation drama of the men’s penitentiary” and “their individual and collective ‘emasculating’ and effacement as speaking subjects.” Consequently, the fear of the annihilation of the speaking subject is inflicted through the stereotypical idiom of male sexuality and gender dichotomy. The Virgin’s image on the convict’s back protects him against flogging and demasculinization by rape; tattoos manifest defilement and “damage” done to the bodies regarded as state property; tattooed images of voluptuous women function as a homosocial bond between incarcerated and emblazoned men across their social and racial hierarchies, affirming hegemonic masculinity that, after the prison sentence, can be restored by their wives and girlfriends in the barrio by becoming pregnant. Internalized and enacted in daily practices, this gendered discourse thus naturalizes the violent power relations inherent in the appropriation of bodies (and spaces) at large. What is more, it transports into the convict’s community the antagonistic stricture of the prison system, determined by the territorial markings that also characterize the Pinto Subject in Olguín’s essay.

While pointing out the pachucos’ (older equivalents to the modern day gang members, cholos) “phallocentric notion of empowerment,” Olguín’s reification of the Pinto Subject reverberates with similar atavism of which he accuses those 1970s’ intellectuals who romanticized the image of the Pachuco, the defiant Mexican American hero/victim of the wartime era. Already in 1991, in fact, Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino and John Tagg’s seminal essay, “The Pachuco’s Flayed Hide: The Museum, Identity, and Buenas Carras,” proposed a criticism of this self-same male symbol resurrected as the essentialized proto-subject of La Raza and charged with primordial associations as a medium for instinctive or unconscious powers. Their criticism could well be applied to the interpretations of the pinto discourse, too. Conducting the traffic of communication between the inside and the outside worlds, both unusual dressing styles (e.g., the pachucos’ “zoot suits”) and prison tattoos bestow upon a person a certain measure of control over his own self-definition, but, on the other hand, they often stipulate rather strict social boundaries to its expression. Montoya’s work acknowledges the impossibility of consolidating unproblematically the ideal of seeing persons as effects of community affiliations (inferred by the concept of the political unconscious) with the individualistic ideals of personal autonomy and self-possession that characterize the pinto discourse. Metaphorically removing his “perpetual stigma” and overwriting his skin with the help of photographic technology, Montoya unleashes the body of the inmate to float outside of this paradoxical discursive field, offering it to be viewed, reread, and consumed as a constructed image, a work of art – not as the portrait of Felix Martínez, though, but as an image of el guadalupano, a pilgrim and a follower of the Virgin of Guadalupe cult. The artist’s fascination with the ability of the camera to trace the minutest detail of the inmate’s skin, his hands in particular, thus betrays a desire to dare the panopticon with its own optical tools and to provide the body of el guadalupano with a transformed inscription, the second skin conceived by the religious imaginary.
The Second Skin

Unlike the first, “real” skin whose modifications aim at projecting the presumably unmediated inside onto the outside and “freezing” the person’s identity on the visible surface of the body, the second skin acts as a more permeable surface of transformation, adding further layers of meaning and commuting them between the interior of a person and the world outside. The absolutism of the first skin breaks down exactly at the same moment when the unfinished tattoo on Martínez’s back becomes metaphorically tailored by Ipiotis’ crayon and Montoya’s photographic manipulation, and therefore it ceases to primarily signify the perpetual stigma of criminality, the dualistic quality of skin inscriptions, and the emblem of rebellious masculinity. Henceforth, various permutations of the second skin dominate the *La Guadalupana* installation, which replicates in a giant scale the aesthetic conventions of the Mexican American home altar, the privileged site of family remembrance. The altar, as a container of meaning in its own right, invites the viewer to look at a larger system of signification and enculturation beyond the construction of sacrificial victimhood, escorting the tattooed skin of the pinto across various geographical locations, cultural practices, and religious mythologies. Thus, embedded within a multitude of meanings hailing from European mystical tradition as well as from indigenous cosmology (as interpreted in Euro-American documents), the normative, unitary body of the tattooed convict becomes possessed by the power of embodied feminine spirituality.

Composed as a home altar, the *La Guadalupana* installation infiltrates the private domain of women into the space of two very different public institutions, the prison and the museum, striving to challenge the parameters of both and turning the art work into a battle field of representational power politics. Handcuffs and the grid of iron bars – the stark symbols of containment, humiliation, and dehumanization – that foil the convict’s torso battle with the signs of the spiritual life force stirred up by the attributes of the Virgin repeated again and again in the form of a halo of roses, spikes, tattooed body parts, and burning candles. Enclosed inside this protective magical circle, the pinto submits his rebellious masculinity, accepting a different inscription, a second skin capable of absorbing the brutality of the needles. Although his physical body, marked as a site of control and disposed as a defunct piece of state property, did not endure, transmuted into an image and a site of worship it continues to carry powerful meanings and take issue against the system which ultimately failed to destroy his selfhood. The dynamics of the home altar as a public space of remembrance, continuity, and cultural reproduction thus dismantle the humiliation rites of the prison that prescribed the pinto’s body to manifest absolute subjection. Instead, he becomes interlinked with other Chicanos modeling in the installation – college students, barrio boys, and a white musician – who carry their tattoos without the stigma of crime.

Assembled for display in the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe in 1999, the installation became a striking public reminder of the prison’s failure to accomplish its job of total disempowerment. Namely, the labor of completing Martínez’s unfinished tattoo was taken up by his relatives and friends, who donated their own offerings, *ofrendas*, to further enhance his
body altar and turned it into an intimate performance of personal mourning and communal regeneration. These ofrendas and other devotional objects not only infused the institutional space of the museum with religious connotations associated with Catholic ceremonies, but also invoked the aesthetic sensibility of indigenous faith, particularly the *Día de los Muertos* practices of celebrating the dead.\(^{29}\) Even in New Mexico, where indigenous as well as Catholic religious iconography is extremely popular and customarily appropriated by artists, this type of paradigmatic breach against the conventional art practices is very unusual. As a kind of storehouse of the legitimate national heritage, the museum stands as a supreme arbiter of cultural values, and therefore Montoya’s installation, once housed inside this institutional setting, becomes significant in unforeseen ways. It speaks for the definition of art divorced from the ideas of essential innovation and formal evolution. It privileges familiarity over alienation, but disguises its specificity behind the façade of common cultural knowledge about traditional religious forms. It sneaks alien elements into the museum’s definition of the consumption of art, inviting the audience to touch the art work, to even alter it, and to give homage not to the artist, or to the “masterpiece,” but to the memory of a community member. It changes the institutional space of the museum into a personal “place,” the meaning of which flows from spontaneous audience participation unmediated by technological interfaces.

The discussion so far has dealt with some rather obvious aspects of the institutional parameters of and their subversions by the installation. In the context of Montoya’s art production as a whole, however, *La Guadalupana* must also be considered as an integral part of her life-long enterprise to understand the paradoxes of her own family heritage within the regional history of religious syncretism. Part of this tradition, as I have already described in the first essay on Montoya’s work, is the reclamation of spiritual (i.e., social and political) power through self-inflicted pain, practiced by the male members of the Penitente brotherhood, whose secret rituals emulate the suffering of Christ (see page 172; endnote 18). The duality of a mystical spiritual/physical experience, and specifically its gendered aspects, has been a thematic undercurrent in most of Montoya’s art production, starting from the installation *Saints and Sinners* (1992) and running through the series of portraits in *El Sagrado Corazón*, of which three photographs in particular inflect the discourse of religious ecstasy and sacrifice. The first is titled *Misterio Triste*, the second its twin image, *Misterio Triste Suéltame*, and the third, *Homage to Frida Kahlo*.\(^{30}\) *Misterio Triste* and *Misterio Triste Suéltame* (figs. 35 and 36, page 292, also discussed on page 176), where Montoya uses her own body as a model, depict the annihilation of selfhood as a result of identification with the torment of Christ, and hence they verge on medieval mystical texts, which locate the site of suffering and religious ecstasy in the female saint’s body. Meanwhile, the witness- voyeur’s gaze, which actually predates and construes the enactment of mystical communion and its meaning, remains ambivalent.\(^{31}\) This tension, I believe, provides a key for translating the complex workings of gender in Montoya’s images.

Contrary to medieval discourse on the saint’s suffering and sacrifice, the pinto as well as penitente discourses (the former seeming to reflect the latter in many ways) elevate the unequivocally masculine body as instrumental in mediation between mortality and the divine, thus creating an intermission in the tradition of negotiating the gendered spiritual power in
Christian theology. In other words, the convict’s apotheosis falls short of incorporating the gender tension essential in the visual imagery of the Catholic saints. The ultimate meaning of his personal suffering and identification with Christ, therefore, is not translatable through a bisexual sign system but remains within the confines of his inner experience, the communication of which to the world outside becomes thwarted by the discursive economy of the prison. On the other hand, read as a performance for the voyeur (an aspect always crucial in representations), the convict’s suffering trespasses into the realm of the symbolic and inevitably also stays put within the symbolic, devoid of access to the sphere of pre-individual and semiotic implicated in the usage of the term “political unconscious” that Olguín’s essay is arguing for.

Producing a parallel effect of epistemological preclusion, modern writings on tattoos, for the most part, either invoke their affinity with paganism or integrate the practice with its history of marking criminality, ignoring its equally age-old usage as an honorary sign in medieval Christian tradition a long time before Europe’s contact with indigenous cultures around the globe.32 “Throughout the medieval period,” claims language historian Juliet Fleming, “it was common practice for pilgrims to have themselves tattooed in Jerusalem, returning home bearing indelible marks as evidence both of their journey and of their commitment to the service of God.”33 And further, “Religious tattooing continued to flourish in the Levant throughout antiquity, and has continued among eastern Christians to the present day,” adds C. P. Jones, globalizing and historicizing the pinto discourse beyond its prison and barrio boundaries.34 This interrupted but lately rediscovered history links pinto tattoos intimately with old penitential practices (including those in New Mexico), which asserted not only the pilgrim’s communion with Christ, but also his subordinate status as a slave and soldier of God. Thus both, the “Mark of Beast” branding the criminal body and the “Badge of Honor” decorating the pilgrim, ultimately act as signs of a chattel, on the one hand pledging immunity against violent encroachment but, on the other hand, also inferring an extreme religious bondage that, in the pinto’s case, seldom transforms to the kind of sovereign agency enjoyed by the Penitente brother.35

Excluded, due to her gender, from the membership of the order of the Penitente brothers as well as from the followers of the cult of La Guadalupana — also exclusively male, Montoya appropriates the pinto image to become the “Holy Other”36 for the female icon of Guadalupe that occupies his “real” skin, predestined for annihilation of which the photograph itself is a proof. Instead of the tattooing needles, the sharp rays of the halo around the Virgin figure rewrite the convict’s back and endow him with the psychological and physical qualities of a mystic, who in medieval tradition was always bi-gendered – the female Soul and the male Lover in one. In Christian iconography this also entailed the bi-gendering of the physical attributes of saints, resulting in soft-featured male saints and de-breasted females with short hair. Furthermore, female genitalia were inferred in the bleeding wounds of Christ, which nurtured the Soul of man.37 In Montoya’s art work, however, the bi-gendering effect operates predominantly at the level of the gaze, for the bi-sexual nature of a mystical performance also preconditions the attributes of the witness-voyeur. As the bearer of the gaze, therefore, the viewer as well as the artist is expected to respond to the ensuing demands of bisexuality, which
emanate from the ideals of Christian mysticism but are violently suppressed in modern society, whose power hierarchy rests on the bipolarization of sex and gender.\textsuperscript{38}

At this point in the discussion, it is illuminating to juxtapose \textit{La Guadalupana} with the photo-portrait titled \textit{El Aborto: In Homage to Frida Kahlo} (fig. 27, page 288, also discussed on page 174) from the \textit{El Sagrado Corazón} series. Both images are composed in order to facilitate spectatorial contemplation of the other’s suffering, albeit the latter marks the site of suffering as feminine, which, in fact, means the body of Frida Kahlo. The Mexican artist, handicapped in her youth after a bus accident which left her spinal column severely damaged, suits the role of a suffering female mystic marvelously well; however, her personal predicament is not the focus of this essay. Instead, what concerns us in the image is the depiction of the Virgin of Guadalupe reflected in the oval-shape mirror hanging on the wall. Traditionally in paintings, the mirror image of the “real” exterior before the canvass often showed the artist himself working on the painting. From the spectator’s point of view, the familiar experience of facing from the canvass the intense gaze of the artist, sitting in front of the mirror and painting his/her own portrait, reinforces the symbolic valence of the mirror as the soothsayer and of the artist as privy to the optical exposure of knowledge.\textsuperscript{39} The convex mirror in \textit{In Homage to Frida Kahlo} points to this representational convention in a rather ambiguous fashion. Symbolically, the potency of the camera lens to capture “truth” is echoed by the capacity of the mirror to reflect something outside of the image field onto the inside and thus reveal the image of the photographer herself – \textit{an image identical with the Virgin of Guadalupe}. In spite of the artist’s oblique self-divination,\textsuperscript{40} the suffering mystic Frida Kahlo’s ecstatic liaison with the goddess falters because it still has to take place within the masculine place of domination (jealously guarded by Diego Rivera’s stern face). Consequently, the power of her body to articulate spiritual knowledge turns out to be more limited than that of Felix Martínez’s, whose equally real suffering was, of course, never discredited as hysteria. Hence, he became the ideal bearer of the “true icon” of authenticity.\textsuperscript{41}

Martínez’s emblazonment brings us back to the issue of tattoos, which in Western tradition, according to Jane Caplan, have functioned like a “promiscuous traveling sign” without an active role in social reproduction. Therefore, “the European tattoo has been free to roam at will, so to speak, and opens itself to a variety of appropriations and inversions” and has “typically [been] represented in official discourse as something that has arrived from somewhere else – from another culture, another country, another epoch.”\textsuperscript{42} Although Mesoamerican symbolism does not conspicuously appear in \textit{La Guadalupana}, it is very much present in Montoya’s own statements about the meaning of her art, and this, again, links the installation with her earlier production and her interest in the history and mythology of the Aztecs. The overlapping of and the dialogue between Christian mysticism and indigenous cosmology have been significant features of Chicano art since its inception, but, contrary to early, rather romanticized \textit{indigenismo}, most contemporary artists use it as a vehicle for imagining a non-European cultural ethos and formulating their political stand thereupon, rather than to claim \textit{bona fide} Aztec lineage. Says Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, “In contrast to the more direct or didactic iconography of other artists, especially in the earlier decades of the Chicano Movement, Montoya’s more recondite handling of Mesoamerican traditions posits a different
relationship between artist and spectator, as well as a rethinking of the community-building dimension of Chicana/o art.”

For the sake of aesthetic, intellectual, and philosophical cross-fertilization, Montoya wholeheartedly embraces the conceptual possibilities of the appropriation and adaptation process that centuries ago permanently changed both European and indigenous worldviews, albeit that the fundamental nature of this process remains largely obscure even for today’s researchers. Montoya herself explains that

The Guadalupe, a bicultural icon, denotes not only the international baroque aesthetic [endnote] that was immersed in Catholicism but references central parameters of Náhuatl thought [endnote]. […] The señal (sign or proof) that Juan Diego had spoken to Guadalupe or Our Lady Tonantzin [endnote] is her graphic appearance on his cloak, known as a tilmatli or tilma. Like the Guadalupe herself, the collective understanding of the tilma has remained intact throughout the centuries and resonates in the consciousness of Xicano society.

The tilma references clothing as a symbolic "magical alteration of reality" (Kubler 1985, 105) and a metaphor for the second skin. The first skin of course is nakedness and the second skin conceals that state. In addition, for Náhuatl society the second skin evokes the Xipe Totec's flayed skin garment. This ritual garment was presented to the Amerindian deity following sacrificial rituals in which a boy and girl were flayed. The Xipe Totec was considered the male equivalent to the earth and moon goddess. […] Interestingly, the girl, who represented the sacrificed Earth Mother/Tonatzin, wore a tilma made of maguey before her flaying.44

As Yarbro-Bejarano notes, Montoya’s work and statements explore the “layered historical resonances of skin as/and sacred garment,” which reveal compelling similarities between the flayed skins in Aztec sacrificial rituals, Juan Diego's tilma, the shroud of Turin, Verónica’s veil, and contemporary tattoos of the Virgin of Guadalupe.45 While most contemporary controversies about each phenomenon focus on the attempts by their believers and disbelievers alike to prove something definite about their date and origin, our interest is to see what kind of meanings these fragmented, mostly popular or vernacular histories carry to the present day, the time period at the heart of historical investigation (and art) in any case.46 Instead of the “true icon” of universalizing episteme, at stake then is the impact of its representation on the voyeur, that is, which icon proves to be the most spectacular, transfixing, and powerful.

