HISTORY/WHOSE-STORY?
Postcoloniality and Contemporary Chicana Art

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Latinas/Chicanas have radically transformed late-twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century art by introducing issues of gender and sexuality within Latina/o society, as well as by challenging patriarchal colonial and postcolonial orders. Their ambivalent relationship to male-centered colonial cultures and Euro-American feminism situates their artistic production within a bordered space, a decolonial imaginary as noted by Emma Pérez, that is saturated with personal and aesthetic possibilities. By recently gaining acceptance among mainstream museums, galleries, and collectors, Latina/Chicana art has set in motion a disruption of the center/periphery paradigm that often defines power relations in the United States and, in particular, the art world. This article discusses the work of three artists, Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Consuelo Jiménez Underwood, and Delilah Montoya, in light of their individual postcolonial visual epistemologies. Their work not only stands as an exploration and critique of historic objectivity but also responds to challenges brought about by contemporary political and social realities. [Keywords: postcolonial, women in art, Chicana/o art, Delilah Montoya, Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Consuelo Jiménez Underwood]

When looking at imagery produced by Chicana artists, the question arises as to whether or not we can understand and discuss this artwork under the nomenclature of "postcolonialism." An initial examination of the term would seem to throw its applicability to Chicana/o art into question. For scholars who seek to define postcoloniality, the rapidity with which the term has taken on more and more of a semantic load has led to debates over both chronological and contextual applications.[1] Theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin broadly define postcolonialism and then go on to note the speed with which the term went from specific usage to general applicability:

> Post Colonialism deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. As originally used by historians after the Second World War…"postcolonial" had a clearly chronological meaning, designating the post-independence period. However, from the late 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization…[and]…has subsequently been used to signify the political, linguistic, and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies. (186)

While the term's early usage privileges newly independent nations, it is clear that the consequences of colonization continue to inform cultural definitions and self-awareness. In terms of postcolonial studies, this trend has broadened scholarly definitions and chronological parameters even further. Emphasizing the ever-increasing breadth of the discourse, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin go on to state that "post-colonialism as it has been employed in most recent accounts has been primarily concerned to examine the processes and effects of, and reactions to, European colonialism from the sixteenth century up to and including the neo-colonialism of the present day" (188).

While the nature and chronology of postcolonial discourse is broad, so are its mechanisms—that is, the ways in which people respond to the post- or neocolonial presence. This is due, in part, to the diversity of colonial experiences. This marked heterogeneity has led to a veritable laundry list of ways in which writers have voiced the postcolonial experience. According to Stephen Slemon:

> [post-colonialism] has been used as a way of ordering a critique of totalizing forms of Western historicism; as a portmanteau term for a retooled notion of "class," as a subset of both modernism and post-

> structuralism…; as a name for a condition of nativist longing in post-independence national groupings; as a cultural marker of non-residency for a Third World intellectual cadre; as the inevitable underside of a fractured and ambivalent discourse of colonialist power; as an oppositional form of "reading practice." (16)

Questions of Postcoloniality

Given the definitional parameters and mechanisms of postcolonialism, the position of Chicanas/os within this discourse could seem highly problematic. While typically treatises dealing with postcoloniality address the political and cultural fallout inherent in newly formed independent nations, Chicanas/os as a people have no "nation" in the conventional sense. For better or worse, they recognize the fact that they are part of a larger nation. Nonetheless, many Chicanas/os, especially in the Southwest, view themselves as living in "occupied America" (Acuña 1972, 2; Goldman 2001, 52). Adding to this sense of difference is the manner in which Chicanas/os self-identify. While many Chicanas/os maintain their connections to the first peoples of this continent, intrinsic to the very definition of Chicana/o is a recognition of their status as a New World hybrid. Despite the deliberate invocation of indigeneity, the truth of the matter is that a great part of identity is based on a colonial history of biological and cultural miscegenation.

The question then becomes one of how to negotiate traditional notions of postcoloniality with a very real sense of alterity that is dynamic and bicultural in its nature—that is, to recognize as valid a positionality in which identity is contingent upon changing internal and external cultural discourses and reassessments. Within the Chicana/o community, theorists and cultural critics have addressed modes of activism that allow for a variety of positions that can be experienced singularly or simultaneously. They have also described

the interstitial space in which this activism occurs. In this regard, Slemon's "oppositional form of 'reading practice'" benefits greatly from Chela Sandoval's more self-reflexive notion of "oppositional consciousness," which, in its differential mode, allows the subject to self-consciously "read the current situation of power…, choosing and adopting the ideological stand best suited to push against its configurations" (59). Gloria Anzaldúa has also expressed the methodology of oppositional consciousness under the rubric of *la conciencia de la mestiza* (1999). This term references the possibility of action born of numerous sites in which subject identity may lie. It occurs in a dynamic space where negotiated identity is created over and over again by "a continual motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each paradigm" (101–102). Emma Pérez (1999, xvi) labels this "third space" of historical recovery as the "decolonial imaginary" and states that it is "where agency is enacted through third space feminism."[2]

Visual responses to this alterity are particularly apparent in artworks generated by Chicanas since the 1970s. Many artists employ the mechanisms of postcolonial discourse and oppositional consciousness to combat notions of canonical histories and art history as well as their European-based constructs. Given the apparent permanence of their position as part of a larger U.S. construct, some artists have chosen to challenge the center/periphery paradigm that often privileges the dominant system of power and representation over subaltern systems. These works reaffirm particular sites of Chicana/o cultural memory, thereby challenging external hegemonic postures that attempt to erase histories validating alternative visions of the past. In doing so, the artists create bridges for understanding the multivocality present in the United States.

