THE VISUAL ARTS OF LINDA VALLEJO: Indigenous Spirituality, Indigenist Sensibility, and Emplacement

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Analyzing nearly forty years of art by Linda Vallejo, this article argues that her indigenist sensibility and indigenous spirituality create the aesthetics of disruption and continuity. In turn this entwined aesthetics generates emplacement, a praxis that resists or remedies the injuries of colonialism, patriarchy, and other systems of oppression that displace and disavow indigenous, Mexican, and Chicana/o populations in the Americas. Her visual art fits squarely within the trajectory of Chicana feminist decolonial practice, particularly in its empowerment of indigenous communities, Mexicans, and Chicana/os in the hemisphere.

Key Words: *Emplacement, hemispheric studies, aesthetic practice, spiritual mestizaje, decolonial imaginary, indigenous epistemology.*

Born in Los Angeles and raised by three generations of Mexican-heritage women, Linda Vallejo creates an *oeuvre* that is easy to understand as feminist and indigenist. Ancestral women, including three great-grandmothers, grandmothers, her mother, and several great aunts, were the artist's first sources of feminist and indigenous knowledge. Vallejo describes one great-grandmother as "una indígena" because she was short, had dark skin, and wore trenzas and huaraches; she was also very strong, even fierce, having worked in the fields as she migrated north (Vallejo 2013).[1] The appellation indicates the way in which Vallejo understands knowledge and subjectivity as emerging from material conditions, social forces, and affect, rather than biology.

Vallejo is also a world traveler. Because of her father's military service, she visited "all the major museums of Europe, many of them as a very young girl" (Vallejo 2013). This exposure at an early age to European art, not

reproductions, influenced her artistic process. While attending a boarding school in Madrid, Vallejo traveled throughout Spain and to Portugal, Italy, and France to study Western history, mythology, and ancient civilizations. She was enthralled by the technical and compositional revelations that become available when witnessing art in person. Her approach to learning was soon predicated on a personal encounter with art.

This aesthetic process was central as Vallejo turned to indigenous cultures. In 1975, while studying printmaking at California State University, Long Beach, the artist was introduced to Sister Karen Boccalero, the Franciscan nun who in 1970 co-founded Self Help Graphics and Art (SHG) in East Los Angeles with Carlos Bueno, Antonio Ibañez, and Frank Hernandez.[2] Vallejo was hired in 1975 to assist with the Barrio Mobile Art Studio (Davalos and Gunckel 2014, 49). This involvement with an arts organization at the center of the Chicano art movement would further solidify her commitment to indigenous knowledge as well as her complex identity as a "Chicana-indígena." A critical turning point that further inspired Vallejo to cultivate an "interest in ancient cultures and symbols and songs" of Mesoamerica occurred when Sister Karen and her co-founders initiated a project to make día de los muertos into a community celebration (Vallejo 2013). In the mid-1970s, SHG was refining its vision for Day of the Dead, the event to honor and commune with those who have passed, registering the "intersection between [Catholic and indigenous] belief systems" (Medina and Cadena 2002, 75).[3] During their research, artists at SHG, including Vallejo, could find only a few books on the subject, and this inspired her to return to the learning style she had developed in Europe (Davalos and Gunckel 2014, 65–66). She knew she had to see in person the art and architecture of Mexico and immerse herself "in [her] own classical culture" (Vallejo 2013, 2014b).[4] Vallejo made several trips to Mexico to see the "pyramids . . . and to study the gods," visiting ancient sites a number of times

(Vallejo 2013). Like many artists at the time, Vallejo wanted to understand the oldest non-European cultural and aesthetic influences for herself and other Chicana/os.

Vallejo's integration of art and life, however, crystalized in the late 1970s when she joined Flores de Aztlán, a danzante troupe directed by Josefina Gallardo. According to art historian Sybil Venegas, Vallejo's "life experiences and spiritual sensibilities coalesced . . . when not only her art but also her spiritual life became immersed in the Red Road, Sweat Lodge circles, indigenous *danza* and both ancient and contemporary indigenous philosophy, spiritual practice, and community" (2010, 102). Flores de Aztlán performed ceremonia "based on Mesoamerican traditions and values" and taught workshops about ancient cultures and arts of the Americas, traveling throughout the Southwest to cultural centers, schools, colleges, and public parks and building a network of indigenous artists, scholars, and community cultural workers (Medina 1998, 196). Vallejo studied Maya and Azteca ritual dance forms with the troupe for over eight years and even after she stopped dancing and teaching, she continued her spiritual devotion. For more than two decades, she "poured water" and accepted leadership roles in the practice of North American sacred indigenous ceremonies, eventually bringing her two sons to and mentoring other young people in the traditions of healing and homage (Vallejo 2013, 2014a).[5]

Linda Vallejo demonstrates a profound indigenous epistemology that allows her to blend multiple sources of aesthetic inspiration and life experiences into a decolonial imaginary (Pérez 1999; see also Lugones 2010). I argue that Los Angeles-based artist Linda Vallejo has been producing for nearly forty years the "aesthetics of disruption and continuity" through an integration of indigenous spirituality and indigenist sensibility (Román-Odio 2013, 96).[6] An aesthetic of disruption defies the colonial legacy, which "makes it possible to transcend

dominant meaning systems" and visually renders feminist decolonial notions of belonging and space (96). This affirmation of indigenous people, cultures, and places forms one avenue of an aesthetic of continuity. Together the joined aesthetics of disruption and continuity propose the emplacement of Chicana/os, Mexicans, and indigenous people—all populations that were and are the target of colonial and imperial rule in the Americas—by visualizing and articulating them within the social imaginary of the hemisphere and within public and civic space. Emplacement—as both a physical and social location—offers a method of healing from injustice, isolation, erasure, or alienation.[7] In this way, Vallejo's work is generative, remedying the historical and ongoing colonial and patriarchal displacements to which indigenous, Mexican, and Chicana/o people are subject. I position Linda Vallejo's work squarely within the aesthetic trajectories of indigenous, feminist, and Chicana arts, particularly the decolonizing artistic practices of Delilah Montoya (Cortez 2007; Leimer 2006), Carmen Lomas Garza (Cortez 2010; Gaspar de Alba 2004), Yolanda M. López (Davalos 2008, 2009), Consuelo Jimenez Underwood (Cortez 2007), and Celia Herrera Rodríguez (Cortez 2007).