Montoya’s evocation of the flayed skin of sacrificial victims, who in Mesoamerican visionary thinking paid with their blood the dept humankind owed to its gods for providing food, is powerful, indeed, for it dips deep into the unconscious anxieties about human nature and its relation to divinity, mortality, and beyond. The fact that – besides enemy male warriors – about one third of the sacrificial victims were women, who did not die atop the Aztec temple voluntarily, has been regularly ignored even by feminist scholars perhaps struck silent in the face of such sophisticated mass murder.47 In view of what we learn about these ritual killings of young women by male priests from Diego Sahagún’s Florentine Codex, 48 it seems justified
to make an effort to deduce something about the nexus of gender and power constructions in Mesoamerican society. Yet, all the indigenous voices that speak in Sahagún’s and other Spaniards’ codices belong to males – women’s accounts about their own lives do not exist, but there is some evidence indicating that in everyday life power relations between men and women were not that clean cut. What looks evident, though, is that women’s symbolic metamorphosis into goddesses through ritual death mainly served the military interests of the warrior empire.\textsuperscript{49} In sum, “what really happened” is neither here nor there – at least for us – for what we mostly learn from history is about the present, not about the past. For Montoya, the foremost significance of the Xipe Totec ritual lies in its power to embody and unite female and male energies and agencies within the concept of divine mystery, an enterprise that today does not look much easier than it did in medieval/pre-colonial times. Choosing to read the Guadalupe myth as a cultural intermediary between Amerindians and Europeans rather than as a ruse by the Franciscan friars to speed up Indian conversion, Montoya continues,

It is believed that without the Guadalupe myth that bridged the Spanish and Native American cultures, an absolute holocaust might have ensued. Her acceptance by the Catholic Church opened the door for the conversion of the Amerindian people by extending the spiritual views of both societies.

In light of this history, the contemporary tattooing of the Guadalupe onto the backs of cholos [endnote] is not an odd coincidence – that is, if one trusts the collective consciousness. […] In tattooing Guadalupe’s image onto their backs, youths reference the ritualistic wearing of Our Lady. In following the myth, the tattooed cholo can be thought of as the Xipe Totec who is the male aspect of Tonantzin. This act binds together both the male and female energies of Our Lady.\textsuperscript{50}

Montoya’s choice of imagery involves further complexity, though. If the sacrificial practices in Aztec society were conceived and administered by the ruling elite of priests and leaders for public purpose, as suggested by Esther Pasztory in Aztec Art (1983), then what happened in the private sphere outside of the temple areas where the ritual spectacles took place? Pasztory speculates about the role of class distinctions, which produced the pessimistic, individualistic worldview of the military aristocracy not perhaps shared by the commoners, who “placed the continuity of the group above the destiny of the individual.” \textsuperscript{51} Accordingly, the common folk’s religious practices were organized around everyday expressions of piety and spirituality in order to ensure the well-being of their kin and the recurrent cycles of the solar year. Rural Indian villages today retain many aspects of these rather modest ceremonies – often under the guise of misunderstood Christian teachings – the most enduring of which are home altars and the altars assembled for the celebration of the dead. The colonial chronicles did not describe domestic religious expressions because they were women’s business then as they are now. When adopted by contemporary artists, however, these expressions have a potential to overwhelm and subvert the hegemonic discourses of sacrifice – as they do in Montoya’s installation – whether these discourses speak in the name of the universe, the empire, the nation, or the community.\textsuperscript{52}
Most contemporary tattooing in Western countries reflect a kind of corporeal absolutism, which rests upon sophisticated technology and/or formidable display of physical endurance and will power, seeking to construct a strong enough barricade against various social/institutional mechanism of control but ending up in rigid fantasies of identity and bodily autonomy.53 The pinto in the La Guadalupana installation has transcended this kind of corporeal absolutism, the ultimate nature of which restates Foucault’s ideas about the body as an essentially inert tool or target of socio-political manipulations. Against the Foucauldian grain, Montoya writes with light rather than with needles, providing the pinto with a “second skin” that precludes the regressive aspects of Chicano aesthetics and social practices without, at the same time, undermining the power of tattoos as a counter-hegemonic discourse.

Incorporating the body of the convict within the mystical and feminine forms of both European and Mesoamerican religious practices, with their embodied expressions in particular, the installation creates a multiple skin made by light. This skin is suffused with desires and drives of Nietzschean intensity, yet oriented toward producing a processual subject that marks the site of ongoing communal relations and negotiations rather than the site of individual autonomy. “Photographs, like tattoos, bring into being other selves, including spirit selves,” proposes Christopher Wright, implying that – like tattoos in so-called primitive societies – photographs today can function as makers, manifestations, and evidence of significant social affiliations that span over time and space.54 As we know, photographs can also evidence the indelibility of death, in the case of La Guadalupana, the death of Felix Martínez; nonetheless, in the absence of his physical body, whose hair, nails, and pores inscribe the photographic surface with amazing clarity, the presence of his bi-gendered spirit becomes arresting indeed.

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2 Ibid.
4 According to Delilah Montoya, the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the icon itself; and her altar are considered female; hence the feminine term, la guadalupana. However, the followers of the cult are mostly men, and they are called by the masculine term, el guadalupano. E-mail message in February 2005.
7 Olguín, 1997, 166.
8 Ibid., 194. Olguin defines tatotecando as the transgressive bodily act of making tattoos (page 167). His conceptualization of tattoos is very much in tune with Juliet Fleming’s observation that “[w]ithin tattoo’s new representational economy, its traditionally marginal social status and its association with ancient or primitive cultures enhance its value as a form of expression whose ‘low’ or atavistic character allows it to function as a

9 Philips, 2001, 358.


11 Quoted in Philips, 2001, 18. Prison regulations reveal the importance placed on the prohibition of all public expressions of identity and the activities connected with them. In regard to this, it is interesting as such that Montoya managed (with help of the Mexican consul in Albuquerque) to acquire a permission to photograph Martínez inside the detention center and consequently disseminate images that destabilized the notion of total control propagated by the system itself.

12 In Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Vintage Books, 1995, 25), Foucault says, “But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.”

13 Olguín describes in intriguing detail the difficulties and dangers involved at the different stages of the process: finding or manufacturing the tools, the secrecy of the tattooing work itself, and the protection the tattooed needs to keep the guards from noticing fresh tattoos (1997, 168-176).

14 It seems to be rather common that prisoners’ practices of self-empowerment recapitulate the practices of the larger social system that subjuga them. In her essay, Abby M. Schrader describes how inmates in the “Russian Frontier,” i.e., Siberia, “quite explicitly classified themselves,” “drew on the corporate language of the Russian social order,” and “by wrestling control over practices associated with official power and reenacting its spectacle, convicts reinforced the idea that they could carve out their opposition to officialdom by assimilating its technologies.” Schrader, “Branding the Other/Tattooing the Self: Bodily Inscription among Convicts in Russia and the Soviet Union,” in Written on the Body (2000) 174-192, see pages 183-186.


16 For an incisive analysis of pachucos, the meaning of their dress, and the negative reaction of Octavio Paz, see Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino and John Tagg, “The Pachuco’s Flayed Hide: The Museum, Identity, and Buenas Carnas” (1991). Paz’s reaction echoes the voice of early 20th-century criminology, which claimed that “the desire to be tattooed was a biological feature of the criminal ‘type,’ a kind of genetic disposition that often came along with a passion for other forms of excessive ornamentation, bodily mutation, strange clothing, and obscure slang.” Christopher Wright, “Supple Bodies: The Papua New Guinea Photographs of Captain Francis R. Barton, 1899-1907,” in Photography’s Other Histories, ed. by Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003) 146-169, 151.

17 Ibid.

18 The term, technical schema, was coined by anthropologist Alfred Gell (Wrapping in Images: Tattooing in Polynesia [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993]) to emphasize the significance of the concrete processes of tattooing and what they entailed. This, of course, comes quite close to the Butlerian thinking of gender performances and the performatve act theory in linguistics. See also Victor Witter Turner, The Anthropology of Performance (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987).

19 Although American society at large glorifies aggressive masculinity, which is shown rather conspicuously in media and popular culture, it is commonplace in social science parlance to pathologize Latino cultures by accusing particularly Mexican and Mexican American men of excessive machismo and sexism.

20 As of late, the most memorable demonstration of gendered tattoo practices seems to be found in Cheech Marin’s film, Born in East LA, from the 1980s. Disguised as a tattoo artist, the protagonist, Rudy, redesigns in a rather gruesome fashion the tattoo of a convict enraged by the assumed adultery of his wife whose image decorated his chest.


22 In an interview in September 2003, Laura Aguilar noted that ex-convicts frequently seek to impregnate a woman as soon as possible after their release in the need of covering the humiliating experience of same-sex rape and to prove to themselves and to the community that they are not homosexuals.

23 Like Chicano epic poetry, Salinas’ verses also claim territorial ownership through the invocation of his own body as a sole landowner in the barrio and the personification of the Chicano body politic:

my Loma of Austin
my Rose Hill of Los Angeles
my West Side of San Anto
my Quinto of Houston
my Jackson of San Jo
my Segundo of El Paso
my Barelas of Albuquerque
my Westside of Denver
Flats, Los Marcos, Maravilla, Calle Guadalupe,
Magnolia, Buena Vista, Mateo, La Seis, Chiquis,
El Sur, and all Chicano neighborhoods that
now existed and once existed;
somewhere …, someone remembers … (153-66)


24 Ibid., 183.
25 Sánchez-Tranquilino and Tagg, 1991, 99. The stylish pachuco outfit in effect feminized its wearers, and combined with their violent behavior, that seemed particularly disturbing to the public, ethnicity notwithstanding. In Montoya’s work, however, the gender bending of the pinto takes place within the spiritual space of the home altar, which seems to “normalize” its excessive subversiveness through something familiar and acceptable to the viewers.
26 Susan Benson, for example, points out the ambivalence of modern tattoos, whether commercial or non-commercial, by claiming that “[the] tattoo can thus be linked both to the over-valuation of certain aspects of contemporary Western ideas of the self – the idea of autonomy and self-fashioning – and to their transgression.” Benson, “Inscriptions of the Self: Reflections of Tattooing and Piercing in Contemporary Euro-America,” in Written on the Body (2000) 234-254, 251. In spite of Olguín’s objections, even pinto tattoos are part of the “history of tattooing […] thoroughly entangled in the processes of commodification, cultural appropriation and global deracination that many of its more articulate and influential practitioners would oppose” (page 242).
27 It is quite interesting to note how systematically the academic treatises avoid slipping from the discourse of the symbolic (i.e., rational and gendered as male) to the sphere of the semiotic (i.e., “pre-conscious” and gendered as female) that obviously dominates the religious imaginary of prison tattoos. Nevertheless, Olguín tends to play with the ideas of French feminists by using the term, écriture, for example.
28 The victimhood symbolism that Olguín (pages 186-187) associates with the tattoo of Christ on Salinas’ back does not, as such, change the parameters of Salinas’ phallocentric masculinity; rather, the tattoo rearticulates humiliation and physical pain as the signs of ultimate moral superiority displayed by the victim in face of his victimizer. According to Hamish Maxwell-Stuart and Ian Duffield, victim symbolism is one of the most powerful means by inmates to turn the tables: “the more degradation inflicted on the flayed bodies, the more moral power the targets of abuse can draw from their tormentors.” Maxwell-Stuart and Duffield, “Skin Deep Devotions: Religious Tattoos and Convict Transportations to Australia,” in Written on the Body (2000) 118-136, 132.
29 For an insightful discussion on Chicano altars, see the essays of Elizabeth López and Víctor Sorell in Imágenes e historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar Inspired Art, exhibition catalogue ed. by Constance Cortez for the Tufts University Gallery, Medford, Massachusetts and Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, California (Hong Kong: The Mexican Museum, 1999).
30 Although 20th-century mysticism among European literati, as best exemplified by French writer Georges Bataille (a Catholic convert), shared with many contemporary artists (including Montoya) the concern about breaking the boundaries of the self-sufficient individual, their ends and means to achieve this goal were deeply incongruous. While Bataille’s understanding of history and political action is essentially bound with his personal physical experience, symbolized, in its extreme, by his intense contemplation of a photograph showing a horribly tortured Chinese man, Montoya complicates the troubled relation with the “Holy Other” (to use Bataille’s term) by problematizing her own position as the imaginary subject of suffering as well as the witness of it. See Amy M. Hollywood, Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) pages 25-35, for an illuminating discussion on Bataille’s philosophy and the reactions to it by his contemporaries Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maurice Blanchot.
31 I owe thanks to María-Kristina Pérez for her insights about medieval Christian mysticism, the role of feminine suffering, and the bi-gendering of the witness-voyeur therein. Her comments greatly helped my understanding of Catholic symbolism and its relation to gender. Pérez, “The Site of Suffering: Gender and Ecstatic Performance,” presentation at the 2nd Christina Conference of Women’s Studies, University of Helsinki, Finland, March 2005. In this and the following paragraphs, I have also drawn ideas from Amy M. Hollywood (2002).
33 Fleming, 2000, 79.

Ibid., 5-6. As a privileged member of the brotherhood, an individual Penitente can be considered a sovereign subject; however, all the members – and particularly the younger ones – were subjugated under the absolute order of the elder brothers. The imposition of a religion-based hierarchy upon the rural communities in New Mexico is interestingly argued in Michael P. Carroll, *The Penitente Brotherhood: Patriarchy and Hispanic Catholicism in New Mexico* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002). Even today in northern New Mexico, the reputation of the religious leader Padre Martinez of Taos looms large over the region.

For a theoretically sophisticated discussion on the term, “Holy Other,” and the meaning of suffering associated with the body of Christ, see Hollywood (2002) 86-110.

Some Mexican American artists have, in fact, associated female genitalia with the shape of Guadalupe, which is perhaps not so far fetched considering the obvious morphological similarity. Interestingly, in the Finnish folklore tradition women’s genital power, their “väki” (“folk”), had a double connotation: it was often considered harmful but also a means of protecting the community and a formidable weapon against the enemy. See Laura Stark-Arola, *Magic, Body and Social Order: The Construction of Gender through Women’s Private Rituals in Traditional Finland*, Studia Fennica Folkloristica 5, Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki (Tampere, Finland: Tammer-paino Oy, 1998).

Pérez, 2005.

The mirror plays a fascinating role in the story of Western art. The Renaissance pictorial tradition replicated the historical period’s obsession with accurate scientific observation, and so mirrors, lenses, and all kinds of perspectival devices invented to enhance visual perception are found in Renaissance paintings, too. A painted image of a convex mirror duplicated the illusory world of the picture plane, enclosing the interior, exposing the exterior, and positing the viewer somewhere inside this unstable space. My discussion on the mirror in the *Homage to Frida Kahlo* image owes to Foucault’s controversial analysis of Velasquez’s painting, *Las Meninas* (Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of The Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage Books, 1973, c1970).

This, apropos, is in keeping with art historian Holy Barnet’s claim that Mexican American women – unlike men – feel that the spiritual resides inside of their bodies rather than in religious texts (lecture at UNM, 1998). This is a rather radical stance for generally in the U.S. spirituality appears overwhelmingly textual and based on the firm belief in the Bible, which, however, does not impede people from interpreting and reinterpreting the text in extremely individualistic ways, even without having actually read the Bible.

According to the Christian legend, Veronica dried Christ’s face on the road to Calvary, and so an image identical with his face was impressed on the cloth. The name “Veronica” seems to be a derivation from the Greek and Latin words “vera icona” (“real icon” or “authentic image”), which in the Middle Ages referred to Christ’s miraculous images, indicating also the true knowledge of the divine. Retrieved on March 10, 2005 from http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/stv02001.htm.