This essay will address the work of three Chicana artists who envision their work as postcolonial responses to the dominant constructions of history.

Painter, performance, and installation artist Celia Herrera Rodriguez (University of California, Berkeley) addresses the blurred boundaries of indigeneity. Her work references an imaginary wherein past indigenous and European interactions collide with the spiritual and implicate the present and future. Fiber artist Consuelo Jiménez Underwood (San Jose State University) examines contested topographies in her work. The U.S.-Mexico border is presented as a site where ideological battles are waged. This conflict is the product of two distinct definitions of "land": one that views it as a historic site of unrestricted passage, another that understands it as reified manifest destiny. The third artist to be discussed here, Delilah Montoya (University of Houston), uses photography and video to subvert colonial iconography and folklore. In doing so, she underlines ongoing class and gender struggles in her home state of New Mexico. Through their art, these three women explore and critique notions of truth and social memory. They also respond to challenges brought about by the continuation of colonial, political and social practices, which include inequities based on race and gender. As will be shown, their artwork exemplifies "la conciencia de la mestiza" in its fully operational mode.

Celia Herrera Rodriguez: Re-inscribed Pasts, Re-visioned Presents

Celia Herrera Rodriguez is one generation and one country removed from her northwest Mexican Tepehuano roots. However, for the artist, the main obstacle blocking access to a fuller understanding of indigeneity can be traced back to the Spanish Conquest and subsequent colonization of the culture during the eighteenth century. Much of her work explores both apparent and hidden ramifications of the cultural encounter between the European and indigenous peoples. It is acknowledgment of this and subsequent moments that enable the reclamation of both the preconquest and the colonial past, as well as the recognition of her current position as heir to multiple histories.

Figure 1.
Celia Herrera Rodriguez, *Red Roots/Black Roots (Tree of Life)*, 1999. Window screen, acrylic paint, wood, linoleum, cotton fabric, nails, 8.3' x 8.3' x 8'. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

In *Red Roots/Black Roots (Tree of Life)* (1999), Herrera Rodriguez recounts the impact of the colonial presence on her family (figure 1). The work was displayed at three venues and is both an installation and a stage for a performance.[3] Like an onion, the work's subsequent layers lead to an inner core that represents the historic moment when Europeans attempted to supplant the Native religions with Christianity and when European bloodlines were mixed with those of the indigenous peoples. The work takes the form of an eight-foot square chamber that rests upon a slightly elevated tiled base. While the top of the chamber is open, painted screens enclose the walls. A tree of life, the focus of the work, is visible through the transparent walls. It consists of the tree, a bundled object supported by its topmost branches of the tree, and the

Christian cross, which is positioned at its base. These three elements act as a metonymic device, invoking both personal memory as well as a larger historical context.

The screened walls are our introduction to the work. Here, generations of Herrera Rodriguez's Tepehuano ancestors, in the form of children, gaze toward the room's center, bearing silent witness to their own history. Clothing and bodily features have been captured in an abbreviated, almost sketched, manner, their presence barely perceptible. This ghost-like quality is enhanced by the use of white paint as well as by the surface on which the artist paints. Because the figures are rendered on only one side of the screen, as the viewer moves from one side of the installation to the next, entire groups of individuals seemingly disappear and reappear, making it impossible to see all of the figures at once. Clearly, these ghosts from the past reference the marginalization of the Tepehuanos into a state of visibility, one nearly subsumed by the forces of colonization. Here, as in the case of most colonial situations, access to history is controlled by the conquerors. So while the figures gaze upon their tree and their history, they can only do so from a single perspective. Frozen as they are within the confines of the mesh, they cannot engage nor can they manipulate their own past.

The multicolored tile work in front of the figures in *Red Roots/Black Roots* serves as both an impediment to history as well as a seductive invitation to that same history. Herrera Rodriguez has chosen to use nine-by-nine-inch tiles that date to the middle of the twentieth century. While these tiles invoke the domestic warmth of mid-century kitchens, rooms tiled in such a fashion would have been accessible only to a rising post–World War II middle class. For the Tepehuanos, access to such privileged spaces would have been made possible only in the context of their roles as domestic workers. The triadic

use of red, white, and blue tiles speaks of migration to the United States brought about by the disruption of traditional systems of subsistence. The green tiles forming another triad of red, white, and green—the colors of the Mexican flag—remind the viewer, and perhaps the figures in the piece itself, that while people may move from place to place, sites of origin remain an immutable part of identity. Across the tiles, handwritten names inventory some of the artist's ancestors and operate as indices referencing the past existence of individuals. However, the record is incomplete. These are slave names, that is, names given to the indigenous people by the Spaniards after conquest. Their indigenous names, along with their true identities, have been masked by the colonial presence and by the passage of time. In an ironic reversal, the viewer has to reassume conceptually the role of a domestic worker and tread across the ersatz bodies of ancestors—here represented by the inscribed names—in order to gain access to the tree of life and, by extension, the institution of history.