Bridging the Political and the Spiritual: Indigeneity and Indigenism

Guisela Latorre provides a useful distinction that illuminates the orientation that is visualized across Vallejo's oeuvre and lived experience. According to Latorre, the pair "*indigeneity* [and its adjective form, indigenous] . . . refers to the organic expressions that emerge from the indigenous communities themselves, which may or may not have anything to do with the official Indigenism often espoused by nation-states" (2008, 3), whereas "Indigenism refers to the act of consciously adopting an indigenous identity—which may otherwise not be fully self-evident—for a political or strategic purpose" (2). As Latorre cautions, "Indigenism," or indigenismo as it is known in Latin America, operates as an ideology for *or* against "native

peoples themselves" (3). Mexico, the United States, and Canada have employed "Indigenist campaigns [that] sought to assimilate and acculturate native peoples into national culture" (3). However, when "Indigenist" ideology is put to work for Native peoples, it functions as a strategy for empowerment and resistance, particularly when it challenges the status quo and white supremacy.

In this way, Linda Vallejo is an indigenist artist who proclaims origins that predate European colonialism and US expansionism. She makes visible that which is invisible within the dominant cultural narratives of the United States and Mexico. Operating within Chicana/o philosophical rethinking of mestizaje, Vallejo aligns with the work of Rafael Pérez-Torres (2006), Norma Alarcón (1998), and others who "shifted from a term that erases indigenous ancestry to one that claims it, from one that signals only racial mixture to one that celebrates cultural hybridity, from one that bespeaks narrow nationalism to one, as in [Gloria] Anzaldúa, that dismantles that striving" (Delgadillo 2011, 11). Her tactic of belonging does not duplicate settler colonialism or nationalism and the goals of territorial possession. Latorre also observes that "Chicana/o Indigenismo" relies on "many of the strategies and tools of previous Indigenist initiatives" but with "goals" that are "critically different" in their critique of the nation-state (4). Finally, Vallejo's dedication to ceremonia and to the spiritual beliefs of balance and interconnectedness illustrate that "Indigenist and indigeneous expressions can overlap" (3). The spiritual needs that are fed during a sweat or the time in dedication to cultivating community, trust, and responsibility are processes that not only challenge the nation-state's vision of Indigenism, they exist outside of the nation-state. Simultaneously, her life and work embrace and propose empowerment, rejuvenation, and transformation. In this way, Vallejo's practice and her art interrupt the coloniality of power—that long hangover from European colonial domination

and its creation of a racial and gendered social order that "has proven to be more durable and stable" than colonial rule itself (Quijano 2000, 533).[8]

Laura Pérez articulates a critical undertaking within Chicana/o scholarship by exploring the political significance of spirituality (2007). Breaking from materialist views of religion and spirituality as false ideology, Pérez documents how Chicana artists engage spirituality as a decolonial strategy. According to Pérez, "spirituality . . . is inseparable from questions of social justice, with respect to class, gender, sexuality, culture, and 'race'" (20). As Theresa Delgadillo notes, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) proposed such a relationship between spirituality and social justice with her concept spiritual mestizaje, a "transformative renewal of one's relationship to the sacred through a radical and sustained multimodal and self-reflexive critique of oppression in all its manifestations and a creative and engaged participation in shaping life that honors the sacred" (Delgadillo 2011, 1). An awareness of this relationship leads to "spiritual activism," the simultaneous inner and outer work necessary for social and material change in the world (Anzaldúa 2002). Similarly, Vallejo's art intervenes against or disrupts historical and cultural erasure by referencing and validating Native peoples that suffered the indignities of colonization and imperialism. She comes to these topics through an indigenous spirituality that enjoins all beings. Furthermore, this practice and the inner work it produces interrupts a western evolutionary model that constructs indigenous cultures and arts as inferior to European ones (Calvo-Quirós 2013; Pérez 2007; Sendejo 2013). More importantly, spirituality is generative of change, as Anzaldúa notes in her discussion of spiritual activism (2002). The indigenous spirituality and indigenist sensibility of Vallejo allows Chicana/os and Native people to see themselves as whole within a universe in which they are vitally connected; thus, they are emplaced.

Notably, Vallejo's investment in indigenous culture is not nostalgic for an idealized past. The aesthetics of disruption and continuity require contemporary Native communities and places. In short, unlike those Chicana and Chicano artists who emphasize the portrayal of an ancient cultural homeland, Mesoamerican civilizations, and historical recovery, Vallejo creates images of the contemporary spiritual landscape of Native peoples. This visual attention to current spaces and places aligns with her ongoing collaborations with Native Americans to establish and perform ceremonia, her leadership within indigenous circles, and her participation in collective healing. Challenging the coloniality of power, she insists on indigenous belonging, place, and relevance in our contemporary world. This maneuver allows her to sidestep nostalgia and its melancholy for a relic culture, twin conditions of settler colonialism.

In what follows, I examine the work of Linda Vallejo focusing on several series that span across nearly forty years of aesthetic production: *Spirit Cloak* (1978–1990) and *Tree People* (1980–1990), two sculptural and found-object series that depict a visual record of continuity with an indigenous spirituality; the indigenist sensibility that disrupts settler colonialism by emplacing indigenous people through an exploration of earth, water, fire, and air; and *Make 'Em All Mexican* (2007–present), her most current project that draws on her long-term interest in manufactured objects, known as ready-mades, and the repurposing of objects. While each series imagines a decolonial subjectivity, *Make 'Em All Mexican* (*MEAM*) imagines over several time periods the quest for belonging in a context of political invisibility, denial, and rejection. *MEAM* presents an alternative sense of self and its relationship to the cosmos. Therefore, I offer an extended discussion of *MEAM* as its ironic and humorous visual emplacement of Mexicans illuminates the aesthetics of disruption and of continuity. As a decolonial imaginary, *Make 'Em All Mexican*

conveys the disorientation anticipated by the rupture of norms and the comfort provided to Chicana/os and indigenous people who through the disruption of coloniality find a sense of belonging. The series illustrates how an indigenous epistemology can restore dignity and emplacement, thereby challenging the coloniality of power and its interlocking forms of oppression that render Mexicans, Chicana/os, and indigenous people insignificant in the nation and hemisphere.