Caplan, 2000, xv.


Particularly the shroud of Turin seems to stir up endless popular interest, which is proven by the large number of websites dedicated to its mysteries. The same applies to Veronica’s veil and Juan Diego’s tilma, to some extent, whereas the flayed skins of Christian pilgrims appear less engaging to public imagination. In Ireland, according to Charles W. MacQuarrie, historical chronicles were made out of the flayed skins of deceased saints who had the Bible and other texts tattooed on their backs. Skin thus literally became a receptacle of knowledge and means of cultural preservation. MacQuarrie, “Insular Celtic Tattooing: History, Myth and Metaphor,” in *Written on the Body* (2000) 32-45, see page 41.

Ibid., 5-6. As a privileged member of the brotherhood, an individual Penitente can be considered a sovereign subject; however, all the members – and particularly the younger ones – were subjugated under the absolute order of the elder brothers. The imposition of a religion-based hierarchy upon the rural communities in New Mexico is interestingly argued in Michael P. Carroll, *The Penitente Brotherhood: Patriarchy and Hispanic Catholicism in New Mexico* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002). Even today in northern New Mexico, the reputation of the religious leader Padre Martinez of Taos looms large over the region.

For a theoretically sophisticated discussion on the term, “Holy Other,” and the meaning of suffering associated with the body of Christ, see Hollywood (2002) 86-110.
Carrasco’s conclusive remarks about the sacrifice of Aztec women sound ominous, indeed, particularly in regard to contemporary U.S. debates about women’s reproductive rights in convergence with the debates about the U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. He says, “What is being masked when a male teotl ixiptla wears and carries a female ‘thigh-skin mask’ out to the frontier to provoke war? It will take future studies to help us understand these codes, meanings, and performances in which female powers, bodies, and genders were managed by males in strange ways that drew the regeneration of plants into the purpose of war” (page 219). Besides the collection where Carrasco’s essay is published (Representing Aztec Ritual [2002]), my sources about Aztec life and rituals include Inga Clendinnen, Aztecs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Kay Almere Read, Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998); and Esther Pasztory, Aztec Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983).

Montoya, 2002, 184.

Pasztory, 1983, 63. She continues, “The ruler and the military aristocracy had the mission of supporting the universe, accomplished through the ceremony of warfare and the acquisition of victims for blood sacrifice.”

For information about these altar and ceremonial traditions appropriated by Mexican American artists, see Imágenes e historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar Inspired Art, exhibition catalogue ed. by Constance Cortez (Italy: Tufts University Gallery, 1999) and Ceremony of Spirit: Nature and Memory in Contemporary Latino Art, exhibition catalogue (San Francisco: The Mexican Museum, 1993).

Says Susan Benson, “The body thus acts not only as a site of personal creativity, but also as a touchstone of authenticity and truth […] Pain, like the tattoo itself, is something that cannot be appropriated; it is yours alone; it stands outside of the system of signification and exchange that threatens the autonomy of the self […] Now, none of this looks much like the flexible, mutable personhood celebrated in so many post-modern texts: on the contrary what seems to be central is fear of fragmentation, anxiety about the boundaries and about the relationship between will and self, the body is the battleground in which such anxieties are played out” (2000, 251-252).

Wright, 2003, 165.
Presence in Absence: *Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in Vogue* and *If Walls Could Speak / Si Las Paredes Hablaran* by Celia Álvarez Muñoz

The fondness of dress among the women is excessive, and is sometimes their ruin. A present of a fine mantel, or a necklace or pair of earrings gains the favor of a greater part. Nothing is more common than to see a woman living in a house of only two rooms, with the ground for a floor, dressed in spangled satin shoes, silk gown, high comb, gilt if not gold, earrings and necklace. If their husbands do not dress them well enough, they will soon receive presents from others.

Henry Dana (1840) ¹

It was tremendously inspiring to learn about Dolores Hayden’s remarkable project of recovering the hidden histories of working-class ethnic communities and women in Los Angeles. Her publication, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (1995), grows into a compelling political manifesto on the significance of bringing together communities with social historians, artists, and urban designers so as to recreate the meaning of lived places and vernacular aesthetics in the urban landscape. In contrast to the largely hidden history of women in the downtown Los Angeles manufacturing zone, maquiladoras in Juárez have drawn a lot of public attention since 1998 – myriads of articles in newspapers and journals, interviews on TV, websites, art exhibitions, books, films, et cetera. In spite of all this, or perhaps partially because of it, doing background research on women’s lives in Juárez tends to produce a rather ambiguous emotional reaction – disbelief, anger, sadness, and frustration. It therefore seemed to me too distressing, if not even misleading, to follow my original plan and discuss Álvarez Muñoz’s two projects – the artist’s book *If Walls Could Speak* and the *Fibra y Furia* installations – as if they could be contextualized and understood within one “coherent” chronological continuum of the labor history of Mexican (im)migrant women. They cannot, and that is why I prefer to start by unraveling the politics of *Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in Vogue* (1996-2003). The essay will contextualize the installations, first, with feminist readings of contemporary international politics and economy, and second, with some transnational historical observations about women’s labor history in the Americas. Then follows a discussion of the installations in relation to various – often competing – forms of public, academic, and popular discourses that have shaped common understanding of Ciudad Juárez and its inhabitants.

Thus, to take leave with a more optimistic tone, the latter part of the essay will cross the border from Chihuahua to California and step chronologically backward in focusing on the artist’s book, *If Walls Could Speak / Si Las Paredes Hablaran* (1991), about women’s labor activism in Los Angeles around the mid-twentieth century. I argue that the public art project that conceived this book was pivotal in the development of Álvarez Muñoz’s artistic
expression, not only because it instilled in her a lasting fascination with communal art outside of the four walls of museum and gallery spaces, but, more importantly, because the ideals and work processes that evolved during this collaborative project helped the artist to crystallize her ideas and channel her abilities, interests, and ambitions, which rapidly yielded her national and international recognition. In short, her current art production, instead of reiterating contemporary critical theories about the border predicament, embodies the sensibilities of such environmentally, communally, and politically committed authors as Rebecca Solnit and Lucy Lippard. The latter maintains that

\[
\text{[p]ublic art is accessible art of any kind that cares about/challenges/involves and consults the audience for or with whom it is made, respecting community and environment; the other stuff is still private art, no matter how big or exposed or intrusive or hyped it may be.}\]^{2}

Ghosts on Global Stage

DESAPARECIDA

NOMBRE: Guadalupe Luna de la Rosa
Edad: 19 años. Estudiante del I.T.C.J. Características:
Tez Morena, Delgada, Ojos Claros, Cabello Corto (Color Caoba)
Estatura 1.65 Mts. Peso 45 Kg.
Vestía: Blusa Roja y Short Blanco. Desapareció desde el día 30 de Setiembre del 2000 a las 12:00 horas.\textsuperscript{3}

Álvarez Muñoz’s first professional career was in commercial fashion industry, and this experience informed Fibra (fabric), her 1996 installation at the Center for the Arts in San Francisco, which two years later would form part of a larger work called Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in Vogue at the Irving Art Center in Texas (fig. 58 on page 306 shows a 2003 version in the Mexic-arte Museum in Austin, Texas). In this larger version, Álvarez Muñoz gives vent to her horror and fury about the working of globalization on women’s bodies; it is, as the artist puts it, a “pleading cry about how fashion and labor exploit women,” an area “both seductive and repulsive that needs direct confrontation.”\textsuperscript{4} The sway of consumption/seduction ruling the north side of the border feeds on the regime of production/repulsion on the south side of the border, breeding laissez-faire industrial zones and maximizing the profits of international corporations. The artist’s conceptualization of transnational politics of gender does not stop at the border, however. In another interview she lays out the latitude of her thinking, contending that on the global stage of (economic) wars women’s lives cost little:

I don’t think you can separate one from the other. The rape of Bosnian women is no different than the rape going on in the streets in this country. […] I am referring to all
the wars that are tied to the continual subjugation of women or the feminization of poverty that seems like endless layers of fabric and are rooted in the complex web of our social fabrics.\(^5\)

In the comment above, Álvarez Muñoz spells out the main hypothesis of feminist writers who maintain that personal is not only political, but, to an increasing degree, also international. The intricate wirings that negotiate economic relations between nation states, global cities, local peripheries, and capital interest also bargain for the value of human bodies, in particular female bodies. The words of Eduardo Galeano, an Uruguayan essayist, journalist and historian, capture the gist of the liaison between the Americas:

Can we be like them? Promise of politicians, rationale of technocrats, fantasy of the forsaken: the Third World will become like the First World, rich, cultured, and happy, if it only behaves itself and does what it’s told without kidding around or asking embarrassing questions.\(^6\)

In America, in Europe, in Asia, one of the embarrassing questions surrounded by global silence has been the absence of women as actors, decision makers, or auxiliaries as well as workers or victims. “Where are the women?” asked sociologist Cynthia Enloe as early as in 1989. “Why are women approximately 80 percent of the global factory workforce?”\(^7\) Endeavoring to make feminist sense of international politics, Enloe asserted that

the traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity have been surprisingly hard to perpetuate: it has required a daily exercise of power – domestic power, national power, and […] international power. […] If fathers, brothers, husbands didn’t gain some privilege, however small in global terms, from women’s acquiescence to those confining notions of femininity, it might be much harder for the foreign executives and their local elite allies to recruit the cheap labor they desire.\(^8\)

Since Enloe’s trailblazing publication, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (1989), targeted the gendered construction of the new economy, there has been a proliferation of feminist studies aimed at unraveling the myths of global restructuring lead by the United States in the name of spreading democracy. Whether springing from sociology, economics, political science, or social history, these studies agree upon the need to cross-reference the various dimensions of the restructuring process, including not only the market, the state, institutional structures, and so forth, but also how we think, who we are, and how these dimensions interconnect in the gendered rearticulation of global political economy.\(^9\)

This kind of relational thinking also informs Álvarez Muñoz’s garment installations, which summon up the absence of women’s bodies by dramatizing the fundamental significance of dress in defining how women should feel, think, behave, and appear in order to fulfill the demands of socially sanctioned womanhood. Women’s clothes play an essential
part in the rites of passage from a baby girl in pink to an outrageous teenager to a dutiful wife and loving mother. Marking these transformations, Álvarez Muñoz’s pieces of “design clothing” swing uneasily between humor and horror, often emphasizing vulnerability, sexuality, and tacit violence that suddenly darken the light-hearted visual play upon the foibles of fashion. The artist calls these sartorial skits (assembled by a seamstress for the San Francisco Opera) “wicked garments” and “emblems of desire.”

They hang amid rolls and rolls of luxurious fabrics that flow down from the high ceiling of the gallery space and stage spectacular charades of gender, mocking but also warning about the trappings of beauty that the artist associates with the predilection of the Renaissance tragedy:

There has been an absence of dignity, especially in and towards the adolescent girl. A web of deceptive threads engulfs. Tabloids rule. Globally, there’s an attitude problem that shapes this girl’s dreams. I can’t help but recall Shakespeare’s Ophelia, whose opulent clothing contributed greatly as she plunged to her death after failing to please. Today, fashion and media – both accomplices to corrupt government policies – continue to cast baby maidens into the well.

This version – the first one – of Fibra went up in when the murders in Ciudad Juárez were still covered by silence even in El Paso just across the river; then public media caught on with local activists and Shakespearean drama started to pale in comparison with the deadly intrigue playing out on the borderlands. Álvarez Muñoz first heard about the missing women from her mother, still living in El Paso, and her garment installations took a sinister turn. Comical relief waning, they became more overtly politicized and conscious of the wholesale devaluation of women’s lives in the U.S.-Mexico “new world order.”

Among the frivolous pieces of feminine vanity there appeared an austere proletarian slip-on dress made of burlap (fig. 59, page 307) and a set of five sexy denim shorts with red sequined edges and just a single seam where the legs join. Hanging from the ceiling, these “low couture” shorts cast eerie shadows on the gallery floor, like basin shapes of pelvic bones. Ironically, behind these flashy icons of the working-class aesthetic display of femininity haunts the dowdy proletarian dress, the outfit worn by millions of women working below minimum wage in sweatshops and garment factories manufacturing fashion clothing. So, what is the connection between the maquiladora murders and these dresses? “Sometimes these things may seem disparate, but they’re not. It’s up to the artist to tie the knot, to form a relationship between these elements,” notes Álvarez Muñoz.

According to Filipina feminist theorist Delia Aguilar, globalization in its modern form is based less on the proliferation of information technology than on the proliferation of migratory proletarian work force, whose geographical, social, and wage differentials are much greater than ever before. This has further accumulated wealth and power in the First-World nations and, in poorer countries, caused increasing inequality among workers, heightening insecurity due to the “casualization” and “off-shoring” of employment. The disruptive social consequences of these changes have particularly affected women’s lives, globally. It is Third-World women’s and children’s labor that is the cheapest of all, guaranteeing
manufacturing companies the highest profits at the lowest cost and with the least worry about restrictions effected by local governments. The promotion of export production, the deregulation and liberalization of trade, the privatization of services, and other “conditionalities” of structural adjustments programs imposed on developing countries by such organizations as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the U.S. Agency for International Development have set a global trend where women from impoverished rural areas are drawn to cities or export oriented industrial zones to earn a livelihood as factory workers, servants, entertainers, and/or prostitutes. In Juárez, the promise of a better life has turned into an early death for many Mexican young women, who en mass continue to leave their villages and head northward for a weekly paycheck at a border maquiladora.

It would be a mistake to think that this was something new, an unexpected upshot of the 1994 ratification of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement between Canada, the Unites States, and Mexico. During the period of the Spanish colonization, indigenous women were raped and forced to work as servants in mining camps, missions, and military bases. The “super-exploitation” (that is, increase of the intensity of the work; extension of the working day; payment of labor power below its value; and a “double day” at work and home) of indigenous women today interweaves the historical legacies of colonization and proletarization. It can be seen as a successor of indentured labor and slavery, which were never legal in Mexico or California, per se, but nevertheless practiced in the form of the government-sponsored programs of importation/deportation of foreign workers to and from the United States. The birth of a mobile, surplus proletariat was preceded by the destruction of indigenous subsistence household economy in Mexico and also in the U.S. Southwest, which triggered the downward transformation of women’s status: devaluation and indirect appropriation of women’s domestic work and direct marginalization of their input as laborers in commodity production. The disintegration of traditional familial and social structures also entailed vicious forms of sexism, racism, and violence against women.

These are the historical circumstances that have steered the development of Ciudad Juárez, also called the “city of our future.” These are hard facts to face. It has been hard for those outsiders – many of them Chicanas and Chicanos – who have committed themselves to break the silence surrounding the rampant femicides to face their own lack of effective means of resistance. Violence against young women continues to escalate as does the frustration of foreign helpers, trying to find the answer to the question “why.” Not any longer who did it, in the first place – that does not seem to solve anything – but why is it allowed to continue and why in such a vicious, hateful way? The same kind of nettled frustration also underlies some critical comments about Álvarez Muñoz’s installation, particularly about the part that directly presents unmediated details about the killings. Says Dan Koller in The Irving News, “As is usually the case, the barest recording of facts from these incidents is so overwhelming that her installation of empty shoes comes off as an inadequate, arty response to the injustices she describes and the outrage she evokes in the viewer.” Koller is referring to the center piece of the installation, which consists of a collection of women’s shoes assembled in front of a shrine with a large photograph of a woman’s feet in black shoes, the apparent victim lying face down in sand and presumably dead (fig. 60, page 307). Flanked by
cascades of black fabric, the photograph also includes a selection of media quotes about the killings, which grow smaller and smaller as if the victims had “just become numbers, listed like the Vietnam Memorial.” The recording of the bare and brutal facts, as Koller voices out, can be effective and overwhelming, indeed, but it can also create a comfort zone of distance and externalization.