The focus of the work, the tree, provides a polyvalent framework that encapsulates past and present. The tepee-like shape of the willow construction was utilized by the artist because of its association with Native American spirituality. Larger, similarly shaped constructions were created by Native Americans as focal points for Ghost Dance ceremonies held during the late nineteenth century (Kracht 2000). These events constituted last ditch public reaffirmations of unity and prayers on the parts of Native Americans. Through their ceremonies, they sought to restore the past, revitalize their slain ancestors, and eliminate the source of their consternation, the White Man. In the Ghost Dance, a pine or willow tree was placed in the center of a plaza and individuals would dance around it. It was believed that the branches extending toward the heavens served as conduits along which prayers could travel to unseen spiritual forces. In this way, personal and communal prayers would be heard

by supernaturals, who would respond to the pleas of a people bordering on extinction. Herrera Rodriguez makes another reference to Native culture by placing a bundle amid the tree's topmost branches. Here, the artist invokes the custom of tree burial formerly practiced by Plains groups such as the Oglala Sioux. Again, proximity to a supernaturally charged heavenly realm was the incentive for the elevated placement of the body.

In Herrera Rodriguez's work, indigenous historic references have been interrupted by the inclusion of the cross, indicating the European presence. The black cord wrapped around the tree cross-references the black-clad Jesuits, purveyors of Christianity in Tepehuano communities. While the bundle represents past generations and, by extension, their offspring, successful unification with traditional supernaturals has been interrupted. The red lifeline, connecting cross to bundle, tethers the spirit of past ancestors to the earth.

The installation was given life as an altar via Herrera Rodriguez's 1999 performance titled *Cositas Quebradas* (broken little things) (figure 2). In this work, the artist physically positions herself outside of the space and history but views with clarity her own past. Her performance—part ceremony, part prayer, part entreaty—focuses upon the suppression of indigenous identity via assimilationist strategies such as the imposition of slave names and the masking of her family's indigeneity by her own parents. In the fifth and final part of her performance, the artist invites audience members to sit on a small textile, a space demarcating what she says is left of her nation. After the distribution of the food into receptacles, she attempts to invoke an understanding of the plight of her people by sharing the experience of loss even if it is only through the actual shattering of material objects born of distant lands. For the artist, the reacquisition and re-membering of indigenous identity is achieved not only

Figure 2.
Celia Herrera Rodriguez, *Red Roots/Black Roots (Tree of Life)*, 1999. Detail of artist performance, *Cositas Quebradas*. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

through the work but also through ceremony. Her gift to her ancestors offers a kind of immortality through visual and narrative historic references and through the acknowledgment of their importance to the artist herself.

While *Red Roots/Black Roots (Tree of Life)* is decidedly aimed toward the past and an overall examination of the impact of colonialism, the artist's most recent series of watercolors are decidedly forward-looking in their direction. In the painting *Ojo de Sabiduría* (spring/font/eye of knowledge) (2004), Herrera Rodriguez again uses a bundled figure but, this time, one that is not bound by the historic referents of colonialism (figure 3). The main figure is situated on a

Figure 3.
Celia Herrera Rodriguez, *Ojo de Sabiduría*, 2004. Watercolor on Kozo (Japanese handmade paper), 29" x 55". Reproduced by permission of the artist.

life-giving red background that indicates a supernatural realm. Depth of field is implied via the deft use of transparent layers of watercolor. In the center of the painting, the main figure arcs in movement, simultaneously dancing with and giving life to fantastic creatures.

Pictorial elements found in Herrera Rodriguez's previous work that reference Church iconography have undergone catachresis and are reinscribed with new meaning proclaiming a newfound indigenous agency and meaning. For instance, the *mandorla*, the luminous cloud that surrounds the Virgin of Guadalupe, is no longer gold and perfectly symmetrical. In Herrera Rodriguez's depiction, the central figure is encircled by a red mandorla marked by irregular, almost explosive, edges. This mandorla can be conceived of as an exclamation mark connoting sudden self-awareness on the part of the figure. The halo, normally associated with Christian icons, has also been modified. It surrounds the head of the figure and now includes triangular elements associated with the Aztec symbol for the sun. As if to underline this source, Herrera Rodriguez has dotted the edges of her sun disc with twenty flowering plants, a reference to the life-giving qualities of the sun and to the Mesoamerican calendar, which was made up of twenty days. Finally, the cross that forms the bundle's head is far removed from Christ and notions of death. Again, Herrera Rodriguez has borrowed from indigenous iconography. This cross is used by both the Tepehuanos and their neighbors, the Huichol. This is a *sikuli*, a cross that connotes the five directions (Furst 2003, 27–28). At the juncture of the cross's arm is a faint *ojo de Dios*, an Eye of God. In Huichol usage, the sikuli is a kind of talisman to protect their children and is constructed over time. The object is given at the time of birth, and an arm is added on each birthday for the next four years. The five points represent not only five directions (north, south, east, west, center), but also the elements of air, earth, fire, and water, with the eye representing the union of all four elements. In each instance, the central

element is associated with supernatural vision and the ability of supernatural beings to see and hear the prayers of the sikuli's owner.

The artist also freely manipulates iconography that is unambiguous in its pre-Columbian origin. These elements uniformly point toward concepts of transformation. For instance, the serpents emanating from three arms of the cross making up the figure's head possess the attributes of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent found in many indigenous mythologies. The creature traditionally mediated both earthly and heavenly realms, and here the artist broadens its domain by painting its body blue, a reference to water. The second element, the butterfly adorning the cloth shrouding the figure, is also transformative in its nature. In this instance, the insect clearly indicates the bundled figure's metamorphosis. The figure will soon break the bonds of its cocoon to realize a new incarnation as an even more powerful being. The third indigenously derived element employed by the artist is that of a *yei* or a holy being (Young 2002, 252–53). These long-waisted, often bigendered beings are part of southwestern religious cosmology and are represented in Navajo dry painting. They are holy beings who address issues of personal and communal healing and restore *hozho*, spiritual balance. Here, Herrera Rodriguez shows only the lower portion of a yellow yei located just below the figure's midpoint. The head of the creature is partially hidden as it dives under one of the swaths of cloth apparently on its journey to impart balance to the transforming body of the bundled being.