I purposefully discuss a range of works that are technically and stylistically different and make use of a variety of media—sculpture, painting, and repurposing of objects—to demonstrate the robust coherence of Vallejo's aesthetic project. In this way, my analysis directly challenges art historians and curators who position Vallejo's work as disjunctive and divergent. While her body of work has been described as "diverse" or "varied," this interpretation appears to be driven by the artist's ability to work in multiple styles, techniques, and media (Brown 2010, 15; Landi 2010, 141; Moreno 2010, 192). Although Vallejo's oeuvre is internally divergent in style, I argue that it is conceptually consistent, a reflection of and an appreciation for the enduring nature of the divine and humanity's relationship with the life force of the natural world.[9] Vallejo's oeuvre is informed by a spiritual impulse to celebrate and honor the interconnectedness of nature and humanity, a desire to acknowledge the life force of the natural world, and a preference to emplace disregarded peoples who desire a location in the world. Vallejo's work is "explicitly contextual" and signals a feminist and indigenous complex relationality that understands all beings as living in relationship to the world around them (Román-Odio 2013, 96). Interconnectedness is both a spiritual belief and a social justice principle, reinforcing the unavoidable link between spirituality and collective action (Medina 2014).

Indigenous Spirituality: *Tree People* and *Spirit Cloak* as Aesthetic of Continuity

Vallejo began her professional artistic career exploring the spiritual world of ancient cultures of Mexico, investigating the iconography that many scholars and critics now have come to anticipate in Chicana/o art. The two series, *Spirit Cloak* and *Tree People*, are informed by her involvement with Self Help Graphics in the mid-1970s and her exploration of ancient civilizations, but this work evidences an abstract style and conceptual approach rarely documented in Chicana/o art of this time period. Indeed because the work is less narrative than the acknowledged visual record of Chicana/o arts of the 1970s and 1980s, it is often overlooked by art historians expecting realist and representational styles. *Spirit Cloak* is a series of wall-mounted sculptures that engage an aesthetic dialogue with Lee Bontecou, a US artist known for creating three-dimensional wall-hangings, rather than free-standing sculptural objects. The wall sculptures of *Spirit Cloak* explore a fundamental question: where are we in the universe?

Vallejo visualizes a partial answer to this ultimate question through indigenous notions of balance expressed in geometric and symmetrical forms. The concepts of balance, unity, and harmony are central to Native philosophies and community practices. For example, in *Spirit of Quetzalcoatl* (1980), the symmetric form illustrates a type of balance (fig. 1). Although the triangular shapes suggest the body of Quetzalcoatl in that viewers can image the torso beneath a blue cape with a red lapel, the mixed-media work also signifies the power of the cloak, not the actual garment. Critically, this sense of balance does not rely on identical patterns nor does it insist upon undifferentiated parts. Equilibrium is achieved through compositional weight, placement, coloration, and orientation of the parts—it is the relationship between the pieces that comprise a sense of overall harmony and balance, and thus, suggest a way of being connected to the world.

Figure 1
Linda Vallejo. *Spirit of Quetzalcoatl*, 1980. Recycled lithographic prints, monotype, wool, handmade paper, Procion dyes. 22 × 22 in. From the collection of Anita Miranda.

Invested in indigenous continuity across the Americas, Vallejo also explores organic compositions that gesture to the totemic productions of Native America. After a visit to the studio of East Los Streetscapers, Vallejo saw a beautiful felled pine tree in the parking lot.[10] "I went in and I scavenged and found this one branch that I could put in my car" (Vallejo 2013). This was the genesis of *Tree People*, a series of sculptural works composed of hand-made paper and found objects. It expresses the Chicana/o community's embrace of their

indigenous heritage, but it relies less on figuration and more on abstraction. As Vallejo notes, "*Tree People* is dedicated to the concept of a metamorphic relationship with nature that begged the question, 'How would humanity appear if we were to acknowledge our fundamental relationship to nature?'" *Tree People* is an aesthetic and spiritual practice of creation, engaging indigenous ethics in which the tree is a life-force and a central component of ceremony.

From that moment, her journeys to and from home, the university, and Self Help Graphics became rescue missions. Thus, in creating the series, Vallejo enacts two sacral gestures—the first act comes in the finding and rescuing of the tree limb from the side of the road, and the second spiritual act is in the discovery of the divine within the tree branch. Vallejo has repurposed the tree after its living cells are without access to water, after it has been dismembered from its roots, and she has nurtured it into a second life as an apparition. The series articulates the interweaving of Vallejo's creative and spiritual journey.

For example, Vallejo forgoes the human form in *Tonanztin* (1990), tacitly indicating that nature, not humanity, is the central component of the cosmos (fig. 2). In building up the tree fragment, Vallejo focuses on the birth canal of Tonanztin, the earth mother and general reference to the mother of the Nahua gods. Tonantzin is known for a capacity to create and extinguish life; she is a formidable deity that inspires fear and awe.[11] Vallejo has rescued the life force within the tree branch and by compositionally emphasizing the portal, she encourages viewers to recover our humanity by acknowledging the value of all life and death. *Tonanztin* disrupts patriarchal and racist structures that deny nature, female, and indigenous life.