Amid the explosive proliferation of “documentary” media images of crosses, cadavers, and skulls, complete with statistics of ever-growing numbers of dead and missing, what actually disappear are these women’s personhoods, their citizenship, and their subjectivity. Meanwhile public discourse has transmogrified their bodies into “superfluous human waste” without consciousness – as if they were an unfortunate but inevitable side-effect of Mexico’s modernization and transnational economic belonging. Alicia Schmidt Camacho opens a new platform for discussion by reflecting upon the way international solidarity extended by activists, writers, and artists has inadvertently participated in this kind of reification of Mexican women’s bodies as “disposable,” as the site “between humanity and non-humanity” and thus “fit to be killed.” Her argument draws upon the naturalizing function of the reified image (see page 44; endnote 31) – in this case the proliferation of media images of a dead and mutilated female body – that hides the mechanism of its production and makes “a given social order or cultural practice appear natural, inevitable, and fixed.” By criticizing certain works of U.S. and Mexican scholars and artists for just this kind of reification, Schmidt Camacho’s argument also stirs up tensions in regard to who among the outside interpreters would be qualified and discerning enough to speak about/for the “subaltern” without silencing the voices of the victims themselves and undermining their families’ efforts to get justice. Paradoxically, due to their deployment of the traditional modes of representing the female body, many well-meaning visual artists, too, have inadvertently contributed to the reification of Mexicanas as voyeuristic objects of violence, whose mobility amid the real and imagined dangers of the border space thus needs to be monitored – presumably for the sake of their own good.

Álvarez Muñoz’s installation (conceived before the tensions described above started to emerge in academic discourse) suggests uneasiness about representing an image of the dead female body. On the one hand, the artist spells out her need to confront the issue as directly as possible, which she does by including some documentary material and a staged “pseudo-realistic” photograph of a victim’s feet (fig. 60, page 307). The photograph is direct and arresting, but it does not carry the force of a complex visual metaphor, Álvarez Muñoz’s staple tool. On the other hand, she couples this reified image of death with elements that effectively displace the official and popular narratives that rationalize violence and reduce female subjectivities to nil. These elements include dozens of used women shoes scattered in a sanded area in front of the shrine. In news articles about the found bodies, there always was something about shoes, the artist recollects: no shoes, tennis shoes, one shoe missing, on so forth. Women’s feet and shoes, of course, are loaded with sexual meaning; the red high-heel shoe (chosen to illustrate the first El Paso newspaper articles about the murders) symbolizes sexual availability, fetishized femininity, par excellence. The shoes make the victims alluring; they belong to the same symbolic order as the miniskirts on prostitutes, whose images
enhance tourist websites of Ciudad Juárez where prostitution is legal and young women plentiful. Perhaps the shoes, too small and hurting, could tell the truth about the malady of the borderlands. They would perhaps enlighten a journalist who, reviewing Fibra y Furia, noted that “[s]ome [viewers] might question the stretch from fashion’s dictates for the ideal woman to the slayings of young women.”

The abridged version of Fibra y Furia that I saw in 2003 in the retrospective of Álvarez Muñoz’s work in Austin, Texas, included two pieces of her “wicked garments” (figs. 58 and 61, pages 306 and 308), doubled by a pair of large, computer-enhanced photographs of the same garments. One photograph featured the baggy burlap slip-on against a scene of urban “dystopia” with corporate high-rises, smokestacks, barbed wire, and cardboard shacks; in the other, black fish swim amid veils of blue luster, shrouding a red prom dress with giant rosettes over the strategic areas – a dazzling dream of modernity and a toxic nightmare disturbingly placed side by side, together but separate, conjuring up the missing female bodies. In the borderlands of Mexico, according to Rosa Linda Fregoso, “the subject of the discourse of globalism is an abject one: a subject in need of regulation; a subject as passive victim; or a subject as fetish of the masculinist gaze.” The intense public debate around the appearances of women in Juárez has coupled media images of decomposed pieces of torn clothing found in the desert with the “hyperfeminine” dress preferences of maquiladora workers. Their lifestyle, behavior, morality, and sexuality have come under intense public scrutiny, while state officials accuse women of promiscuity and their families of negligence. And the families, in turn, blame the Mexican government for intentional and systematic disregard of its poor mestiza citizens.

“I think that ultimately I pose the question of who creates the borders, how are those borders created?” ponders the artist, “Do we … have we been conditioned to do that, too?” Why are women in Juárez murdered, then? Because society – through jurisdiction, corruption, politics, and religion – lets it happen. As Lourdes Portillo’s film, Señorita Extraviada / Missing Young Woman (USA, 2001), declares, “There’s no better place in the world to kill a girl than in Juárez.” There are no perfect crimes, only perfect places to commit a crime with impunity, and the on-going militarization and demonization of the borderlands lays bare just that. Like in the past, the borderlands today play the role of the barbarous outpost of civilization, constructed as primitive, subhuman, and out of control (see pages 17-19). These constructions are invariably circumscribed by sexual/racial overtones that, in regard to women on the borderlands, serve as a justification for an escalating social surveillance so as to ward off non-normative liberties women might assume outside of the private space of patriarchal regulation. However stimulating (like for Charles Bowden) or romantic (like for José Limón) sexual transactions across the border may be for males, for women they are mediated in a different idiom, through folklore, with the reappearance of the figure of La Llorona, the wailing woman. Alicia Gaspar de Alba, in her poem Kyrie Eleison for La Llorona, accuses her of betrayal:

[…]
You’ve gone the way of the alligators
in San Jacinto Plaza.
You’ve traded your midnight cry for the graveyard

shift and a paycheck at the maquila.
That mushroom cloud hovering
over Mount Cristo Rey

is your shadow.
That train howling past the gay bars of El Paso
Is what’s left of your voice.31

What, then, is at issue in this poem as well as in the story conveyed by the folk ballad, “El Corrido de la Maquila” (the corrido of a maquila girl), which also retells the legend of La Llorona? The poem disclaims La Llorona as a devil’s advocate, a conspirator and manipulator of hegemonic patriarchal power that tolerates and perpetuates social femicide. The contemporary corrido, in contrast, articulates paternalistic/nationalistic concerns by passing on the tragic story of a maquila worker who becomes pregnant by the Anglo manager of her factory, gives birth to two stillborn babies with birth defects, and finally commits suicide. The warning tale about female deviancy from normative behavior, according to Schmidt Camacho, functions clearly as “an allegory for national anxieties about the partnership between U.S. companies and the Mexican government,” echoing “the popular conflation of women’s sale of their labor with the sale of their bodies for sex.” 32 Thereby “To Be Like Them” 33 – as Eduardo Galeano eloquently phrased Mexico’s anxious hunger for economic inclusion – comes with a price tag, hanging on the neck of the maquiladora worker and all women on the borderlands. At the end of the day, no doubt, the real Lloronas and Antigones are the mothers of the victims, who are organizing public campaigns in spite of police harassment, reclaiming the human value of their absent daughters as national subjects of the state that, as Álvarez Muñoz puts it, “continue[s] to cast baby maidens into the well.”

Knowledge is Power, Yes and No

While Álvarez Muñoz’s father was fighting the war on fascism in Europe, the rest of the family lived in government housing and her mother worked odd hours, earning a living by sewing uniforms for soldiers successively in three manufacturing plants in Los Angeles and El Paso. During those years the artist hardly saw her mother, but she remembers the late shifts, the women walking home together from the factory, sometimes crossing the border to shop and entertain themselves in Ciudad Juárez, which back then was “slick and seductive.” 34 Back then, for the first time, Mexican American women ventured outside of their communities, ushered by new occupational opportunities opened up by the war in the defense industry. The Eastern-based garment firms, for example, doubled their number of plant locations in the Texas-Mexico border area during the war years, and Mexicanas made up
eighty percent of their work force. In the dress factories of Los Angeles, the percentage was seventy five. The WW II era helped Mexican American “Rosie the Riveters” develop a sense of self-worth and independence as they, like their men serving in the Army, earned their own money, gained experience about Anglo society, learned to communicate in English, and bonded with each other. The female bonding also binds together the two parallel story lines of Álvarez Muñoz’s artist’s book: the campaigns to unionize Mexican American women in the 1930s and 1940s’ Los Angeles and the artist’s childhood memories of the time when her mother had two families – one at home and the other at la fábrica, the factory.

The bilingual artist’s book (figs. 62 and 63, page 309) captures the period of intense optimism and patriotism when the first “Mexican American” generation came of age and started to claim their share of the growing social and economic welfare in the post-war United States. By studying ethno-racial identity formation at the interstices of home and work place, posing such questions as what constitutes a family, a community, or a nation, the book highlights the critical, yet overlooked, role of women as industrial workers, family heads, and labor activists. It also calls for a need to further explore the complex connections between citizenship and war – an issue that is just as contentious today as it was during World War II. The artist describes this era as “[a] time when many of us were too young to understand the confused pride shared by many men and women who fought a war and supplied fortification for a nation growing from unfair labor and human treatment.” (fig. 64, page 310) The tendency of war to obscure inequality and conjure up comforting moral absolutes thus conflicted with the grim experiences of minorities on the home front, such as the zoot-suit riots in Los Angeles, the internment of Japanese Americans, and the racially organized labor market that affected all people of color.

Álvarez Muñoz’s interpretation of the war-time labor struggles pays homage to the achievements of a handful of women activists as well as to the everyday survival skills of ordinary factory workers, like her mother. Unfolding on the top part of the pages, the larger story told by the Embassy Auditorium walls evokes the cacophony of machines and music, the chatter of the workers, and the “roar” of marching protesters during the “early tremors of the City of the Angels.” “Here, for the first time,” confirms the book, “Latina workers chanted for justice exposing threats and traditional abuse,” and continues by introducing the three strong labor organizers – Rose Pesotta, Luisa Moreno, and Josefina Fierro de Bright – whose achievements demonstrated that Latinas were not just submissive victims of social oppression and restricting ethnic traditions as stereotypically believed.

Rose Pesotta (1896-1965), an immigrant from the Ukraine, was the organizer and vice president of the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) from 1933 to 1944, the worst years of the Great Depression. She witnessed how the economic down turn affected adversely particularly women workers, whose wages plummeted and work conditions deteriorated with the revival of the garment sweatshops. She led the ILGWU Los Angeles Dressmakers’ Strike in 1933 and opened a new chapter in U.S. labor history. According to her biographer Elaine Leeder, Pesotta’s pragmatic “female consciousness” conflicted with the bureaucratic organization, and she encountered serious opposition as a woman and an
anarchist while working in the all-male union leadership which disapproved of her radical social visions.40

Trade union leader and civil rights activist Luisa Moreno (1906- ) was born in Guatemala, but moved to Mexico and eventually to New York City where she worked as a sewing machine operator at the onset of the Great Depression. She founded La Liga de Costureras, a Latina garment workers' union, and in 1935 the AFL (American Federation of Labor) hired her as a professional organizer. Her organizing efforts during the 1940s helped bring thousands of cannery workers into the union. Being herself the first Latina vice president of a major U.S. trade union and the first Latina member of the California CIO Council (Congress of Industrial Organizations), she successfully encouraged women to run for local union positions. Moreno also was one of the organizers of the first Latino civil rights assembly, El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Española (Spanish-Speaking Peoples’ Congress), which was founded in downtown Los Angeles in 1939. In November 1950, Moreno was deported by the Immigration and Naturalization Service on the grounds that she had once been a Communist party member.41

Born in Mexico in 1920, Josefina Fierro de Bright descended from a line of rebellious women – both her grandmother and mother were followers of the socialist leader Juan Flores Magón. While executive secretary of El Congreso from 1939 to the mid-1940s, she organized civil activism against school racism and police brutality in Los Angeles, and – with Luisa Moreno – coordinated El Congreso’s support for Spanish-speaking workers in various trade unions.42 “Women did not stand on the sidelines,” notes Chicana historian Vicki Ruiz, “They distributed food, formed picket lines, taunted scabs, and, when attacked by police, fought back […] [fusing] private life and public space in pursuit of social justice.” 43 The women’s platform endorsed by El Congreso forms a direct link to the Chicano Movement. Moreno and Fierro de Bright, claims Ruiz, were “foremothers to women who would come to call themselves Chicana/Latina feminists” at the time when post-war optimism had turned into deep disillusionment. When people of color started to organize their protest around civil rights, the initial focus was on racial discrimination, but the issues of class and gender followed soon after. As labor and community leaders simultaneously, these two women planted the seed for a new kind of leadership that differed from the hierarchical model of the mainstream unions of their time. They empowered others, weaving comadrazco mentality into the tapestry of political resistance, and interlinked political activism with self-help and reciprocity traditionally practiced in Mexican immigrant communities.44

The lower half of the pages in the artist’s book are dedicated to the story of four females – the artist herself, her mother, grandmother, and aunt – living together to make the ends meet. Unlike the stories of her father in the El Limite essay, the mother’s stories stem from her mundane experiences in the factory: tedious toil and production quotas, unsafe machinery and casualties, confrontations with managers, Coca-cola breaks in a small back room, gossip and dates with co-workers, mutual help and camaraderie. Like snippets of random oral history, these stories convey fleeting images from the home front. They bring the life of an all-female Mexican family very close to the viewer, who is invited to participate in the child’s pleasure of seeing a new dress come together out of parts and her apprehension
about the scissors that the mom always carried in her purse. While kin and friendship networks among the factory women proved a powerful means of survival and resistance, as demonstrated by Ruiz in her study on Mexican cannery workers in Southern California, the transferal of familial mores and relations onto the factory floor did not always work for the benefit of women. “When I caught the foreman cheating me, he said, ‘I love you like a daughter, Carmen, but who’s the foreman, me or you?’” testifies an anonymous factory girl in the book. She, like many other Carmens before and after her, was caught in a limbo between the patriarchal ideology of the woman’s proper place (the home) and the reality of having to work outside of the home due to economic hardship.

For women in a patriarchal culture, leaving the private sphere is always perceived as morally and socially dangerous, no matter how pressing the reason. “The working man” connotes a male who provides for his family; “the working woman” connotes a prostitute. Whether Bizet’s tobacco factory in Spain or an assembly plant at the U.S.-Mexico border, industrial employment tends to grant women at least a limited amount of independence; yet at the same time, it makes them morally suspect and vulnerable to sexual predation. Securing potentially “uncontrollable” women under the control of mayordomos, male managers, recapitulates the gender hierarchy of society at large and undermines union activism under the pretext that the factory is la familia. Thus the gendered labor system that consistently devalues women’s work in “light” industries as temporary and “un-skilled” in fact builds on the ideology of the proper family values and the personal relationships between women and men thereby. In the factory environment, the worker identity and loyalty to the company are also reinforced by such visual props as logos and uniforms, and by recreational activities that help deploy ideas about a family-like community of workers across the factory floor.