Although many of Herrera Rodriguez's earlier artworks can be understood as multilayered tributes to historical moments, her recent works, as exemplified by *Red Roots/Black Roots* and *Ojo de Sabiduría*, represent a synthesis of histories and a validation of a re-visioned present. This can be understood as an act of decolonization. She has transformed the visual vocabulary of the colonial system that shackled Tepehuano spirituality while giving equal voice to these

same indigenous roots. By acknowledging and reconciling the two pasts—the indigenous and the colonial—she amends the present and is able to look toward the future. As viewers, we are left to contemplate the applicability of her Spring of Knowledge to our own lives and to ponder at the potential results of such transformations.

Consuelo Jiménez Underwood: Cartographic Explorations

…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

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.
To show the white man what she thought of his
arrogance,
Yemayá blew that wire fence down.

This land was Mexican once,
was Indian always
and is.

And will be again…

— Gloria Anzaldúa *Borderlands/La Frontera*

The above passage from Anzaldúa (1999, 24–25) seems an appropriate introduction to the work of Consuelo Jiménez Underwood. As in Anzaldúa's work, Underwood charts the geographic, historic, and spiritual realm marked by the "1,950 mile-long open wound," the U.S.-Mexico border. She employs both barbed wire and silk in her art, weaving topographies that recreate conflicts and contradictions born of historic circumstances. In her works, the border becomes a conceptual field in which she lays bare questions regarding colonialism as well as the nature of an externally imposed border, a tangible symbol of the ongoing colonial presence.

Movement through and beyond the border is a leitmotif in her fiber art and is reflective of childhood experiences. Born in the Southwest of a Chicana mother and Huichol father, Underwood was part of a large migrant farming family. Because of this, her youth was determined by the seasonal demands of agribusiness in California. The experience of moving from place to place led to an early awareness of the relationship between life and land. At the same time, discrepancies between the value of the land, as ancient provider of food and spiritual sustenance, versus the inhumane manner in which those who cultivated the land were treated, also left an indelible mark on her psyche. Her life amid these contradictions provided the artist with a stage on which she could visually contest these realities with an indigenous rescription of territory.

In *Virgen de la Frontera* (figure 4), from 1991, Underwood pays homage to her migrant childhood and the seasonal night passages from one side of the U.S.-Mexico border to the other. Issues of liminality and specificity are literally interwoven across the field of this textile. The darkness of the piece imparts a sense of apprehension about the unknown territory and the silken threads of varying colors speak of the unevenness and harshness of the geological terrain crossed by migrants. But the passage here is not just a physical one; it is a passage that is also experienced at a cognitive level, where that which is experienced does

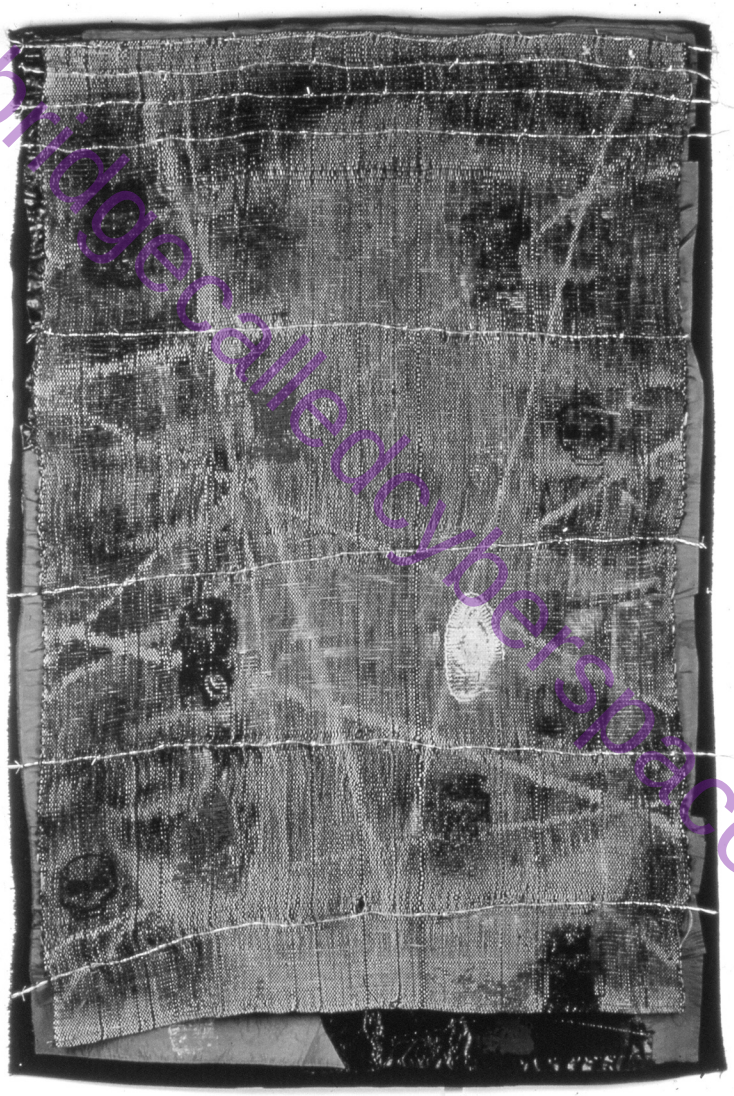

Figure 4.
Consuelo Jiménez Underwood, *Virgen de la Frontera*, 1991. Silkscreened, woven, sewn. Linen, cotton, barbed wire, 94" x 60". Reproduced by permission of the artist.

battle with that which is unseen and unknown. This is a psychological landscape filled with anxiety about the journey and the journey's end.