It is significant that Vallejo did not draw upon the emerging visual vocabulary to register indigeneity. She did not produce the maguey or Aztec hieroglyphs

Figure 2
Linda Vallejo. *Tonanztin*, 1990. Found tree fragment, led, handmade paper, Procion dyes, mixed media. 40 × 8 × 8 in.

that circulated in Chicana/o art since the 1970s. Even though she had visited Mexico and studied the architectural sites of Teotihuacan, Tenochtitlán, Bonampak, and others, she was not trying to access the historical monuments as sites of an unchanging past but as aesthetic references for contemporary mobilizations of Chicana/o communities in Los Angeles. More critically, she wanted to witness in person the art and pre-conquest sites of Mexico. Her trips to Mexico were not an attempt "to provide a direct link to an ancient past" (Alberto 2012, 45); they were direct links to a method of learning. As such, she

gravitated to the conceptual representation of indigenous culture. In Vallejo's hands, indigenous gods and goddesses of Aztec culture were alive and well, simply hiding within the trees discarded on the streets of Los Angeles. This contemporary emplacement hypothesizes another present and future.

The two series embrace living between two worlds or more, thereby aligning the work with Anzaldúan thought, particularly borderlands theory and mestiza consciousness. While Vallejo's aesthetic of continuity reimagines indigeneity as historically contingent and contemporaneously present, the two series *Tree People* and *Spirit Cloak*, also disrupt the obligatory Western iconography, particularly Christian devotional art, and distinctions between figuration and abstraction as well as trash and treasure. By repurposing a tree limb and portraying its life form, Vallejo participates in the sacralization of the natural world, an orientation fundamental to indigenous spirituality. Unlike Christianity and its devotional art which portrays the Holy Spirit as inhabiting all things; indigenous belief bestows all things with an inner life or spirit of their own. Additionally, her use of abstraction brings to the foreground the concepts of balance, harmony, and interconnectedness, a complex relationality that ties all living things into a singular and interdependent world. Such a view conflicts with Western sensibilities of conquest and control of the natural world and people. *Tree People* thus suggests a decolonial *and* gendered aesthetic project by envisioning female and male tree spirits, even if rendered abstractly. In fact, the abstracted human and spirit forms allow for the opening and widening of Chicana and Chicano subjectivity without reducing Chicana or Chicano subjectivity to an idealized Native person. However, Vallejo's abstraction, the style presumed to be independent of local references, is not a pure form that images a universal subject/viewer. It recalls a politics against universalizing subjectivities that would negate Chicana/o selfhood.

Indigenist Sensibility: Four Elements as Aesthetic of Disruption for Continuity

Since 1995 Vallejo has examined our relationship to the earth, water, fire, and air, the four elements central to many ancient and Native American cultures (Hernández 1988). Several events supported this investigation for nearly two decades. After the death of Chicano artist Carlos Almaraz, Vallejo reconnected with Elsa Flores, Almaraz's wife, and for ten years annually visited their home in Kauai, Hawai'i. Within that time, Vallejo realized she was captivated by the Hawaiian sky and she "cried buckets for the beauty of Kauai" (Vallejo 2013). The depiction of the four elements began in 1995 with the series *Los Cielos*. Other encounters with the four elements emerged during ceremony. "When you go to ceremony, you're standing on a flat piece of ground and all you're looking at all dag-gone day, is either the ceremonial circle and the players in it, or the sky . . . . You're watching the sun as it arcs across the sky" (Vallejo 2013, 2014a). With her eyes focused on the sky, her spiritual training provided guidance for what she saw; humanity shares the universe with a divine life force as expressed in earth, water, fire, and air. "Earth Water Fire Air" is a potent exploration of indigenous epistemology and belonging, articulating one of the strongest integrations of Vallejo's spirituality and sensibility. Through paintings of landscapes, waterscapes, celestial spaces, and incinerating heavenly forces, Vallejo documents a complex relationality and sense of belonging. Through the suite, Vallejo asks: How are we to live with the natural world? How can we honor the natural world's beauty and power? Or most basically, who am I in this world?

Scholars in fields of art, literature, religion, and archeology have documented the relationship of Native people to place, historically and metaphysically, and for many activists and intellectuals, this relationship to the land is often cited as the very root of indigeneity. For instance, indigenous peoples' origin stories and worldviews involve the geographical features in the landscape, and the

belief systems integrate human experience and geography, influencing Native subjectivity as grounded in an understanding of a collective relationship to the cosmos. Further reinforcing Native American spatial sensibilities, Native American maps are an oral picture or experience of the landscape, and as such they record the interconnectedness of living things (Warhus 1997). In contrast, "European maps are concerned primarily with objective and verifiable spatial relationships" and were used to "organize and control the land and its resources."[12] For Vallejo, the exploration of "Earth Water Fire Air" references both historical and contemporary relationships to place and documents how the same spirit animates nature and humanity.

In the painting *Full Moon at Midnight* (1998), a celestial female spirit floats within the clouds, but only her eyes are visible. The moon occupies a point between her eyes indicating that she orbits the earth from a heavenly location beyond the moon. Yet, this spirit-woman is compositionally anchored to the earth by the horizon line that cuts across the bottom register of the painting. Other works in the series also depict "the heavens [as] anthropomorphized into a female aspect of the creator; a benevolent Grandmother watching over us" (Venegas 2000).[13] The series symbolically recognizes the divine within humanity, and thus registering the human body as a sacred center of the universe. Several skyscape paintings are sublime—spacious skies are filled with enormous clouds that appear as a life force. These paintings force the viewer to encounter her own immortality with humility and to contemplate her role in the universe.

Further reinforcing indigenous emplacement, Vallejo literally names and documents contemporary sites of indigenous ceremony. *Death Valley Salt Flats* (2003) and *Sacred Rocks* (2005) are two examples in which Vallejo renders "this idea of creating *sacred space* with [her] paintings and [her] sculpture and what [she] had learned from ceremonia" (Vallejo 2013) (fig. 3).[14] If

Figure 3
Linda Vallejo. *Sacred Rocks* (also known as *Our Rock Elders*), 2005. Oil on canvas. 60 x 48 in. From the collection of the National Museum of Mexican Art.

land is the index of history, memory, as well as the space of empowerment and situated knowledge, then these images visually produce a critical consciousness of belonging, not to national identities and state entities, but to cosmological locations. By invoking the indigenous sacred places of the American Southwest, Vallejo unmoors the hegemonic concepts of nation, citizenship, patriarchy, and whiteness. This rendering of indigenous spirituality is politically and materially charged—an indigenist orientation to correct historical amnesia about Native and Mexican-Indian people and their presence in the hemisphere. By disrupting the colonial narrative of erasure, genocide, and assimilation or the capitalist strategy of market value and appropriation of property, Vallejo documents that indigenous people have not disappeared. She names sites and visually recalls how indigenous cultures are inscribed in and sustained by the land, independent of geopolitical territories.