On these grounds women – particularly immigrants and women of color – have stereotypically been considered culturally challenged and impossible to unionize. Álvarez Muñoz’s book, and the Power of Place project as a whole, redresses this stereotype in regard to Mexicanas. We learn that, yes, in California Mexicanas organized meetings at the Embassy Auditorium, unionized, and transformed the practices of labor activism; in Texas, yes, they went on strike against pecan growers and garment manufacturers at great personal costs. But in El Paso, Álvarez Muñoz’s mother did not have a whole lot of choices. When asked whether she belonged to a labor union, she said, “No, I just worked in three factories, at Hortex, Hicks & Hayward, and also at The Union.” Ironically enough, there was no labor union in the factories where she worked in El Paso, and there are no labor unions in the assembly plants of Ciudad Juárez today. The disempowerment of contemporary Mexicanas at the border casts a shadow over the proud slogans of the past labor organizations. ¡El Saber es Poder! Knowledge is Power! – but what kind of knowledge can overpower the discursive violence practiced by the seemingly all-powerful media? ¡Si se puede! Yes, one can! – but in the global world economy, characterized by de-industrialization, off-shoring of production, and the transnationalization of labor force, it has become increasingly difficult to organize collective action and press social issues. Elizabeth Martínez and Ed McCaughan argue that, devoid of citizenship and inhabiting the fringes of the affluent countries, the transnational
working class in itself is stateless, that it is the “world’s industrial reserve army of labor” that
does not go on strike or demand anything.” 50

Historically, even Chicanas and Chicanos are a creation of this escalating process that
has dictated the development of the U.S.-Mexico border region.51 Therefore, the fate of the
women in Juárez reverberates far beyond the border, touching the people of Mexican origin
throughout the country, particularly the relatively empowered Chicanas – scholars, writers,
and artists – whose struggle to gain interpretative power over their past and present continues
to be intricately linked with Mexico. Today, however, a cold wind is blowing from across the
border. The second page of Álvarez Muñoz’s book shows a naïve Victorian-style drawing,
which depicts three young women in their summer dresses, their backs turned against the
rising wind, trying to hold on to each other and to their brimmed hats (fig. 65, page 310).
Little angelitos flutter around them, spiriting away bunches of women’s hats. In a disturbing
fashion, this image conjures up Walter Benjamin’s somber depiction of the angel of history:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one
single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of
his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has
been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings
with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly
propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before
him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.52

Although the storm of global forces is tearing the bodies of Mexicanas and Chicanas, it would
be an error to uncritically diffuse all local to the global, to forget the missions accomplished in
the past, and to succumb before the mantra of economic determinism chanted by mainstream
media. This is the message carried on by counter-narratives like the Power of Place, which
instructed Álvarez Muñoz in reaching out to public spaces and private histories so as to
breathe life into the ideological genealogy of Mexicanas/Chicanas.
Summary of the Essays

The previous three chapters presented a composite perspective on Chicana photographers’ art work from various angles: from the historical viewpoint, as contestations of the nineteenth and twentieth century grand narratives of war and technological progress; from a point of view of alternative community building founded on female agency; and, finally, from the perspective of citizenship, personhood, and subjectivity within the body politic of Mexican American cultural discourses. In each chapter, the aim was to carefully contextualize the discussion of Chicana photography (as art and as a medium of representation), paying equal attention to Euro-American cultural/socio-political discourses as well as those produced by Chicana/o authors.

The main argument of Chapter 4 contended that the photo-mural *El Límite* by Celia Álvarez Muñoz and the series *My Alamo* by Kathy Vargas systematically manipulate the strategies of photographic representation in order to “decolonize” expansionist U.S. historiography by rendering visible the construction of the idiom of modernity and relocating it from the sphere of eternal and universal into the circulation of temporal and particular. Drawing from their childhood memories, the artists make use of their family members, their experiences and life stories to unravel the working of language, myth, and history in the “birth of the nation.” In Vargas’ work, this involves resignifying the symbol of The Alamo, the key factor in the development of the Mexican American community and self-identity in Texas. Álvarez Muñoz, on the other hand, completes her photo-mural, depicting a giant toy train, with an enigmatic neologism “colic couplings.” The phrase conveys the similar warning tone as do the writings of the twentieth-century German critic Walter Benjamin, who saw the fundamental role of photography in serving the war in Europe. In their American context, both art works grow into *decolonizing historical metaphors* of the border people and the border itself, which in American public imagination has frequently been envisioned as the predestined site of violence and permanent crisis.

As of late, one of the most thought-provoking conceptualization of the nation was launched in 1983 by Benedict Anderson’s publication, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. How to imagine a community otherwise, eschewing the dictates of old representational standards, was the challenge Laura Aguilar and Delilah Montoya responded to in their respective photo-series, which were discussed in Chapter 5. Aguilar’s “nature photography,” showing groups of naked women of all colors and shapes, breaks radically from the common notions of photographic genres, which also makes her work hard to categorize in terms of Chicana lesbian representational politics. Aguilar’s *disidentification* from the individualistic predisposition of identity politics betrays a utopian undercurrent in her work, an undercurrent that also informs Montoya’s reconstruction of the Chicano conceptual homeland, Aztlan. Appropriating the appearance of an old family album, her portrayal of a Chicano community destabilizes the conventional social and gender hierarchies and provides the symbol with a material referent animated by her *mestiza consciousness*. Both essays take their cue from the notion of “the village photographer”
introduced by Swedish photo-historians, who suggest a space of production and interpretation between professional photography and vernacular expression, a space traditionally occupied by women and therefore rather unexplored.

In the art work discussed in Chapter 6, the Mexican American body politic becomes configured in spaces/places and embodied by subjects commonly considered abject – degraded and repulsive. Comparing Laura Aguilar’s nature self-portraiture to some historical (literary and visual) discourses of nature in America, the first essay substantiates Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano’s observation about cultural reciprocity and the porosity of the boundaries between mainstream and non-mainstream visual idioms, which accounts for “[t]he well-known presentational practice of appropriating or ‘queering’ the signs of straight culture, recoding, or rewriting them, as Aguilar does with the tradition of the fine art nude.” 53 Aguilar’s enactment of her American identity thus pits the sublime grandeur of conventional nature photography against the exquisite tactility of a naked female body, recoding the significance of land from property to partnership. The abject body pondered over in the second essay belongs to the Chicano ex-convict, el pinto, whose tattooed skin articulates the parameters of the Chicana body politic in Montoya’s La Guadalupana installation. With indigenous/Hispanic spiritual aesthetics, the artist dismantles the myth that it is only the male body that can act as the writer and reader of culture. At the same time she places herself before the image in the position of power to interpret and manipulate the meaning of religious forms and practices. The last essay brings the circle to an end and weaves together absence and presence, the past and the present. Placing a dark mirror to reflect Chicanas’ configurations of their identities, Álvarez Muñoz’s fabric installations resurrect once again the native woman as a trope of violence, this time in the shape of la maquiladora, the female assembly plant worker whose murdered body has turned into a reified symbol of neo-colonial globalism. A related, yet entirely different storyline completes the essay by juxtaposing the history of ordinary Mexican women workers in the United States with the lives of female labor organizers, who are the central characters of Álvarez Muñoz’s artist’s book on union activism in Los Angeles.

The final chapter of this study will begin by elaborating upon the findings of the previous three chapters, locating the issue of Chicana/o identities in the broader field of U.S. ethno-racial identity politics. The discussion centers on the following questions. If, indeed, the Chicana photographers are shooting from the Wild Zone generated by alternative, gendered and ethno-racially specific knowledges, then what are the exact parameters of this zone? Why do they imagine Chicana/o community the way they do, and what kind of representational differentials characterize their imaginings? Do they articulate “Mexican American exceptionalism” just as another variant of the assumed American exceptionalism, the main tenet of state nationalism? Or do they, in fact, aim at pushing the boundaries of all contemporary “regimes of truth,” regardless of their origin.


3 Text copied from Willie Varela’s color photograph of a poster on a wall in Ciudad Juárez, titled *Juárez, Mexico, 2001*, exhibition at the Mexic-Arte Museum in Austin, Texas 2004.


5 Álvarez Muñoz interviewed by Neery Melkonian, Director of Visual Arts at the Center for Contemporary Arts of Santa Fe, exhibition catalogue, undated photocopy received from the artist, n.p.


8 Ibid., 3, 17.


12 Felps, 1999.


14 Ibid., 16-18. Aguilar is talking about new global trends (in Malaysia, the Philippines, Nicaragua, and elsewhere) accompanied by such euphemisms as “labor flexibility” and “new culture of labor,” etc. Yet, she claims that “perhaps the most distinguished mark of globalization is the unprecedented diaspora of migrant women workers from poor exploited nations to more affluent countries of the North.” This is not a separate phenomenon from, for example, international tourism and the trafficking women to become sex workers or mail-order brides. Cynthia Enloe (1989, xiii-xiv) asks, “[w]ho is profiting; who is turning a blind eye to those abuses?” when Kosovar, Albanian, Georgian, Russian, Filipina, Thai women are traded to rich countries in Europe and America.


17 This phrase echoes the title of Charles Bowden’s by now notorious book, *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future* (1998). Wrapped inside the informative foreword by Noam Chomsky and the heartfelt afterword by Eduardo Galeano, Bowden’s unabashedly egotistic homage to death, violence, and erotic voyeurism in the name of Ciudad Juárez encapsulates the kind of predatory fanaticism that the city attracts. “Juárez is a depressing place and Juárez makes you feel more alive,” addresses Bowden the reader (page 41).
Several writers have used the term femicide in order to emphasize the gendered nature of murders and how this has been erased by such terms as homicide and manslaughter. Diana E. H. Russell in her essay, “Defining Femicide and Related Concepts” (Femicide in Global Perspective, ed. by Diana E. H. Russell and Roberta A. Harmes, New York: Teachers College Press, e2001, see pages 12-25), defines femicide as “the killing of females by males because they are females” (page 13), males who are “motivated by a sense of entitlement to and/or superiority over females, by pleasure or sadistic desires toward them, and/or by an assumption of ownership of women” (page 14). In the case of Juárez, one can add one more motivation: impunity – because one easily can murder a woman there without the fear of punishment. Unlike the term gynocide launched by Mary Daly and Jane Caputi (1987), femicide is not limited to planned, institutionalized, deliberate and intentional efforts to exterminate females as a gender. There are more studies about intimate femicides that happen within the family; less research exists about random, systematic killing and torture, which can be called social femicide. The latter term focuses on the role of the existing social order in practices which result in death and devaluation of female lives. This seems to be at issue in Juárez with its historical legacy of border violence.

Femicide in Global Perspective: “Defining Femicide and Related Concepts” (page 13), males who are “motivated by a sense of entitlement to and/or superiority over females, by pleasure or sadistic desires toward them, and/or by an assumption of ownership of women” (page 14). In the case of Juárez, one can add one more motivation: impunity – because one easily can murder a woman there without the fear of punishment. Unlike the term gynocide launched by Mary Daly and Jane Caputi (1987), femicide is not limited to planned, institutionalized, deliberate and intentional efforts to exterminate females as a gender. There are more studies about intimate femicides that happen within the family; less research exists about random, systematic killing and torture, which can be called social femicide. The latter term focuses on the role of the existing social order in practices which result in death and devaluation of female lives. This seems to be at issue in Juárez with its historical legacy of border violence.

The Irving News, Saturday, August 21, 1999.


Ibid., quotation on page 32.

Ibid. “For Marxist scholars, reification emerged with industrialization as a technique of representation linked to new modes of social control in which the image serves to make a given social order or cultural practice appear natural, inevitable, and fixed. The reified image masks the contingent nature of its emergence, hiding the mechanisms or interests behind its production and dissemination” (page 41). In short, reification masks just as it reveals. Charles Bowden’s book on Juárez is an extreme example of the kind of reification and naturalization of violence that Schmidt Camacho resents. His heroes are the fanatically energetic “guerrilla photographers,” who drive by night with police scanners on, trying to get first to the scene of murder. Says Bowden, “In the academies they have sessions to bemoan this reality. In the streets, they are simply lived. I believe that Juárez is one of the most exciting places in the world” (page 41). The polar opposite kind of depiction of the city is delivered by Lourdes Portillo’s documentary film, Señorita Extraviada / Missing Young Woman (Xochitl Films production, 2001), which refuses the discourse of death and instead focuses on the efforts of the victims’ families and local activists to solve the crimes and get justice.

Ibid., 25-26. Rosa Linda Fregoso’s take on the Juárez murders resembles in general terms Schmidt Camacho’s criticism although the former’s resentment mainly targets journalists’ and film makers’ (what she considers) inappropriate representations of the issue. Both emphasize the importance of grassroots activists led by the victims’ families and local feminists, whose work easily gets undermined by outsiders eager to help but not necessarily in a sensitive manner. See Fregoso, Mexicana Encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003).

The special issue of the series METAPOLÍTICA/2003, “Las muertas de Juárez,” published by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, does just this; its illustrations include a host of voyeuristic images of women with obvious connotations to sadomasochism and almost biblical eroticism.

Alicia Gaspar de Alba, during the reading session of her newly published novel, Desert Blood. The Juárez Murders (Houston, Tx: Arte Público Press, 2005), pointed out the way Juárez’s tourist sites in the internet conspicuously advertise Mexican women as sexually available. What is less publicized, on the other hand, is the fact that the U.S. side of the border has become a dumping ground of U.S. sex offenders, who, after rehabilitation, are handed a one-way ticket to El Paso. This makes a rather scary equation, particularly because crossing the border from the U.S. side is so easy, even for a sex offender on parole. April 21, 2005, at the UCLA Women Studies Department.


See Fregoso (2003) 10-12. Fregoso pays attention to the sexualization of everyday life in Juárez: how women are encouraged to dress in a “hyperfeminine” fashion, how maquiladoras organize annual “Señorita Maquiladora” beauty contests for the workers to reinforce employee loyalty; how the women on the assembly line have to face sexual advances and harassment, and so forth.

...and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950 (Yale University Press, 1989); Vicki L. Ruiz, *Echeces that of the olden-day Mexican American social bandits, Tiburcio Vásquez in California and Juan drug lord as the new folk hero of the borderlands, whose successful defiance against the Anglo establishment alpite that the modern ones fight just for themselves, hardly for the exploited poor. See, e.g., F. Arturo Rosales, ed., *Testimonio: A Documentary History of the Mexican American Struggle for Civil Rights*, the Hispanic Civil Rights Series (Houston, Tx: Arte Público Press, 2000) 28.

33 See Eduardo Galeano’s afterword in Bowden (1998) 121-129.


35 Elizabeth Martínez and Ed McCaughan, “Chicanas and Mexicanas within a Transnational Working Class,” in *Between Borders* (1990) 31-60, see pages 45-47.


37 Álvarez Muñoz, *If Walls Could Speak / Si Las Paredes Hablaran*, The Embassy Auditorium Project, The Power of Place (Fort Worth, Tx: Lone Star Posters, 1991) iii. Of course, the blacks faced the same predicament – they were fighting for the country that denied them of full citizenship – which radicalized them politically. In fact, the U.S. Army was the first government institution to end racial segregation by the end of the Korean War, well before the beginning of the Civil Rights era.


39 Álvarez Muñoz, 1991, 9-10. Margarita B. Melville, “Méxicanas Women in the U.S. Wage Labor Force,” in *Mexicanas at Work in the United States* (1988) 1-11. Stereotypically Mexicanas have been regarded as submissive and weak, “bound by cultural traditions that ‘modern’ women have long since left behind.” Yet in actuality, they haven always participated in production and contributed substantially to the meager family income. Melville claims that “[...]the basic problem in dealing with Mexicanas in the wage labor force is the prevailing idealist stereotype that the cultural norm calls for them to be housewives exclusively and to care for their children at home,” any other kind of behavior being considered “deviant” (page 2).


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43 Ruiz, 1998, 75-76.

44 Ibid., 97-100. Ruiz emphasizes the importance of UCAPAWA (United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America) in cultivating women’s leadership. For women, holding the picket line was an important way of claiming public space and drawing attention to their needs as workers and caretakers of their families (page 85). The Empire Zinc Strike in New Mexico (on which the film Salt of the Earth [USA, 1987] is based) in 1950 was a significant example of women fighting for higher wages as well as for hot water in their houses.


But while kin and friendship networks remain part of cannery life, UCAPAWA did not last beyond 1950. After WW II, red-baiting, the disintegration of the national union, Teamster sweetheart contracts and an indifferent NLRB spelled the defeat of democratic trade unionism among Mexican food processing workers. (page 272)


47 Bizet’s opera, Carmen, is actually an interesting case of this since all the elements of the “working women syndrome” are at play in its plot: the factory, a sexually active and independent woman, racial, class and gender war, military occupation, and a violent death. In Mexican American history, moreover, it is interesting to think about soldaderas and their ambiguous reputation/representation as revolutionary heroes with questionable morality. In Finland, the same kind of dual reputation has haunted the Lotta women, who during the World War II era served as nurses on the forefront of the war.

48 See Enloe, “Making Women’s Labor Cheap” (1990) 160-166, and Ruiz (1988) 127-129. As did the factories, so too the labor organizations developed their own visual languages that gave men and women a sense of identity or belonging. The artist’s book introduces a plethora of union logos and emblems that convey the upbeat spirit of labor activism of the twentieth century. Thus, with her background in commercial graphics, Álvarez Muñoz displays sensitivity to the history of printing and graphic design as a strategy to manipulate emotional response, to hail viewers as coworkers, union members, consumers, citizens, and believers of the common cause.