The physical markers of the present danger associated with the U.S.-Mexico border are woven into the fabric of *Virgen de la Frontera* in two ways. The first of these is in the form of the irregularly spaced barbed wire inserted among the weft threads. These metal threads reference the actual lines of barbed and razor wire that form man-made barriers impeding migrant crossings. Danger at the journey's end is stated via the golden diagonal lines darting across the field of Underwood's piece. These are the headlights of the INS, or *la migra*. Rather than represent the border patrol in their fully realized corporeal form, Underwood only hints at their very real presence via these lights, their impalpable manifestation. Hence the sudden appearance of lines shooting across the darkened desert floor constitutes both illusions and allusions. The lines are ethereal references to faceless individuals who have the power of life-altering decisions over migrants.

Responses to questions of unseen dangers woven into the fabric's narrative are given in the form of images stamped randomly across the textile. Dark *calaveras*, skulls, of ancestors, dot the landscape. These are polyvalent in their meaning. They reference ancient ancestors who lived and died in the desert without ever knowing the reality of the line that would be inscribed upon the land. At the same time, they speak of the tenacity of more recent unsuccessful migrants who were willing to sacrifice their very lives in the pursuit of better conditions for their children. They are the same skulls that are celebrated on home altars during *el Día de los Muertos*. These calaveras own the land demarcated by the textile and bear witness to successive groups of travelers who attempt night journeys across the border.

Finally, what remains is the single stamped icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe, referenced in the work's title. Located in the third register of the textile, this golden figure functions as a talisman protecting the single migrant traversing this field. The power of Guadalupe derives, not only from her identity as a Christian icon, but also from her well-known association with the pre-Columbian mother goddess, Tonantzín.[4] She thus represents the fecundity of the earth as well as a maternal protectress. As pointed out by Anzaldúa, Guadalupe/Tonantzín's inherent bicultural identity makes her "the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-Mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess" (1999, 52). It should be remembered, however, that the Virgin is the product of a colonial incursion. As such, she has been the object of controversial reinscription by contemporary artists such as Yolanda M. López, Ester Hernández, and, most recently, Alma Lopez. In Underwood's work, she is a reference to the double-edged faith that sustains travelers. While the faith has its basis in the tenets of traditional Catholicism, the Virgin as earth deity holds the promise of a better life. Guadalupe floats above the desert floor, above the lights, and presumably will float beyond the lines of la migra and their barbed wire.

Deer Crossing, a ten-foot long silk weaving from 1997, also addresses border crossings (figure 5). Unlike *Virgen de la Frontera*, the references to topographies are much more explicit. For instance, the blue that constitutes the lower part of the narrow swath of woven silk alludes to *el Rio Bravo* (the Rio Grande, as it is known in the United States). The delineated, white, silk-screened designs within the blue field represent the state flowers of the four U.S. states bordering Mexico: the golden poppy (California), the cactus blossom of the saguaro (Arizona), a bluebonnet (Texas), and a yucca flower (New Mexico). The artist has deliberately abstracted the representations of the plants to resemble designs

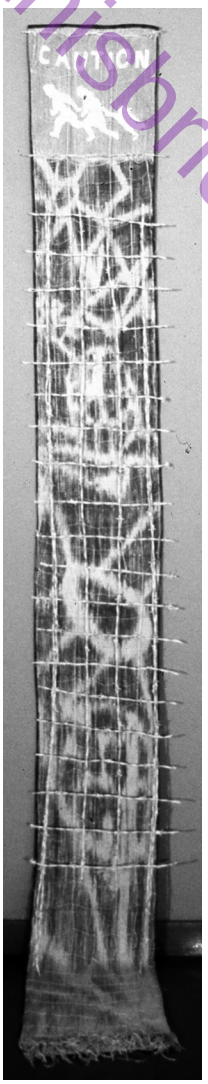

Figure 5.
Consuelo Jiménez Underwood, *Deer Crossing*, 1997. Woven, dyed, sewn. Silk, rayon, 10' x 24". Reproduced by permission of the artist.

found in ancient Anasazi petroglyphs or Chumash rock paintings. In doing so, she reminds the viewer that the plants, the river, and the people who have historically inhabited this land are older than any modern border. Nonetheless, we are also reminded of the present reality and that even the flowers are now restricted by a fence that defines the edges of U.S. territory. Here, the border is represented by barbed wire, woven and painted white.

Also part of our modern reality is the bright yellow "caution" symbol located above the blue zone. Such signs are commonly posted along California freeways near San Diego and warn motorists of border-crossing immigrants. Holding hands, a mother, father, and child are shown fleeing across a highway and are presented in a style that is reminiscent of deer-crossing signs. The artist has rightly noted that this kind of representation has the effect of dehumanizing human beings and creating a field of reference that facilitates the transformation of undocumented immigrants into "illegal aliens" (Underwood 2001). One could push this interpretation even further and suggest that the image's similarity to the often bullet-riddled deer-crossing signs implies that the family group constitutes yet another species to be hunted and that an open season has been declared on migrants. However, the image may be read on an additional ambiguous level. While references to deer-crossing signs are apparent, deer themselves carry polyvalent meanings for the people with whom Underwood self-identifies. Deer are universally hunters' quarry, but among the Huichol and Yaqui, they are also totemic animals and spirit helpers. The artist's representation of the family could therefore point to the presence of contradictory simultaneous meanings—one of danger and the other of indigenous affiliation and totemic power. The implication here is the possibility of an ongoing struggle for contested space that extends to the home turf of the opposition's semiological domain.