Ironically, she does not paint the human figure or traces of human presence in the land. The emplacement of Chicana/o and indigenous peoples does not depend upon specific bodies or representations (cf. Berger 2005). This compositional strategy diverges from the visual tradition of the American Western landscape painting, which portrays breath-taking views of pristine lands or of settler colonists embarking on their journey to the imagined open territory. American Western landscape paintings consistently enact an imperialist and nationalist belief that the space is vacant, ignoring Native presence. Confirming US exceptionalism, American landscape painting is largely a tradition of subjection, human power taming nature or the so-called frontier and its nonwhite people. This is not Vallejo's goal in rendering the heavens, the earth, vast waterscapes, or fire. Emplacement is accomplished without the tactics and maneuvers of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. The work of Vallejo is fully invested in the grace and beauty of the natural world, asking viewers to recognize that the earth requires attention and care as

well as a decolonial strategy of habitation. This sensibility is visually depicted in the compositional strategy, the use of light, shadow, and color to render the force of life, such as the glowing bolder in *Sacred Rocks*. Each painting focuses attention on the horizon line and thereby orients and emplaces the viewer—the work coherently unites people and place. More important, the suite of paintings finds its meaning in the oral traditions and experiences of the locations Vallejo depicts. Emplacement is not just a spatial signifier; it is a tactic of balanced, interconnectedness within a particular location.

Emplacement As Aesthetics of Disruption and Continuity

Make 'Em All Mexican, the final series under discussion, visualizes a different approach to emplacement as well as a broader temporal and spatial decolonial imaginary. Whereas the suite "Earth Water Fire Air" is devoid of human figures, *MEAM* is devoted to human form, albeit through the appropriation, reproduction, simulation, and recombination of bodies. The contemporary proliferation of images, simulation, and duplication inspired Vallejo to consider image-making from a single perspective. Following postmodernist trends, particularly appropriation art, Vallejo decided to remake images from her perspective as a "Chicana-indígena." Postmodernist art, she recognized, is not subservient to the object's original materiality or historical context (cf. Krauss 2011, 48). Vallejo rejoiced in the satirical quotation of well-known images but realized how new meanings are not completely separate from the original as racial codes are difficult to shake off. The series is a recoding and rejection of the quotidian gestures of white supremacy.

Pulsing with a sense of humor, Vallejo's provocative series playfully and satirically re-appropriates Western civilization and American icons, thereby disrupting narratives of power and aesthetics. Using figures found in Norman Rockwell paintings, Disney animation, Hollywood movies, television sit-

coms, and the school primer, *Dick and Jane*, as well as European portraiture and sculpture, including from the British and French monarchy; Vallejo simply paints everyone Mexican, changing the color and facial features using brown and black gouache or oil. By repainting images from the fifteenth to the twentieth century in various shades of brown, the arc of continuity and discontinuity swings wider in this series compared to the previous ones. Several times, she arranges the images into an artist book, following the format of ancient folios, and thereby invoking the production of knowledge. Overall, the simple compositional approach is "an unforgettable feat . . . of social engineering" (Lawson 2014, 77). By painting directly on vintage photographs and advertisements, fine art reproductions, collectable figurines, and mass-produced offset prints and statuettes, Vallejo challenges our presumptions about race, belonging, and identity.

With the statement, "I have to destroy the old image to make the new image," Vallejo announces the aesthetic and political implication of the series (Vallejo quoted in Davalos 2011, 1). She defaces the work when she recasts white skin with brown paint and recolors blond hair and blue eyes with black paint. Vallejo appropriates and disrupts its history and meaning. This act can both disorient *and* empower audiences; but it is not simply those viewers with access to whiteness who are disoriented when they no longer see themselves or their heritage in the iconic image. The coloniality of power inextricably ties the subjectivity of nonwhite people to notions of whiteness, making it impossible to avoid the sensation of disorientation when entire racial codes, hierarchies, and histories are unmade by the new image. The social location, and potentially the emplacement, of nonwhite people shifts with *MEAM*. Similarly, viewers with access to whiteness may also be empowered as they are freed from the racial social order that inhibits their human potential (Freire 1993).

Mexican Normativity: Rewriting the Past

An alternative visualization of Mexican social location is found in *Make Them All Mexican II: Nor All Freed from Want* (2010), the artist book based on two Norman Rockwell paintings. This captivating diptych portrays a different yet familiar American tale. Using the commercially available and mass-produced images Rockwell painted during World War II, *Freedom from Want* (1943) and *Homecoming Marine* (1945), Vallejo's book depicts a Thanksgiving meal in a Mexican American household and the homecoming of a Chicano serviceman, respectively. Making a pun, she uses correction fluid, known commercially as Wite-Out, to craft a new title for each image, simply dropping letters from Rockwell's name and the original titles of the works. The second image of the diptych, *Normal Homecoming* (2011), documents the simultaneous homecoming of thousands of Chicanos who served in World War II and who have yet to achieve public and media acknowledgement as Ken Burns's omission so tragically reminds us.[15] During World War II, Rockwell created *Freedom from Want* as part of the series, *Four Freedoms*. He was inspired by Franklin Roosevelt's State of the Union Address speech in 1941 about the four essential human rights—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. To Rockwell, the four freedoms justified US involvement in World War II, and he feverishly spent approximately six months completing the series. After its publication in the *Saturday Evening Post*, millions of Americans requested reprints and eventually, the images became part of a marketing campaign to rally American purchases of US War Bonds. In selecting *Freedom from Want*, Vallejo marshals the collective sentiment of the series—the images' nostalgia for an idyllic time, American patriotism, and US global domination. In her hands, however, this meaning is transformed into a nostalgia and memory that never existed within the collective conscious.