50 Martinez and McCaughan suggest that the globalization of unions and transnational solidarity (1990, 34) would be able to provide labor activism the kind of cutting edge necessary to confront the changing conditions of the global labor market. This kind of solidarity already happened in Finland during the recent paper workers’ strike which was supported by other European paper workers’ unions. Mind you, however, paper workers (overwhelmingly male) do not represent a particularly underpaid or deprived section of the Finnish labor force, and it remains to be seen whether in the future same kind of transnational solidarity will emerge to support the efforts of typically female-dominated trade unions.

51 Ibid., 35.


7. DISCUSSION

Predicaments of Identity: ¿No esta la familia?

"The life of the future is predicated upon the implication of the past. The historian is the memory of civilization. A civilization without memory ceases to be civilized. A civilization without history ceases to have identity. Without identity there is no purpose; without purpose civilization will wither."

Michael Kammen (1973)

Before the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of identity did not seem to stir much worry; after all, there presumably existed only one American identity – albeit intensely discussed and scrutinized – evoked in the quotation above. So what makes identity politics such a hot issue in the United States today? It is no longer such a big deal to wear corn rows, indigenous earrings, bandana scarves, or Guadalupe tattoos; or to eat tortillas as well as hamburgers or celebrate the Day of the Dead as well as Thanksgiving. This is not regarded as so much different from consuming gefilte fish, sporting a kilt, or dressing in green on Saint Patrick’s Day. Or is it? Although the official rhetoric of pluralism and diversity encourages U.S. citizens to reclaim their former heritage, all heritages do not appear equally constituted. Trendy nowadays, such book titles as *Shopping for Identity* promote, perhaps in part unintentionally, a reductive understanding of identities as something one can pick and choose, try and drop, and tailor at will. The light-hearted shopping for identities that characterizes the blooming multicultural market of ethnic paraphernalia can be understood as one way to ward off the darker implications of identity politics – some identities, particularly those involving racial difference, are obviously rather hard to barter.

These implications stir up the horror of an identity that is not unified, the disintegration of the incorporated self, and, indeed, the “postmodern” death of the privileged subject itself, embedded in the notion of the American identity. In fact, the tendency of non-Christian and non-heterosexual populations to pursue their special interests under the rubric of identity politics has fractured the benevolent façade of the imagined American identity implicitly pinned with European heritage. That is why the political movements of various ethno-racial “minorities” do not enjoy unanimous approval. Amid heated debates about presumably harmful separatism based on ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexuality, it often goes without notice that the history of “white ethnicities” from Europe also is a history of identity politics in service of a special group. The Irish, Polish, and Italians, for example, played down their cultural differences in order to emphasize the shared values of white immigrant experience. However, while pondering over non-white ethnicities’ claim for recognition and civil rights, it
is not hard to figure out the source of apprehension within the dominant culture. As Linda Martin Alcoff puts it, “it is one thing to say ‘You have been unfairly prejudiced against me,’ as southern European ethnicities might say, and quite another to say, ‘You have stolen my lands and enslaved my people and through these means created the wealth of your country,’ as African Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans might say. The latter message is harder to hear.”

From an even longer historical perspective, what we see is an evolution of the European way of dealing with something other than European: from religious difference (converting infidels to Christianity) to racial difference (civilizing savages), and then to cultural difference (celebrating cultural diversity while ignoring the history of racial oppression and present day economic disparities). At the same time as race, one of the central inventions of modernity promoted by state policies, has lost its biological credentials, ethnicity and ethnic identities emerge to invoke new parameters of difference, that is, difference that appears manageable and less threatening than that demarcated by biological fault lines. On the other hand, however, assumptions about the opportunism behind ethnic identity politics run rampant because of the very malleability of ethnicity; because ethnic affiliations yield readily to the interplay of identities, tactics, and strategies that can assert, sustain, and enable formerly denigrated groups. Thus the double consciousness of race (the term first used by W. E. B. DuBois) has broken down into multiple ethno-racial identities with multiple phenotypes and origins, and thereby weakened the role of descent in the process of ethnic identification (that is, at least up until 9/11).

Whether founding their argument on descent or on consent (the latter in fact being one of the traditional cornerstones of American individualism), some contemporary writers, worried about “neo-tribalism” and “ethnomania,” have proposed entirely new paradigms such as the “postethnic perspective” introduced by David Hollinger and lately theorized further in postcolonial studies. Says Hollinger: “The postethnic perspective denies neither history nor biology, nor the need for affiliations, but it does deny that history and biology provide a set of clear orders for the affiliations we are to make.” (Paradoxically enough, the practically same definition could be applied to existing ethnic identity politics in the U.S.) The following assertion however – also by Hollinger – brings forth his “postethnic” identity under the novel designation of “civic character”:

The postethnic perspective on American nationality emphasizes the civic character of the American nation-state, in contrast to the ethnic character of most of the nationalism we read about today.

What goes without further elaboration is the exact meaning and content of this “civic character” of the American nation-state, and how it would help resolve the inequalities and exclusions of American society better than the politics of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual difference. Thus it seems that Hollinger (like Richard Rodriguez whose writings were discussed in Part I) believes that the increasing racial mix and hybridity will be the harbingers and the driving force of a better society absolved from racial/ethnic antagonisms. Some others
place their hopes on the commodity market, like Marilyn Halter in her study about ethnic identities and consumerism:

As the nation evolves into an increasingly mestizo sociocultural entity, the separate European and non-European trajectories of identity construction edge toward collapse. In one huge arena of practice, the marketplace, such differences ultimately become irrelevant. The market is the great leveler.8

In the wake of 9/11 and the 2005 London bombings, the kind of benevolent neo-conservative liberalism described in this paragraph has completely lost its credentials. As noted by Karen Mary Davalos, “[c]ultural encounters and their mestiza/o [or hybrid] products are not harmonious,” nor are they beyond fundamentalist tendencies.9 Thus “post-racial” and “post-ethnic” hybridity, conceived as a means to contain differences without changing socio-political status quo, has failed; in the current political situation, the conceptions of the past (and of American identity) cannot remain in harmony with the legitimizing narratives of the country, as maintained by Chon Noriega.10

Radical writers of various hues have envisioned more sophisticated notions of identity formation, paying attention to the intersectional positions of subjects and emphasizing the complex interactions between various socio-political categories. Queer studies, in particular, have defended the voluntary nature of strategic identity, associated with political affiliations and the fluidity of subjectification. Although this evidently is in accordance with Judith Butler’s ideas about the constructed and performative nature of identities, all ramifications of these new theories are not so felicitous. One can argue that no (race/ethnic/sexual/gender) identity exists behind its expression, or that no subjectivity exists before its ideological interpellation. But, on the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the degree of individual choice in these matters is far from constant – identity is not a drag, not only a performance, not just voluntary or entirely involuntary.11 To disparage strategic identities as mere figments of misguided imagination12 or to denounce all identities as limitations of individual expression is a viable option only for those in possession of already privileged identities. For those, however, who have traditionally had little control over the definition and representation of their identities in face of such formidable outside forces as the government, the media, and the market (not to mention potentially coercive in-group pressures), the deployment of identity as a means of political empowerment and self-representation certainly offers a liberating possibility. Such is the case with Chicana identity politics, which in one way or another inform all artists and writers who call themselves Chicanas. Nevertheless, even Chicana critic Norma Alarcón feels uneasy about the entire question of identity, suspecting the plausibility of the multiple voiced subjectivity itself and contending that

[i]n this culture, to grasp or reclaim an identity means always already to have become a subject of consciousness. The theory of the subject of consciousness as a unitary and synthesizing agent of knowledge is always a posture of domination.13
She concludes her essay with a call for further investigation because “[t]o privilege the subject, even if multiple voiced, is not enough.” 14 What would be enough, then?

*Walking on a Knife’s Blade*

> There is no identity that is not both mise-en-scène and narrative – in personal memory, and common history.
> Victor Burgin (1996) 15

“Identification, then, is now seen as the very process through which the human subject is constituted: personal ‘identity’ is an accretion of identifications,” Burgin continues.16 What kind of identifications – and disidentifications – constitute the Chicana subject, presumably multiple and endowed with mestiza consciousness, yet reeling in anxieties about self-othering and marginalization on the one hand, and the neutralizing tendency of mainstream American culture, on the other. Under the rubric “History as the Site of Identification,” the two first essays discussed the art work of Celia Álvarez Muñoz and Kathy Vargas, both from Texas and both representing a generation whose Mexican-origin parents had already been “Americanized” enough to ensure a fairly comfortable life for their families and a professional education for their offspring. The main argument of these essays confirms the crucial role of historical narratives and symbols in the construction of Mexican American identity, in the reinterpretation of which visual art has powerfully participated at least since the Civil Rights era. Particularly in Texas, where the authorized historical truth is conspicuously inscribed in the daily environment – in public spaces and monuments, in place names and popular lore, and in the media and education, its contestation appears as one of the driving forces behind many Mexican American artists as well as writers.

Unlike even the most radical historians, whose perception is nevertheless tinged by the traditional/academic historical imagination, Álvarez Muñoz and Vargas shun dialectical models of explanation, reconceptualizing Mexican American history – with all its complexities and paradoxes – through the shifting fates of the idealized popular myths and icons. They reopen space for debate about the meaning of western history, *decolonizing* its well-known tropes and *decolonizing* the narratives delivered by official channels. Actually, in spite of their apparent differences in style and scale, both the photo-mural *El Límite* and the *My Alamo* series use the same narrative device: the memories of a child, who is observing the comings and goings of their families from an innocent (and at times not so innocent) position. Thus both art works – while in style and technique highlighting the role of photographic representation in constructing reality, including psychological reality – ward off the intrusion of the viewer’s scrutiny and protect the privacy of the artists’ personal minds and bodies represented mainly by their written comments on the images. Meanwhile this “textual” distance calls attention to the sovereign subjectivity of the artist equipped with humor and
positioned beyond the prescriptive, fetishizing forces of looking. If, as Norma Alarcón has it, this indeed is a position of domination, it also is a position of concession.

Generally, the ways and means by which artists choose to engage identity in their work demonstrate not only individual, but also social and regional fluctuation, as testified by Álvarez Muñoz’s forthright comment regarding her 1988 installation *Postales* in the Tyler Museum: “Subconsciously in *Postales* the political was there, […] And that’s important because Texas is a very prejudiced state. Hispanic artists aren’t featured. I’ve been discouraged by my peers from addressing these issues.” 17 In another context she confirms that “I like walking on a knife’s blade, attempting to keep a balance between the subtle and the subversive.” 18 While the trajectory of her career has steadily moved beyond the seemingly private realm of the elaborate artist’s books dealing with her childhood experiences to occupy public spaces and controversial political terrains, so too has her take on photographic representation changed since her latest art work which, instead of composing multilayered photographic metaphors, portrays Mexican American professionals and thus trespasses her self-imposed ordinance against “shooting” people.

Perhaps due to the similarities in their socio-economic and regional background, both Álvarez Muñoz and Vargas, in terms of the political content of their work, seem to have vacillated between sixties radicalism and the more conventional stance of for example LULAC, the League of Latin American Citizens. For a while, Vargas joined the Chicano art group Con Safos based in San Antonio and was mentored by its leading member, Mel Casas, but she soon started to feel restricted by its political agenda, left the group, yet remained active in the Mexican American art scene in Texas as a curator, teacher, and community activist. Her own comments about the Chicano Movement’s radicalism and her involvement in it are quite individualistic; in an interview she declares that “I’m an ex-hippie, that’s what I grew up with, and with rock’n roll and Kennedy’s murder. I grew up as an American flower child, that’s what formed me, not things Mexican.” 19 Yet she calls herself a Chicana, is fluent in Spanish, has intensively studied meso-American art and philosophy, traveled in Mexico, taken a political stand against injustices in Latin America, and used indigenous symbolism in her art work. Vargas’ art, however, has strong roots in San Antonio, Texas, her home base and primary artistic inspiration. About the *My Alamo* series, she explained that, being at that time in a big hurry, she was unwilling to accept the commission by the Mexican Museum in San Francisco but then completed the piece in record time. Funny and approachable, the series has received more attention than her other art work, which often deal with more somber aspects of life. One of the most compelling of these is called *States of Grace: Angels for the Living/Prayers for the Dead* (1997), a photo-installation dedicated to her mother who died from complications due to diabetes. (If I had an opportunity to see this installation, there would be eight essays in this study instead of seven.)

Celia Álvarez Muñoz’s life has followed a different trajectory due to her marriage to Andy Muñoz, whose professional career with the Federal Highway Administration took the family around the country and to a white middle-class social environment. Thus, though living on the fringes of feminist and Chicano civil rights movements, as a Chicana artist Álvarez Muñoz came of age only in the 1980s when she received college training in fine arts. The
question of authenticity appears to be a continuing source of concern for many of her interviewers and reviewers, who are eager to convince the reader about the “universal” appeal of Álvarez Muñoz’s work, perhaps unintentionally downplaying its historical specificity and her investment in the politics of difference. The juggling between perceived “universalism” and individual “particularism” becomes a kind of Sisyphean chore endlessly repeated and reinforced by the questions about the artist’s multiple identifications, presumably also inscribed in her art work. Avoiding the common themes of Chicano art or blatantly rasquache/domesticana aesthetics has been the artist’s conscious tactic so as to avoid being included in mainstream venues as a “token other.” (Yet, to her dismay, the curators of the 1991 Whitney Biennial chose to exhibit Ella y El, a multicolored mixed-media diptych beautifully composed of Mexican folkloric paraphernalia, which Álvarez Muñoz calls her token “exotic” piece.)

As such, I think, these recurring complications have less to do with the artist’s self-identification as a Chicana than with the expectations and anxieties of the audience (and institutions) troubled by various subtexts that arise from the histories of art and modernity, including assimilation, cross-over, and multiculturalism. The latter ideology both overlooked social inequalities and commodified cultural differences while celebrating them at the same time. One might ask, can an “authentic” Chicana artist make art outside of the barrio? Can Chicano art refer to itself as a signifier, to its own production in galleries and museums, to its distribution in the art market, or to its relation to mainstream modernism, rather than recreating space for the discourse of otherness? In addition, Álvarez Muñoz’s soaring career trajectory has stirred up acute gender, class, and age trouble regardless of the commentator’s background: could a forty-some, middle-class suburban housewife really become an authentic artist? Can suburbia, like the barrio, be a legitimate site of resistance? Does she dress like a real artist? And so on, ad nauseam.

Are these questions of identity and authenticity reflected in the style, technique, content, and form of the art work, then? I argue that they are, by way of making the artists cultivate a kind of materialistic, pragmatic perspective of culture (and art) that defies the opaqueness of historical meta-narratives. Theirs is not an idealistic interpretation of human behavior that neutralizes differences and reifies individual fulfillment; that is, that anyone can be what she/he wants to be by so desiring and working for it with determination. Rather, their perspective utilizes and simultaneously frames the means by which the forces of assimilation (popular culture, media, and education) work on individuals and groups, who often face their material reality by rationalizing their inferior condition as an “other” rather than standing in direct conflict with their social situation. What seems to happen, then, is that the recognition of class does not necessarily presume the existence of a unified class: self-identifying as Hispanic does not necessarily preclude the Chicana designation, it appears. Consequently, the artists discussed here perhaps do not suffer from the same dilemma that Mexican American academics do, according to Sheila Marie Contreras: namely an alienation from “our non-academic constituency.” She further claims that often times “this sense of obligation [to represent lower classes] is predicated upon the implicit assumption that the Chicano academic class finds its origin – collectively and individually – in these marginalized social spaces.”
Thus as a class marker, the term Chicana is ambiguous, undermining the notion that resistance would only be possible from the margin (the barrio) and that individuals can either represent the margin or the center with no recourse of inherent connections, crossings, and movements in between.

So, independent minds like Álvarez Muñoz and Vargas are rather tricky to pin down in terms of their class allegiances and affiliations if one entertains the idea of a single unified working class with which all Mexican Americans would identify at some level. Both artists practice their politics with a keen awareness of the fragmentations and class-based tensions within their communities (and even within their families) as well as about the difficult choices dictated by the art market. This is not to say that their work would promote the “epistemology of relativism,” which identity politics have frequently been accused of. Rather, they seek alternatives to relativism and idealism in “partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology.” 23 They practice what can be called “individualism in communalism” through the choices they make in terms of planning, executing, framing, and showing their art, which – particularly in Álvarez Muñoz’s case – has become increasingly confrontational, stirring things up within and without Mexican American communities and working as a grassroots catalyst for broader audience participation across class divides. “I’m a populist at heart. I want to give back to the community,” says Álvarez Muñoz.