Consuelo Jiménez Underwood's artwork explores the cultural fluidity of borders in the face of man-made impediments. She makes good use of the multiple traditions available to her. Using a medium as old as the Americas themselves, the textile becomes a map through which we visually travel the tale. Embedded prose of barbed wire and silk relate histories of indigenous and nonindigenous conflict and express implications of power relations between people who work the land and those who own it. Perhaps an even larger issue that goes to the heart of her work is that of the nature of the border itself. On one level, the geopolitical borders that we traverse are inherently fictive creations. Their artificiality is made evident by the ever-changing historical criteria that colonial powers have used to erect these borders. On another level, these borders are very real and crossing them can entail serious consequences. In the end, Underwood provides viewers with a personal cartographic journey through which they can view with clarity the impact of real and imagined lines of demarcation on the life of those who have traveled the tale.

Delilah Montoya: Our Saints Among Us…

In 1998, New Mexico celebrated the 400th-year anniversary of its so-called founding by the Spaniards.[5] The years between Juan de Oñate y Salazar's arrival in 1598 and the present era have been marked by a constant reaffirmation of colonial Hispanic identity as the official standard by which to understand New Mexico history and culture. Politically and culturally speaking, this Iberian-identified Hispanic identity has been privileged over Mexican American/Chicana/o identity.[6] In the realm of politics, the resulting antagonisms between upper-class Hispanic *criollos* and poorer agrarian and working-class populations have been an ongoing source of tension and division on both sides (Meier and Ribera 1993, 93).[7] In terms of culture, art production has been driven by the market and by fixed notions of Hispanic authenticity. Traditional art forms, such as devotional imagery, not only promote privileged

Hispanic identity, but are also subject to rules of production. For instance, *santeros*, or saint makers, who fashion devotional imagery in two- and three-dimensional forms, have an established guild that maintains strict codes regarding formal representation and canonical interpretation of art. Those who waiver from or challenge the guild's rules can expect expulsion from the group. Additionally, since authenticity is associated with guild products, outcasts can also expect to be edged out of the art market that sustains them (Tapia 2004). It appears that there is no room in the New Mexico art scene for those who question the constructed myth of identity or who challenge monolithic visions of cultural purity. Artists who reference devotional imagery outside of the sanctioned ideological framework find themselves going up against a negative bias born out of a colonial elite structure that is more than 400 years old.

It is in the light of ongoing colonial traditions that we must consider the work of photographer and video artist Delilah Montoya. Using her camera, she records, critiques, and re-members the cultural, sexual, and political ramifications of the constructed mythologies that are part of a colonial New Mexican identity. In many works, she lays claim to her own identity as a *nuevo mexicana* vis-à-vis canonical representations of devotional imagery. At the same time, her critique of New Mexico's sanctioned mythology is never far behind, and it usually comes in the form of contextual changes to the canon. Thus altered, the art calls into question both the standard modes of representation and the exclusive ownership of iconic forms that elite New Mexican groups seemingly possess.

A case in point is Montoya's fourteen-foot photomural, *La Guadalupana*, from 1998 (figure 6). Here, the artist reexamines codified sacred traditions while critiquing class structures. As noted by Victor Sorell (1999), the function of photograph and altar are the same in this case, as both can be recognized as

Figure 6.
Delilah Montoya, *La Guadalupana*, 1998. Photo mural, 14' x 10' x 4'. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Mexico. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

"a tribute to the past as well as a reification of memory" (23). Montoya's overall format is in keeping with traditional altars. Forty-nine separate photo panels make up a *retablo*, or two-dimensional sacred image. Offerings are placed on the floor before the image. However, the similarities to colonial-inspired altars end here, for the central iconic space offers an unlikely subject—a handcuffed *pinto*, or convict, shown from behind. Tattooed across his back is the patroness of the Americas, the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Montoya has deliberately divided the mural into two photographic zones: the central core, in which she utilizes black-and-white photography, and the border, in which she employs color photography. The artist's choice of black and white in the central field brings to mind documentary photography and speaks to the bleak reality of mug shots and captivity. Seemingly, the only hope to be found in this dismal institutional setting is in the image of the Virgin, whose yellow mandorla has been hand-colored by the artist. While Guadalupe's presence as a protective, sacred figure references traditional Catholicism, her image is also employed in a manner never intended by the Church. Inside the context of a prison, her placement on the back of a convict acts as a talisman, warding off potential rape by other Catholic inmates, who would have to gaze upon the Virgin while carrying out the act and thus subject themselves to the wrath of God. As unusual as the placement of the Virgin is, so are the offerings found on the pinto's arms. Echoing the shape of the Virgin's mandorla, his arms are covered with images derived from popular culture—among these, *maracas*, a so-called Poncho figure, Yosemite Sam, and a hypersexualized señorita. These offerings bespeak the integration of popular culture into the sacred sphere and are celebratory statements of *rasquachismo*, a Chicana/o bicultural aesthetic sensibility reflective of "a view from *los de abajo*" (Ybarra-Frausto 1990, 156).

The colored photographs framing the central icon make references to family snapshots and the intimacy of personal memories. The icon of the Virgin is repeated on the backs and arms of a variety of males as represented in the photographic fragments surrounding the central figure. The variety of contexts for the Virgin and the outdoor setting indicate to the viewer that the photos have been taken in a space where choices can be made without institutional repercussions or personal considerations regarding safety. Memories of blue skies and New Mexico's landscape are visible over the subjects' shoulders, as are women who are shown caressing the male subject in some of the photo fragments. These still shots are narratives of desire—they operate in a manner similar to memory, where dreams and reality merge into idealized, fragmented vignettes.