What makes the images powerful is what Vallejo leaves untouched. For instance, in the first image, which is renamed *Nor All Freed from Want*, the artist depicts a large and multigenerational Mexican American family gathered around a neatly set table of simple white china, humble water glasses, a dish of cranberry sauce, a tray of celery, a bowl of fruit, and a tureen of mashed potatoes (fig. 4). The image captures the moment when the matriarch of the family places a fat turkey on the table while the family chatters away; only one figure glances toward the viewer as if to signal the fantasy. During the 1940s, the majority of Mexican immigrants lived in rural communities and intimately knew hunger. We recognize the scene as middle-class prosperity, which is linked to the nation's own self-image of good fortune, and we accept the meal as quintessentially American cuisine, not Mexican. Moreover, the day that is portrayed, Thanksgiving, is fundamental to American heritage. Vallejo does not add tamales to the white china plates and the surrounding scene of American plenty and security. By not submitting to these images of Mexican American food and family, she avoids an anticipated script. By simply painting everyone brown, Vallejo normalizes Mexicanness and forces the viewer to confront his or her expectations of the nation, its citizens, and heritage. This visual recoding disrupts who is socially embedded in the nation. Just as the Spanish conquistadors built their monuments on top of indigenous temples, Vallejo steals and disrupts the sublime power and authority from Rockwell and American narratives of belonging and domination.

Mexican Imperative

Vallejo also repainted *Dick and Jane*, the book series written by Zerna Sharp and William S. Gray to improve the reading skills of children (fig. 5). Although the series' popularity decreased in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, it was widely popular between the 1930s and 1970s. Again Vallejo leverages the fortifying power of the images. The quintessential European

Figure 4
Linda Vallejo. Detail *Make 'Em All Mexican: Nor All Freed From Want,* 2010. Re-purposed posters and postcards, gouache, oil, correction fluid, and pigment print of image taken from the Internet. 14 x 28 in. From the collection of Sharon Sekhon and Bob Drwila.

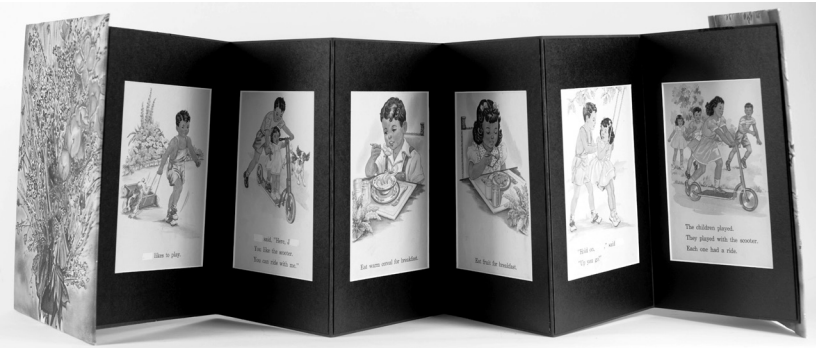

Figure 5
Linda Vallejo. *Make 'Em All Mexican: Dick and Jane*, 2010. Re-purposed antique book pages, gouache, correction fluid, and pigment print of image taken from the Internet. 12.5 x 61.5 in. From the Durón Family Collection.

American names, Dick and Jane, as well as the mundane activities of the story, constitute normative experience. This normality is achieved through the consistent use of the imperative mood, basic sentence structure, and repetition. Everything that the two siblings do is given as a command form; the action creates an expectation. It happens all the time—or habitually—in the past, present, and future. "Eat fruit for breakfast": the imperative mood also announces the truth of a statement. In this case, Vallejo is retelling America's past, present, and future with Mexican characters at the center of the narrative—all the time as subjects and as sources of truth. Painting directly on six images from a vintage printing of the book, Vallejo recasts specific quotidian activities of the two unnamed Mexican American siblings. Vallejo takes correction fluid to the names, allowing viewers to enter this new world order without interruption from the original characters' racial identity. Ironically, the whiting-out of text brings Dick and Jane's whiteness into view even as it is unseen, clarifying the contingent quality of race. This technique also reinforces what Tomás Ybarra-Frausto observes of twenty-first century

Latino art, in which "identity is now seen as a performative act, a social practice, rather than a representation" (2014, 30).

In addition to disrupting the racial hierarchy by painting the characters brown, Vallejo also reorders the book, selecting the scenes when the children are at play or the breakfast table. We see them at inward moments, absorbed in thought or action. Vallejo's book closes with an image of the girl riding a scooter past her friends and brother, and the last line announces, "Each one had a ride" (fig. 6). Grammatically, the verb is in the active voice. "Each one" (the sentence's and the verb's subject) *performs* the action of the verb. With this declarative statement, the work implies a society in which Mexicans have agency. They create their own action and opportunity (a ride), and the social inequalities of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism are unmade.

Sexual Desire, Spectacular Brownness, and Disorientation

Painting things brown also disrupts the racialized sexual script created by colonialism and patriarchy. When Vallejo paints women brown, they are no longer the objects of desire and sexual violence but the agents of their sexuality. *La Victoria* (2014), created using the painting techniques and chromatic density made popular by lowrider cars, conveys the sexual innuendo underlying much of the series (see front cover). The marble sculpture from the second century B.C.E. known as *Winged Victory of Samothrace* or *Nike of Samothrace* is central to Western notions of beauty, power, and femininity. It depicts action and triumph; Winged Victory stands against the wind, her flowing tunic and blowing cloak stream behind her. Painted with a luminous chocolate color known as Chocolate Candy Brown and detailed with metal flake, Vallejo calls attention to the history of Western representation in which nonwhite women are exoticized and eroticized by a white heteronormative gaze.

Figure 6
Linda Vallejo. Detail, *Make 'Em All Mexican: Dick and Jane*, 2010.