Differences and inequalities because of ethnicity, race, nationality, location, and other categories tend to hold back the growth of empowered self-consciousness – the kind of “narrative” self articulated by the artists in this study – just as they have hampered the development of a strong feminist platform among women of color, who do not associate themselves with the idealistic, individualistic overtones of mainstream American cultural values. If the similarities between women function relatively well in regard to views on the public arena of work and social issues, then in the private world of family and community affairs it is harder to forge common agendas between women from different groups, social classes, and denominations. Perhaps because of this – and certainly also because of the vigorous anti-feminist (and anti-socialist) atmosphere in the country – Chicana artists continue to express feminist statements very cautiously, confirming as Álvarez Muñoz does, “I’m not an extreme feminist, but I’m very watchful. My work usually addresses women’s issues.” 24 In regard to her work analyzed in the last essay of Part II, this sounds like an understatement since in conjunction with trade unions, feminist issues formed the ideological nexus of the political activism of the first generation Mexican American women. Vicki Ruiz confirms that

the women rank and file of UCAPAWA [United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America] gained heightened self-esteem along with an awareness of gender issues as the result of union activism. […] UCAPAWA’s women members, in general, developed a job-oriented feminism; that is, they sought equality with men regarding pay and seniority and they demanded benefits that specifically addressed women’s needs, such as maternity leave and day care.25
Ruiz’s emphasis on domestic and work-related issues rather than on the issues of personal liberation associates Mexicana/Tejana/Chicana feminism with the Nordic type of feminism in which the work place rather than the home has traditionally played the central role. But other potential commonalities dwindle when we approach the national borders, drawn by the exigencies of global econo-politics. Neither “subaltern” mestizas nor murdered maquiladoras roam the eastern borderlands of Europe to haunt Finnish feminists, and the increasing transnational trafficking of women from the former Communist countries to the west has not yet left any signs in art works made in Finland.

Albeit that both Álvarez Muñoz and Vargas attest the strong influence of the American way of life and popular culture in the development of their hybrid identities, they also display acute sensitivity to the issues of human rights that affect the U.S.-Mexico border and all of Latin America. The same issues have also complicated the role of Mexican Americans in U.S. society: what kind of effects will their growing number and political clout bring about in the future; do they represent a force of change and if so then what kind of change? Is the kind of transnational feminist consciousness and reconceptualization of American history that the art work under study propagates analogous to the way other Chicana/os imagine their identities and in harmony with the collective subjectivity interpellated in the name of “fictive” Chicano community? The two Tejana artists seem to offer questions rather than answers, more reconfigurations of historical metaphors and fewer imaginings of completely new ones, the preoccupation that seems drive their slightly younger peers in New Mexico and California.

Chicanismo and Chicana Art

There is not a single hermetic Mexican or Mexican-American culture, but rather permeable cultures rooted in generation, gender, and region, class, and personal experience.

Vicki Ruiz (1998) 26

The issue of borders goes beyond geography. Like any art movement, Chicano art has created its own “interior” and its own boundaries, thus producing differences and splitting identities therein. The contestations of this canon go on in major exhibitions and publications, which redefine and set the standards of Chicano art by exercising their politics of production. An invitation to a major Chicano art event (i.e., to the “master’s house,” to borrow Gaspar de Alba’s term which she used in her criticism of the CARA exhibit, the early 1990s’ landmark Chicano art show) in a way “authenticates” Chicana/o artists and, conversely, may sometimes compromise their credibility as “unmarked” enough to attract the interest of mainstream museums. Today, however, the label “Chicana/o artist” is in flux and yet useful as a means for young artists to get recognition.27 Questions concerning contemporary Chicano art were discussed last March in the Chicano Manual of Style Symposium at UCLA. Invited by the Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC), a group of Mexican American scholars presented papers exploring the distinctive stylistic features in Chicano cultural expression, politics, and
everyday life. In addition, the symposium was part of the planning stages for a new series on Chicano art to be published by the CSRC Press.

In his talk, “The Emergent Styles of Post-Millennial Chicano Art – Capirotodo, Bricolage and Mutation,” Max Benavidez introduced some young emerging Chicana/o artists and discussed their art work using the terminology of the title (terms which seem to represent kind of postmodern urban variations of Ybarra Frausto’s *rasquache* and Mesa-Bains’ *domesticana*, see page 87). These young L.A.-based painters, for Benavidez, are the inheritors of Chicano sensibility and carriers of the “Chicano gene” into the future of an increasing amorphous medley of international and disembodied art styles. Without having read Benavidez’s forthcoming essay on the topic, what caught my attention was his association of stylistic legacy with genetics, basically with biology, at the expense of the mentalist frame of reference advocated by Chicana feminists in theorizing such notions as mestiza consciousness, in-between space, and decolonizing imaginary (all of which were discussed in Part II). None of the artists included in this study seems to carry Benavidez’s “Chicano gene.” For rather than drawing stylistic features from Mexican folklore, political posters, muralism, rasquache, domesticana, or high tech hip hop culture, their art conspicuously appropriates such modernist photographic styles as pictorialism, straight photography, and conceptualism. Moreover, they utilize such genres as the nude, the landscape, and the portrait – without aspiring either to the postmodern parody of former styles or the authentication mission of essentializing counter-narratives. Interestingly enough, all four artists claim formative influence from late twentieth-century photojournalism (such magazines as *Life* and *Look* – and particularly the African American FSA photographer Gordon Parks) on the development of their aesthetics as well as the over-all influence of American pop culture and music. Therefore, it is questionable to claim that stylistic features *per se* could be considered radical or conservative, modern or postmodern, Chicano or Anglo. Rather, their navigations and negotiations in the art works should be seen against other aspects: interrelations between form and content, contacts between the photographer and her models, the display, contextualization, and production of the art work, and so forth.

Rafael Pérez-Torres, another speaker at the Chicano style symposium, suggested an entirely different perspective on Chicano culture and community building by claiming that, paradoxically enough, Chicano community becomes recognized in its aberrations and naysayers, such as Richard Ramirez, a serial killer who loved American rock’n’roll, and the writer Richard Rodriguez, famous for his “Anglo-philia” and assimilationist statements. Perhaps in the similar vein, the Chicana artists without an obvious “Chicano gene” construct subjectivities, negotiate identities, and make visible elements about Chicano community that otherwise would not emerge. In homage to art essayist Rebecca Solnit, I wish to call their aesthetic category the *Exquisite* (sensuality), as opposed to the *Sublime* (beauty and horror) associated with a lot of past and present mainstream photographic art as well as to the *Eclectic* (pastiche) of postmodernist painting.

The *Exquisite*, in Laura Aguilar’s art, works on the one hand through absences, gaps and discontinuity in relation to the photographic (and painting) tradition that relies on the sublime representation of landscape and the privileged spectator position therein. On the other
hand, her exquisite aesthetics, akin to high modernism, elevate and idealize the female bodies depicted regardless of their nonconformity to the classical or mainstream American conceptions of beauty and desirability, thus invalidating the visual trope of “a woman as land” and undermining the polarity between natural and post-human. Aguilar’s celebration of exquisite female bodies lacks the kind of narcissistic valorizing of difference that for example Max Kirsch reproaches, accusing influential queer writers of leaving their readers with the presupposition that “our own psychical needs are more important than those of others and that our differences therefore hold priority over our similarities,” resulting in “unwillingness to work actively for the reconciliation of variance.” While mourning the disappearance of “the social,” Kirsch fails to see a utopian undertone in the relativity of identities and experiences that triggers Aguilar’s visual imagination and emphasizes the dialogical, conversational aspect of cultural and social practices. The reinforcement of this paradigmatic shift seems to be the primary mission of the “comadres corporation.” By replacing separateness with communality and subject-object detachment with inter-subjectivity, Aguilar’s photographs undercut the signifying system of photography itself, structured around the spatial abstractions of the optical medium and the gendered artist/subject to which everything else in the image becomes subordinated. By divesting the disembodied Eye from its privileged position for the benefit of other senses, particularly those operating via touch, the images activate, at the gut level, the tensions between scopic and tactile, separation and incorporation, and individualism and collectivism that seem to riddle American society from top to bottom.

Set in “pristine nature,” Aguilar’s nude self-portraits subvert the traditional image of the Indian Maid,” thus “queering” the American national landscape as well as the concept of la tierra in Chicano nationalistic imagination. Her visual discourse converges with Johanna Valenius’ findings in her doctoral dissertation *Undressing the Maid: Gender, Sexuality and the Body in the Construction of the Finnish Nation* (2004), which analyzes how the collated imagery of “the Finnish Maid” and “the national landscape” was used at the turn of the twentieth century to construct the social, racial, and gender hierarchy of the nation. Valenius writes that national landscapes generally are visualized as grand panoramas, containing a formula that “enables the reproduction of imagery according to pre-ordained rules of representation,” which reinforce the power relations embedded in landscapes. Like the iconographic Finnish landscape – distant lakes framed by forests – so too in the United States the national landscape is a masculinist one (the frontier), circumscribed by the “master subject,” who is

[a] no-body, who does not recognize that the existence of certain other bodies, especially those of the gay, the lesbian and the black, of women and children, is not welcome in some spaces […] The master subject recognizes only one body – his. This body, in accordance with the demands of western rationality, is disembodied.31

Although the national landscape has been conceived through feminine symbolism in the form of an idealized “Woman,” women artists generally and women artists of color, in particular, have seldom had access to the privileged position to view it. Their authorial gaze has been
absent, and thereby everything else that would breach the hegemonic canon of national imageries. Aguilar’s self-portraits redress this absence: they function as “visual texts which activate in us the capacity to idealize bodies which diverge as widely as possible both from ourselves and from the cultural norm,” as Kaja Silverman elaborates upon in her thesis about idealization in the process of acknowledging otherness.

In Delilah Montoya’s art work, the Exquisite emanates from her objective of appropriating and “updating” vintage documentary modes so as to intervene in stereotypical representations of Mexican Americans as well as in nationalistic interpretations of Aztlán. The photo-portrait series *El Sagrado Corazón* weaves a visual narrative that spans the colonial period, nineteenth century modernization, and the twentieth century cultural revival. It suggests a possibility of providing the myth of Aztlán with a new referent inclusive of cultural production in sites outside the barrio and of regionally specific spiritual practices embodied in women’s experiences. Thus instead of the U.S.-Mexican War in the 1840s, for Montoya (like for Chicana revisionist historians) Mexican American history began with the conquest of the Aztec empire in 1519, during which Hernán Cortés’ Mayan interpreter La Malinche played a central role as a strategist and the mother of the first mestizos.

This shift of emphasis from bi-national military conflicts onto the issues of race, gender, and power relations highlights the notion of *La Familia* and its political underpinnings in the discourse of Chicanismo and the Chicana/o subjectivity. The imagined community, embedded in temporality, memory and death, and pictured in Montoya’s “family album,” subtly rearranges the ideological structures of la familia. Photo-historian Geoffrey Batchen’s publication *Forget Me Not: Photography & Remembrance* (2004) deliberates compellingly upon the propensity of familial photographic memorabilia to cross time and defer death.

Memory, a ghost of the past, is continually conjured, brought back to life, as a real component of the present. Shutting us back and forth between past and present, slowing down our perceptions and drawing them out, or speeding us toward an ideal future, these photographic artifacts are like time machines. […] In the case of hybrid photographies, for example, individual identity is posited not as fixed and autonomous but as dynamic and collective, as a continual process of becoming.

While portraits of kin, neighbors, and friends are generally devoted to preserving the (chemically fixed) static image of the past in the present, they paradoxically also hark back to the corporeal tactility of the persons appearing in the vernacular family album. Montoya’s portraits, too, fluctuating between temporal spaces of past and present, life and death, undermine the division of the high (post)modernist and vernacular modes by eclectically mixing visual signs of contemporary urban environment, such as graffiti and tags, with the appearance of vintage photographic portraits of the nineteenth century. Together, they make an aesthetically elaborate but politically motivated statement about the time and space-bound nature of representation and reproduction, the key elements of the ideological construction of difference, sameness, and identity.
The inherent ritualistic nature of art promoted by Roland Barthes and bemoaned by Walter Benjamin is allegedly one of the most enduring characteristics of Chicana/o art, which, however, does not diminish its potential as a vehicle of visual power politics. Enigmatically blending the sacred and the mundane, the photo-installation La Guadalupana carries on Montoya’s search for Chicana/o communal ethos delineated by female – or bi-gendered rather – spiritual/political leadership. Thus the Catholic Church’s (and the Chicano movement’s) ideals about gender roles and the family, which historically have kept women from gaining public power through their spirituality, become reorganized by women’s domestic religious practices and encoded on the tattooed skin of a male convict. I think that this representation of Chicana/o faith, subjectivity, and gender dynamics belongs to the same category as those independent films that, according to Rosa Linda Fregoso, are aspiring to construct “meaningful alternatives to la familia’s basis on male domination” and hetero-normative consanguinity. In fact, some scholars have claimed that male domination and the patriarchal values conveyed by the term machismo have never been the behavioral norm among Chicanos, a claim inadvertently confirmed by numerous Mexican Americans, thanking their strong-minded mothers, tías, and abuelas for keeping the household from falling apart. Yet it is important to differentiate between private power and public power, the latter frequently remaining inaccessible to women due to various unwritten, unspoken, semi-conscious social agreements dictated by other exigencies, such as domestic harmony, nationalistic priorities, or struggles for resources, racial equality, and/or political representation.

Both Aguilar and Montoya, instead of looking back into the past with empty “imperialistic” or any other type of nostalgia, proactively envision an inclusive ethnic community with permeable boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality. In their works, the traditional concept of la familia – as the prototype of Mexican American unity – is at the same time idealized and imagined otherwise so as to rule out sexual commodification of women, oppressive patriarchies, and fundamentalist nationalistic movements that rely on ideologies of a single unified and static community. Compared to their Tejana peers, Aguilar and Montoya engage more aggressively in identity and gender politics. They make use of their friends, relatives, and themselves as models and extract from their own backgrounds as working-class mestizas with little Spanish language skill and little Mexican American extended family or community support to begin with. Chicana, feminist, and queer identity issues are thus pronounced in their works, which also challenge the viewer to respond to rather unusual photographic forms that generally demand more time and effort to decipher than photographic art that relies on more “mainstream” contemporary style and iconography. Making art has been an essential part of their search for a sustainable community, which has then turned into a community in a process of being imagined. Particularly in Montoya’s case, it has meant the imagining of a community in the radical ethos of Chicano cultural renaissance and political struggle but without the restrictions imposed by parochial cultural nationalism. Besides being self-identified Chicanas, what evidently is common to all four artists is their determination to involve and work for Mexican American and/or other non-mainstream communities. This means not only teaching, curating, and making public art projects, but also including community members in the actual production and consumption of art works in a spirit of
reciprocity. This urge to be part of and give back to local communities associates Chicana photographers with the largely unstudied group of women called *village photographers* by the Swedish historians, who have, at least in Europe since the nineteenth century, more or less professionally used photography as a means of living and personal empowerment.
Conclusion

*Things exist only in their conversations; value cannot be taken out of circulation. Similarly, works of art are responses in conversations about making meanings, which is why understanding a work of art often entails knowing the conversation: a displaced work of art is a non sequitur, a milestone without its road.*

Rebecca Solnit (2001)  

The aim of this study has been to analyze and elaborate upon the changing map of Mexican American visual art from an inter-disciplinary vantage point. The analysis has focused on four Chicana photographers, whose art works are discussed in the context of the Euro-American history of photographic art genres, on the one hand, and of decolonizing cultural and academic discourse by Mexican Americans themselves, on the other. As implied in the title, the initial hypothesis was built upon the assumption that the art work and visual discourses produced by these Chicana artists are characterized by degrees of difference that call for an investigation of both historical and regional developments of Chicana/o culture, not well-known in mainstream U.S. society. How can we decipher the evoked “Wild Zone,” then, from where these artists look at the world to construct their images, as indicated in this study? The parameters of their homeland are certainly not the boundaries of the American West entrenched in myths and symbols, nor the imaginary borderlines of Aztlán, both of which have been set up on nationalistic, static notions of identity, community, and place.