La Guadalupana is deliberately provocative and challenges the viewer to question traditional notions of where God is found—and where redemption happens, for that matter. Further, it is a deliberate assault on canonical notions of representations associated with colonial Church doctrine in a society that privileges authenticity and a continuation of colonial elite hierarchy. *La Guadalupana* shatters traditional mythology while acknowledging an iconographic hybridity of meaning in the religious practices enacted by different social classes; the Virgin, as protectress, is not the exclusive domain of the upper classes. Nonetheless, the image does follow, albeit in a nontraditional way, Christian doctrine. This inmate is the new prodigal son—unnamed, and in dire straits to be sure—but not untouched or forgotten by God. He reminds us that distinctions between saints and sinners are rarely clear or unambiguous.

In a more recent piece, *San Sebastiana: Angel de la Muerte* (2004), Montoya combines her photographic skills with digital technology to produce a work via two venues: a continuous DVD and an online, interactive video (accessible at http://www.uh.edu/~dmontoy2/) (figure 7). The cult of the folkloric icon

Figure 7.
Delilah Montoya, *San Sebastiana: Angel de la Muerte*, 2004. Movie poster, ink jet on mylar. 35" x 24". Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Doña Sebastiana emerged during New Mexico's colonial period. The saint's primary role is to accompany the dead into the hereafter, and, for this reason, santeros have traditionally represented Doña Sebastiana in the form of a skeleton seated in a cagelike wooden cart.[8] The cart references the *carretas de la muerte*, that is, the death carts that were "loaded with heavy rocks and drawn by hooded [*penitentes*] to a site representing Calvary" as public acts of self-mortification (Yorba 2001, 88–89). In her sculpted manifestations, Sebastiana represents the public acknowledgment of the presence and burden of death.

In Montoya's updated version, Sebastiana is very much animated and shown "off-duty" in the context of her private life.[9] In an often-poignant yet humorous manner, the artist relates her version of events just prior to Sebastiana's agreement to take on the job of New World allegory for death. In the interactive video's introductory narrative, Montoya provides the viewer with a historical context through which to understand Sebastiana and her New World hybridity:

> One cannot help but remember the complementary Western icon—Saint Sebastian, who during the early Christian era was martyred. This saint's depiction is of an euphoric looking Roman strapped to a column who is shot through the head, the trunk as well as the legs with arrows. Mm, once he crossed the ocean, did this saint receive a gender transfer? It is well know that in pre-colonial America "death" is represented as a female skeleton. If Sebastiana was to survive as a death figure in hybrid America, the gender could only be understood as female. Yet, if the truth was to be known Sebastiana never wanted to be "Death" [;] really all she wanted was love, if not love at least to be respected. In the following interactive video, God must convince her that she is right for the job. Her character is revealed as she barters with him for sainthood.

It is her humanity that God desires at the deathbed. Sebastiana loves gossip and believes Time should be halted to allow a revealing story to conclude. Ultimately this gives way to her self-righteous nature as she uses a satirical wit to comment on the "chisme/gossip" of human folly.

After entering the site, the viewer is asked to contemplate and assess the differences between two versions of the same script—one in which we view Sebastiana as she views herself, that is, as a fully fleshed, beautiful, and mature diva, and the other in which we view her from the vantage point of the looking glass as a *calaca*, or skeleton. Sebastiana then takes her position by literally approaching her vanity, her dressing table. Phone to ear, she is in the process of *estar chismeando*, or gossiping about a woman in the barrio who has become pregnant out of wedlock. Though it may seem off the point, the inclusion of this scandalous footnote has two functions: it bestows an air of flawed humanity to Sebastiana, and it also allows the artist indirectly to validate her own family's "unofficial" history (Montoya 2004). Montoya's grandfather was the illegitimate son of Charles Illfeld, an Anglo landowner. Her great-grandmother was forty-seven years old when she gave birth to the artist's grandfather. After Charles Illfeld died, his two legitimate heirs did not wish to share the money with their illegitimate brother and therefore "closed up" the will. Although Montoya's grandfather died at ninety, he was never able to benefit from his father's vast wealth, nor were his twelve children, of whom only five survived. At the time of Montoya's grandfather's death, the will had been closed for forty or fifty years, and the legitimate sons of Illfeld willed the money to the University of New Mexico. In the context of the video, Doña Sebastiana represents both the pride and folly of such situations as well as the inherent unfairness of life.

As the story progresses, we are shown that Sebastiana's vanity, her narcissism, leads to her downfall. Her vanity is indicated by the ever-present mediation of

the mirror. In Sebastiana's diva manifestation, we understand her through her reflection. She flirts with herself and with an imagined suitor while posing and speaking in a seductive manner. When God makes his appearance and asks her to be the angel of death, she answers his queries, again via her reflection. The discussion she has with God differs from the playful conversations with herself—as it is impossible to hide one's true self from God; she is frank and tries to avoid committing herself to the job that the Almighty has in store for her. He tries seducing her with flattery, noting her success in earlier roles such as the tax collector. Not buying his line, she retorts: "Tax collector! I hated that job…At least as a *puta* [whore], people ran to me and not from me!" It is only after he offers to make her a saint that she agrees to take on the position of angel of death. For her, this new position signifies a raise in her current status. Nonetheless, Sebastiana, true to her optimistic (and opportunistic) nature, muses at the video's close, "I wonder, how close would I be to an archangel?"