The Wild Zone, as I perceive it, lies in opposition to the Nation-State and its formalized body politics. The female body, in particular, has served as a symbol of national unity, and thus the “purity” of women frequently occupies the center of nationalistic discourses. This train of thought leads to the theme I wish to briefly summarize because it has so insistently surfaced in the text, time after time drawing attention to the most intimate underpinnings of art – that is, the image of the mother in the axis of la familia, community, and the personal lives of the artists studied. For Chicanas, the body of the mother is evidently not the one sanctioned as the reproducer of the national state – i.e., white – legally instituted in citizenship laws. The critical question, then, is that of the legitimate mother even within the intra-ethnic “family quarrel” which pits against each other the purity of the virgin mother, Guadalupe, and the ambiguity of the indigenous mother Malinche, whose story conjures up images of contradictory identities.

For many reviewers, Laura Aguilar’s *Three Eagles Flying* (1990), which shows her naked body constrained by ropes and standing between the U.S. and Mexican flags (fig. 66, page 311), depicts the birth of the Chicano nation. For the artist, though, the image is “all about my mom,” a fifth generation Mexican American, who, because of her fair skin and reddish hair, was taken for white so much so that “nobody believed she was my mother.”
Supporting her family as a factory seamstress, Celia Álvarez Muñoz’s mother descended from a middle-class Mexican family, whose rather conservative values in regard to race and class also migrated across the border. Doing art work about the murders of indigenous women in the border city of Ciudad Juárez lead the artist to question her own legitimacy as a broker of political meaning in the borderlands. Amid the transnational struggle over interpretative power, the victims’ mothers have taken the right to reclaim the bodies and selfhoods of their daughters from the public discourse of blaming the victim. If indeed mourning is the most powerful political act available for the poor Mexican women encountering government rejection on the both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, what does this signify in terms of Chicanas’ American citizenship? The meaning of the femicides in Juárez in contesting Chicana identity cannot be underestimated as it calls up the old question of Mexicana/Chicana subjectivity constituted as injury and punishment. Since the time of La Malinche, women’s part as sacrificial victims in the rite of “regeneration through violence” has complicated the relations between mothers and daughters in Mexican/Mexican American culture, a condition also reflected in the arts.

In Juárez, where female kin demand sovereignty beyond the two nation-states, family photographs of the murdered young women act as a means of retrieving the victims’ humanity from the “space of death.” Likewise, in Delilah Montoya’s visual imagination, a Chicana/o nation is depicted as sovereign but devoid of the allegiance to death that, according to Benedict Anderson, is typical of nationalistic ideologies worldwide. It is the mothers who exercise spirituality and wield religious power without sacrificial victims, yet motherhood is not elevated to an ideal of national wholeness and territorial privilege – ultimately the body of the mother remains contradictory, liminal, too close, and painful, like in the cross-shaped photo-portrait *Broken Column: Mother* (1997) by Kathy Vargas of her dying mother. These kinds of reconfigurations of religion and unconsciousness embedded in the art work would be another subject of study altogether, especially in view of Luce Irigaray’s and Julia Kristeva’s preoccupations with the signifiers of the maternal. But it is just as significant to contemplate how the role of the mother as a spiritual leader concretely translates into everyday life. So let us look at the Wild Zone as a site of maternal knowledge in the practice of everyday life.

Conventionally, sociologists have conceptualized the Mexican American family as patriarchal, characterized by generalized male authority versus women’s control of activities in the domestic sphere. This organization makes women structurally, culturally, and ideologically central, yielding them considerable informal power; yet their power lacks overall cultural endorsement and thus remains one-dimensional. Chicano families then, claims Maxine Baca Zinn, are *mother-centered*, but not *matrifocal*, for the latter definition specifically postulates that “the mother’s multidimensional centrality must be legitimate.” Baca Zinn continues, “The Chicano family has functioned as a source of trust, refuge and protection against an oppressive society, due to the strength and resilience of the mother role.” Women’s kin and friendship networks – their comadres – have played a major role in the survival of Mexican American communities through the hard times of poverty and hostility when men were absent, working, or fighting a war. Consequently, for Mexicanas and Chicanas who were left to fend for themselves and their children, there were no separate
spaces of work and home, but the overlapping of the two, the pattern that has also characterized the development of Finnish women’s position since the beginning of the nationalist movement in Finland.

Interestingly enough, Gisela Kaplan in Feminist Nationalism (1997) presents Finland and Italy as the only examples in Europe where feminism and nationalism were not mutually exclusive. The prominent position of Finnish women in professions and politics, writes Kaplan, has its historical roots in the pre-independence situation at the turn of the twentieth century when “the rhetoric of self-determination was coeval with goals of achieving prosperity and social progress,” an alliance which from early on allowed women to develop an ideological position within the national political platform. As a result, there has been an unusually large female representation in the government from the very beginning of the independent state in the 1910s. This consequence provided Finnish women with a unique opportunity to lobby for their own concerns, which was not the case in those countries – such as the United States – where political institutions were already in place. Mind you also that Kaplan’s take on the state of affairs in Finland appears somewhat too idealistic. After all, it must be noted that the “social contract” underwritten by women for the sake of the common nationalist cause came with a price, which meant structural inequality and lower wages for women due to the gender segregated labor market. This condition has persisted up to the present day even in spite of the fact that the current president of the country is a woman (linked by the media with strong matriarchal images). Marking a definite change in the political climate of the country, her success in the electoral campaign however signaled a step toward a more pluralistic society, with less anxieties about national unity based on gendered, racially articulated constructions.

The social contract underwritten by Chicanas for the nationalist cause and reinforced by the notion of women’s inherent strength (like in Finland) has been “officially” undone a long time ago, but negotiations about women’s roles versus men’s roles in imagining Mexican American community continue under the rubric entre familia (that is, what is considered proper versus improper behavior or talk in view of the rest of the Americas). The Chicana artists discussed in the study participate in these negotiations, “gendering otherwise” the modes of Mexican American self-representation, advocating human interdependency and mobile community, which would be not only mother-centered, but also matrifocal – that is, willing to grant women formal, public power even at the expense of ethno-racial unity. The imaginaries they produce would agree with some feminist film critics’ appeal:

It might be better, as Barthes suggests, neither to destroy difference, nor to valorize it, but to multiply and disperse differences, to move toward a world where differences would not be synonymous with exclusion and/or segregation.44

In terms of art discourses, this also means calling attention to the role of the viewer as an informed reader/consumer/mediator of visual meanings. After all, art comes alive in the interrelations between the works of art, their creators, and their interpreters who are unwilling to reduce images to the smallest possible denominator under the rubric of unity or
universalism. What it takes is a readiness to overcome the fear of difference, the anxiety of exclusion, the frustration of inaccessibility, and occasionally the recognition of the sign post, No Trespassing.

2 Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000). The emphasis of Halter’s book is on the revival of white, i.e., European-origin, ethnicities, whose social position is secure enough to proclaim their distinctiveness without the fear of being discriminated against because of it. So far so good; the evolution of the relationship between ethnic identity formation and the consumer market is fascinating, but what Halter fails to deal with is the interplay between ethnicity and race in the organization of consumer patterns. Therefore, many of her observations remain obscure or obsolete in regard to diverse Mexican American populations.
6 These terms are quoted from Marvin Harris, *Theories of Culture in Postmodern Times* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, c1999), which offers a rather reductive interpretation of the causes and effects of ethnic revival in the U.S. in an attempt to reconstruct a neo-materialistic “science of culture.”
7 David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: BasicBooks, c1995) 13-14, 56-57. In a more moderate tone than Marvin Harris, Hollinger also expresses his concern about the “retribalization” of America after the 1970s, asking whether a democratic civic nation can mediate efficiently between ethnics and species while negotiating “primordial” affiliations. He refers to the social psychologist Erik Erikson’s theory about pseudo speciation as a response to people’s inability to achieve healthy psychological identities within large human collectives, which echoes eerily with the medicalization and patologization of, for instance, undesirable sexual or social behavior. While neo-conservatives criticize identity politics of opportunism and of endangering the national identity, another attack against the politics of particular groups has been launched by leftist writers, who believe that these movements have undermined a ground for a unified action for the common good (in most cases associated with class solidarities). In his article “The Rise of ‘Identity Politics’,” left-wing historian Todd Gitlin complains that “The proliferation of identity politics leads to a turning inward, a grim and hermeneutic bravado celebrating victimization and stylized marginality.” In the same volume, another historian, Robin Kelley, reminds the reader how identity politics have always shaped labor movements, for instance, and adds: “assuming that the ‘universal’ is truly ‘self-evident,’ the neo-Enlightenment Left cannot conceive of movements led by African Americans, women, Latinos, gays and lesbians, speaking for the whole or even embracing radical humanism.” Todd Gitlin’s “The Rise of ‘Identity Politics’” and Robin D. G. Kelley’s “Identity Politics and Class Struggle” are juxtaposed in *Race and Ethnicity in the United States: Issues and Debates*, ed. by Stephen Steinberg (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 321-335.
8 Halter, 2000, 197.

12 For some scholars, it is very hard to understand that, for strategic purposes, some historically underprivileged groups might want to utilize some stereotypes of themselves, make these stereotypes part of their identity politics, and let stereotypes work for their own benefit, albeit that these stereotypes perhaps originally were created by others. That seems to be the case with anthropologist Shepard Krech III, who with his controversial publication The Ecological Indian: Myth and History (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., c1999) purports to liberate Native Americans from the myth of the Ecological Indian by pointing out how Indians in the past have abused nature and continue to do so today.


14 Ibid., 364.


16 Ibid., 193.


19 Kathy Vargas interviewed by the writer in San Antonio, Texas, 17.5.2002.

20 I am referring to the photocopies of some art reviews sent to me by the artist. For example, “Cultural Concepts” by Susan Freundheim, The Los Angeles Times, March 3, 1991; “Time proves ripe for Chicana artist’s multicultural take on multimedia art” by Helen Cohen, The Miami Herald, April 19, 1992; and “A subtle social critic” by Dianne Solís, The Dallas Morning News, September 15, 2002.


26 Ibid., xvi.


30 Max H. Kirsch, Queer Theory and Social Change (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) quotation on page 61. Kirsch’s main regret is that class, and other categories of social construction, is not a central concern in queer theory, claiming that this has lead to the misinterpretation of class as status in terms of consumption, rather than production, and thereby to a rampant middle-class illusion among working people (see pages 3-40).


38 The most extreme example of ritualizing the body in order to disseminate state ideology is, of course, Germany under the Nazi rule, discussed for example in Siegfried Kracauer’s collection of essays, The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays (originally published in 1963). Such widely different ideologies as social nationalism, progressive reform, and modern consumerism find common ground in the cult of individuality and the cult of regimented, perfect bodies, which together transmit symbolic meaning and provide a semiotic system for conceiving social order as given. See also Lena Johannesson, section “Ritualized Visuality: Dance-Photo-Body Cult, in Women Photographers – European Experience, ed. by Lena Johannesson and Gunilla Knape (Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2004) 63-66.


41 Julia Kristeva, Tales of Love (1987) and Powers of Horror (1982); Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One (1977). The French philosophers’ ideas about the feminine and the maternal have been enthusiastically applied in art criticism but also criticized for essentialism. Visit http://www.cerebation.org/jeasukoh.html for the Irigarayaian imaginary and the Kristevan semiotic. For example Janet Wolff in Feminist Sentences (1990) expresses reservations about the usefulness of the pre-discursive feminine “language”: “The semiotic that ‘precedes’ symbolization is only a theoretical supposition justified by the need for description. It exists in practice only within the symbolic and requires the symbolic break to obtain the complex articulation we associate with it in musical and poetic practices” (page 74).


ILLUSTRATIONS

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Fig. 2. Celia Álvarez Muñoz, *El Límite*, photo scanner mural, left panel, 243.8 x 457.2 cm, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, Texas, 2003.

Fig. 3. Celia Álvarez Muñoz, *El Límite*, photo scanner mural, right panel, 243.8 x 457.2 cm, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, Texas, 2003.
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Fig. 5. Kathy Vargas, *My Alamo*, gelatin silver print with hand coloring, silver powder, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 1995.
Fig. 6. Kathy Vargas, *My Alamo*, gelatin silver print with hand coloring, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 1995.

Fig. 7. Kathy Vargas, *My Alamo*, gelatin silver print with hand coloring, silver powder, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 1995.
Fig. 8. Kathy Vargas, *My Alamo*, gelatin silver print with hand coloring, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 1995.

Fig. 9. Kathy Vargas, *My Alamo*, gelatin silver print with hand coloring, silver powder, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 1995.
Fig. 10. Kathy Vargas, *My Alamo*, gelatin silver print with hand coloring, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 1995.

Fig. 11. Kathy Vargas, *My Alamo*, gelatin silver print with hand coloring, silver powder, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 1995.
Fig. 12. Kathy Vargas, *My Alamo*, gelatin silver print with hand coloring, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 1995.

Fig. 13. Kathy Vargas, *My Alamo*, gelatin silver print with hand coloring, silver powder, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, 1995.
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Fig. 24. Delilah Montoya, *El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart: Without Innocence, How Can There Be Wisdom?* collotype, 25.4 x 20.3 cm, 1993. Originally a color print.
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Fig. 30. Delilah Montoya, *El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart; El Grito de la Gitana*, collotype, 25.4 x 20.3 cm, 1993. Originally a color print.
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Fig. 34. Delilah Montoya, El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart; Curanderisma, collotype, 25.4 x 20.3 cm, 1993. Originally a color print.
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Fig. 42. Delilah Montoya, **El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart; El Matachín/Moro**, collotype, 25.4 x 20.3 cm, 1993. Originally a color print.

Fig. 43. Delilah Montoya, **El Sagrado Corazón / The Sacred Heart; La Muerte y Infinity**, collotype, 25.4 x 20.3 cm, 1993. Originally a color print.
If walls could speak, these walls would tell

Si las paredes hablaran, estas nos platicarian

As a young child, I learned my mother had two families.

Cuando pequeña, yo aprendí que Mamá tenía dos familias.

Fig. 45. Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #4*, gelatin silver print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm, 1996.

Fig. 46. Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #11*, gelatin silver print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm, 1996.
Fig. 47. Laura Aguilar, *In Sandy’s Room*, gelatin silver print, 35.6 x 45.7 cm, 1989.
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Fig. 53. Laura Aguilar, *Don’t Tell Her Art Can’t Hurt*, gelatin silver prints with hand writing, 127 x 406.4 cm, 1993.
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Fig. 55. Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #9*, gelatin silver print, 40.6 x 50.8 cm, 1996.
Fig. 56. Delilah Montoya, *El Guadalupano*, gelatin silver print, detail, 1998.
Fig. 57. Delilah Montoya, *La Guadalupana*, Kodacolor photo-mural with installation, c. 304.8 x 91.4 cm, Museum of New Mexico, Palace of the Governors, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1998.
Fig. 58. Celia Álvarez Muñoz, *Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in Vogue*, mixed-media installation, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, Texas, 2003.
Fig. 59. Celia Álvarez Muñoz, *Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in Vogue*, mixed-media installation, detail, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, Texas, 2003.

Fig. 60. Celia Álvarez Muñoz, *Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in Vogue*, mixed-media installation, detail, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, Texas, 2003.
Fig. 61. Celia Álvarez Muñoz, *La Sirena*, lambda digital print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm, 1997, and *Furia*, lambda digital print, 152.4 x 101.6 cm, 1999, part of *Fibra y Furia: Exploitation is in Vogue*, Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, Texas, 2003.


I liked hearing about the Coca-Cola breaks
*A mi me gustaba oír de los descansos de Coca-Cola*

in sounds of human voices, music and machines
*en sonidos de voces humanas, música y maquinaria*

One with my grandmother, my aunt and I
*Una con mi abuela, mi tía, y contigo.*

Fig. 66. Laura Aguilar, *Three Eagles Flying*, gelatin silver print, 61 x 152.4 cm, 1990.
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