Ever the mestiza, Sebastiana walks between two worlds. As the namesake of a Saint Sebastian, she is as helpless to stave off the arrows of fate as he, and, in the end, she acquiesces to the will of God. However, unlike her silently suffering male counterpart, Montoya's Sebastiana has something to say about the process. Clearly outgunned, she tries to look toward the future possibilities that may lie within the job description inscribed by the Almighty. Sebastiana's ability to visualize her agency within these confines is intrinsic to the definition of oppositional consciousness. History aside, we are left to wonder if she ever did make archangel.

In both *La Guadalupana* and *San Sebastiana*, Montoya responds to the colonial hegemonic control of cultural icons. Embedded in her inquiry are questions of how devotional images function within a modern context and within nonelite class structures. The alternative interpretations offered by the artist are

reflective of hybrid realities. These realities are given agency by unconventional reinscriptions of the canonical rules that govern representation and behavior: the Virgin does indeed belong on the back of a pinto, and Doña Sebastiana is, after all, psychically and emotionally fleshed despite skeletal voiceless archetypes promoted by *santeros*.

Conclusion

The three artists whose works have been examined in this article critique the colonial presence by setting up an oppositional reading of Western historicism. History and memory are not always recorded by those in power. However, this is not to say that the artists' visual discourses lack complexity, for their artworks go beyond a mere contestation of imposed history. While Herrera Rodriguez and Underwood position themselves within their indigenous traditions and use the visual mechanism of precontact and colonial iconographic motifs, such positioning constitutes something greater than merely romanticized nativist longing. There is a recognition of their own hybridity, as both are keenly aware of the impact of biculturalism on their work: after all, the artists are also the inheritors of Western cultural and academic traditions. Likewise, Montoya's use of photography and video, media often associated with the West, underlines her debt to nonindigenous technology. In the end, however, it is the ease with which the artists employ visual code-switching and their willingness to exploit culturally polyvalent referents that gives claim to their mestiza consciousness. As in all things postcolonial, there is a kind of etymological slide and glide inherent in definitions of Chicana art. To be Chicana/o is to be informed by many colonial pasts that simultaneously suggest multiple readings of the present. As such, Chicana artists and their work are able to validate alternative cultural experiences that are essential to our understanding of the larger American experience.

Notes

I offer my sincerest thanks to artists Celia Herrera Rodriguez, Consuelo Jiménez Underwood, and Delilah Montoya. Access to their artwork and insights—both born of *la conciencia de la mestiza*—made this article possible. I am also indebted to Laura Ellingson and Andrea Pappas, both of Santa Clara University, who helped me to negotiate arguments involving theory and content during the final stages of my work.

[1] See Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2000, 186–92), for a current summary of debates surrounding the spelling and usage of "postcoloniality."

[2] In art-related venues, Anzaldúa and I have explored this same space under the designation of *Nepantla*, an Aztec term that references both the state and site of transition and transformation (Anzaldúa 1993, 110; Cortez 2001).

[3] This work was part of a traveling exhibit titled *Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art* and was shown from fall 1999 through fall 2000 at three venues: Tufts University Gallery in Medford, Massachusetts; the de Saisset Museum at Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, California; and the Landmark Arts Gallery at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas.

[4] The literature on Guadalupe-Tonantzín is extensive. Throughout the Americas, the icon constitutes a site of desire and takes on different semantic loads according to the desires of the devotees and the historical situation. For Guadalupe-Tonantzín's transformation from indigenous cult symbol to criollo nationalist symbol during Mexico's colonial period, see Jeanette Favrot Peterson (1992). For a comparison between Malintzín and Guadalupe as binary opposites, a discussion of the idealization of Guadalupe by Mexicans and Chicanos, and the reassessment of both icons by contemporary writers, see Norma Alarcón (1989). For the use of Guadalupe as an important cultural icon modified by Chicana artists during the Chicano movement, see Sybil Venegas (1977).

[5] I have borrowed part of the section title from the exhibition catalog, *Our Saints Among Us: 400 Years of New Mexican Devotional Art* (Awalt 1998). The volume features *santos* from the extensive collection of Barbe Awalt and Paul Rhetts and presents them according to "major devotional themes." With few exceptions, all of the sacred imagery is stylistically conventional in appearance. In the present essay, Montoya confronts this canon by offering alternative sites of devotion and giving a rather nontraditional voice to one of its santos.

[6] This situation has resulted in the production of homogenous histories that exclude other ethnic groups, including women. In recent years, a number of studies have challenged canonical representations of New Mexican histories and relations between different cultures. Sylvia Rodríguez (1996) examines the Indian-Spanish relations and the mitigation of the conquest via the performance of the Matachines Dance. Deena J. González (1999) confronts notions of female passivity in her examination of Spanish-Mexican women and the challenge they posed to Euro-American colonizing institutions.

[7] An early example of this is the 1890s formation of the "Santa Fe Ring," a group of wealthy Euroamericans and twenty rich Hispanic landowners who joined forces and defrauded hundreds of

poorer farmers in order to acquire more land. See Meier and Ribera 1993, 93.

[8] For a traditional representation of Sebastiana in her cart, see Charlie Carrillo's *Mi Comadre Sebastiana* on page 12 of Barbe Awalt's *Our Saints Among Us* (1998).

[9] As noted by Ann Marie Leimer (2006, 35), Montoya's grandfather was a member of the Penitente Brotherhood, and it is likely that the artist became aware of the confraternity's devotional images through him.

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