Vallejo worked with a custom car painter to produce the mouth-watering chocolate-like color and gloss, which makes the sculpture look good enough to eat. In the artist's mind, it is as if Victory is prompting the viewer, "Lick me." Tempting but inaccessible, Vallejo stimulates a sexual transgression. *La Victoria* invites viewers to taste her body, and thus, makes apparent the racial sexual hierarchy produced by colonialism and patriarchy. Under colonial rule, brown female bodies are despised, desired, and raped in the name of colonial domination (Lugones 2010). Yet in the series *MEAM*, Vallejo turns *La Victoria* into the agent of her own sexuality. The brown body announces and confronts the arousal it produces with an audacity that emerges from a sense of control of and dignity for one's body. This delicious brownness is empowering. The reappropriation of Western icons transcends and disrupts contemporary white racial primacy, patriarchy, and heterosexism. Vallejo produces a decolonial image bank that supplants western, patriarchal, and colonial images of Mexican heritage people.

One of the major conceptual themes of the series is the rewriting of the past. Vallejo's temporal approach should not be confused with new interpretations of history, referred to as revisionist history, or the interdisciplinary methods that bring new information to light. Her work visualizes multiple and alternative histories, which Vallejo appropriately stages in book format. Significantly, she follows the dominant format of books from the Mesoamerican world, the folio, a sequentially designed collation of sheets joined at the ends and folded like an accordion, which allows the viewer to see the complete folio at once, reading from left to right across the entire length of the monograph. This aesthetic style makes the books almost sculptural. Linked to Mesoamerican civilizations, the books in the series are conceptually anchored in the force and authority of antiquity, lending greater power to Vallejo's alternative histories of the Americas.

Speculative histories are also powerfully articulated in the sculptures and portraits of real figures, such as the Queen of England and Prince Philip, Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, former presidents of the United States, or elite European women of the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries. For Vallejo, by repainting British royalty, she erases the history of colonial occupation and racial genocide in the Americas. It is as if the colonization of the Americas never happened, and without British colonial rule on the eastern seaboard, French and Spanish colonial domination in North America may also evaporate. This new world order forgoes a racial hierarchy and the genocide of indigenous people through disease, warfare, and displacement.[16]

Literally, when Vallejo repaints classic European portraiture, she creates an optical illusion. The effect is a powerful moment of disruption and emplacement. For example with *I Am Mona Lisa* (2011), a folio that includes Leonardo Di Vinci's famous painting, the viewer has the sense of looking simultaneously at two images—the original and the Mexican one. This doubling is created by the original's iconographic status—the more powerful the image or the more recognizable the image, the greater the chance of seeing double while gazing at the reconstructed, Mexican one. The disorienting effect also comes, not surprisingly, from the implication of an alternative history since the sense of the self is tied to myths about the past. When the narrative of history is altered, one's foothold (or social location) is dislodged. Moreover, the invention of national tradition, as noted by Benedict Anderson, attempts to root the present to a particular past in order to solidify the value of the nation (1983). Yet Vallejo rewrites this familiar Eurocentric history and power; when painted brown, the European portraits can no longer anchor whiteness, nationalism, or Western civilization's social value. In this moment, the viewer who sees herself (or himself) in the original image may experience another form of disorientation. This disequilibrium emerges from a tension between otherness

and intimacy as viewers recognize themselves; the result is a sense of closeness to the work but also a distancing effect as viewers stare at a stranger, a foreigner, the Other, the Self. This act of destruction of the venerated image disrupts the authentic Self of the West and white racial primacy as well as its hold on the master narrative of belonging by reimaging Mexican women as iconic. By taking popular cultural and Western classical icons for her own means, Vallejo jettisons the legacy of racial domination in the Americas. With each deliberately engaged brush stroke, she steals, denies, and suppresses white representational power by placing brown people at the center of historical memory.

Conclusion

The technique of repurposing and deconstructing echoes with earlier explorations with tree limbs and sculpture fashioned from the paper on which Vallejo had printed her own lithographs. For nearly forty years, Vallejo has been wreaking havoc with the modernist privileging of the original by reclaiming the act of expropriation—the primary method of possession used by settler colonialists. Vallejo's appropriation of appropriation places the series squarely within the feminist decolonial project, especially Chicana feminist reconstructions of womanhood in a critique of nationalism and colonialism.

While *MEAM* is disorienting, I propose that her indigenous spirituality and indigenist sensibility reassures us that the transcendence of brownness does not relocate oppression onto white people but rather calls for a dignified, inclusive, and balanced space. She images a future community of complex relations. *Make 'Em All Mexican* brings into sharp focus our blind spots and assumptions, but similar to the suite "Earth Water Fire Air," Vallejo avoids a duplication of European settler colonialism through a rejection of any nationalism that dispossesses and displaces people. Her work questions the

requisite loyalty and exclusionary tactics of nationalism. Vallejo poignantly alters the organization of public space.

As such, *MEAM* is not the visualization of a Mexican Reconquista or anti-immigration nightmares. While population shifts have produced exponential growth in anti-Mexican fears, restrictions on citizenship, the closing of national borders, and massive deportations, such actions cannot sustain a democracy. *Make 'Em All Mexican* can be understood as the documentation of recent census data—through birthrate Latinos continue to increase their demographic presence, currently at 54 million. It also records cultural trends—salsa has long surpassed ketchup as the nation's top-selling condiment. But it is largely political commentary. The series, similar to the previous work, reminds us that the nation, and ultimately the hemisphere, must reimagine itself and its residents. While *Make 'Em All Mexican* serves as a snarky cue that principles of social equality require a solution that does not compromise representation and dignity, the earlier series remind us that indigenous spirituality would not insist on the removal of people but emplacement.

Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson points out that Native and indigenous scholars have been suspicious of Chicana and Chicano practices of indigenism (2003/2004). Voicing this suspicion, Lourdes Alberto argues that Chicana indigeneity creates a "paradox of mestiza consciousness" because "it needs the unchanging ruins of indigeneity in order to operate as a dynamic subject position" (2012, 44). While Alberto convincingly documents how this paradox drives El Plan de Aztlán and Chicano nationalist discourse, I posit that since Linda Vallejo visually articulates the contemporary spaces of indigenous ceremony, not the "indigenous of the antique" (Marez 2001 quoted in Alberto 42), she proposes a form of Chicana subjectivity that avoids the paradox of mestiza consciousness. Her notion of belonging is temporally and spatially constituted but the

imagined Chicana-indígena subject is not *longing for a past*. Moreover, Vallejo's spiritual practice brings her again and again into indigenous communities, allowing for a complex subjectivity that bridges her indigenist and indigenous positions. For Vallejo, emplacement is a healing, communal praxis. It is the performance of ceremonia and the proposals for healing articulated in the exploration "Earth Water Fire Air" that remind us of the role of spirituality in social justice movements. Therefore, the life and work of Linda Vallejo, especially the life force brought forth from dismembered tree limbs, a suite of the four elements, and the portraits of everyone made to be Mexican, are a proposal to heal from injuries of racism born of colonialism, from masculine power, and from Chicano nationalist tendency to enact settler practices of appropriation. In short, Vallejo's decolonial imaginary emerges from a disruption of the coloniality of power and continuity with living Native people. Belonging and emplacement are used spatially but also always in relationship with all beings.

Acknowledgment

Portions of this essay were originally written for *Make 'Em All Mexican*, the premier exhibition of the series at Avenue 50 Studio in Highland Park of Los Angeles, California, May 14 through June 5, 2011, and appeared in the exhibition catalog of the same name. Linda Vallejo is a prolific iconoclast, and I am honored she allowed me to interview her for two projects. For one project, the CSRC Oral Histories Series, an initiative of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, she shared over ten hours of her time for a life history interview in which I learned about her childhood in the American South, her adolescence in Europe, and her spiritual life. It was an experience that profoundly changed me. Her latest series, *Make 'Em All Mexican*, did the same. I wish to thank the kind readers who commented on an earlier version of this essay: Ann Marie Leimer, David G. Stanton, and my parents, Mary Catherine

Davalos and Ruben M. Davalos. I am also grateful for the audiences' feedback and enthusiasm at the 38th Annual Meeting of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies, the 2014 Roundtable on Latina Feminism, particularly Mariana Ortega, Edwina Barvosa, and Cynthia Paccacerqua, and to Armando Durón for the ongoing lively conversation about Linda Vallejo's work. Editor and dramaturge Tiffany Ana López has a keen eye and mind, and she commented on an earlier version of this essay. Finally, I am grateful to my parents who taught me to be totally and completely Mexican, to my children for embracing their multiple identities, and to my husband, David, for empowering the brown children in his classroom.

Notes

[1] The artist's words come from a life history interview conducted by the author over several days in 2007 (Vallejo 2013).

[2] Initially working under the name Art Inc., Sister Karen and co-founders officially opened Self Help Graphics & Art in 1972. Incorporation as a non-profit arts organization came in 1973.

[3] Following the work of Lara Medina and Gilbert R. Cadena (2002), I do not describe the Day of the Dead as a syncretic fusion between two supposedly pure religious systems because the concept of syncretism "ignores power relations involving physical and spiritual violence" and the two systems were not pure (75).

[4] The phrase suggests Vallejo's intentional interrogation and appropriation of the art historical concept of "classical culture" which is limited to Greek and Roman civilizations, thereby excluding the Americas.

[5] An indigenous epistemology became increasing significant to Vallejo because the Native communities of California were the first to unconditionally welcome her (Medina 1998). For information about pouring water and its significance in ceremonia, see Medina (2014, 175).

[6] I use the term "sensibility" because it is part of a larger and more comprehensive way of knowing, what might be termed "epistemology" or "ontology."

[7] Unlike embodiment, emplacement is a spatial allegory, tactic, or imaginary that does not depend upon representations of the body. This work implies that emplacement can extend the notion of social location because it is both physical and ideological, allowing for the subjectivity that Dylan A.T. Miner identifies as "Xicano sovereignty" (2014). The central aspect of emplacement is agency. All people have a social location, but emplaced communities are empowered in their sites and discursive places of habitation.

[8] Anibal Quijano coined the phrase "coloniality of power" which is useful in Chicana/o and Latina/o studies because it explains the ongoing structures of racial and class inequality following independence of the Americas from Spain and Great Britain. However, Quijano cannot account for a gendered racial order. See María Lugones (2010) and Emma Pérez (1999).

[9] This article also challenges a second and more tragic misperception of her work as divergent from a normative Chicana/o art. Although largely undocumented, Vallejo's art is considered distinct from the anticipated Chicana/o aesthetic. Her work is rarely included in discussions of Chicana/o art or major traveling exhibitions. For example, one reference book focuses almost exclusively on her use of indigenous iconography, even as it documents her broad exposure to European art history (Alvarado 2002), and the landmark exhibition, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation 1965-1985*, included a handmade paper sculpture of corn and tortillas, titled *Food of the Gods* (1984), for the section "Reclaiming the Past," not her abstract work from the same series. This critical misunderstanding of Vallejo's aesthetic trajectory presumes an obligatory style not substantiated by the art historical record, and this article participates in the recent call for systematic research and documentation of aesthetic trends among Chicano and Chicana artists. Although not guilty of the same type of omission because it is admittedly idiosyncratic, Laura Pérez's brilliant undertaking of Chicana art and spirituality could use wider application, and I offer this article as an addendum, because Linda Vallejo's work easily complements the nearly thirty artists that Pérez discusses (2007, 13). See Noriega, Romo and Tompkins Rivas (2011) and Davalos (2016) for evidence that Chicana/o art historical discourse requires rethinking as new evidence comes to light.

[10] Originally known as Los Dos Streetscapers for the co-founders, David Botello and Wayne Healey, East Los Streetscapers is an artist collective that produces murals and other public art. Founded in 1976, it is one of the legacies of the Chicano Movement, and Linda Vallejo credits David Botello as "one of [her] very kindest supporters" (Vallejo 2013).

[11] As a self-taught student of Mesoamerican civilizations, Vallejo does not recall the specific source for her understanding of Tonantzin, but similar to other Chicana feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, she was attentive to the connections between Tonantzin and Guadalupe.

[12] The first quote is from Berger (2005, 54), and the second from Warhus (1997, 58).

[13] Elsewhere, I argue that Francisco de Goya, whose work Linda Vallejo saw at El Museo Nacional del Prado, influenced the series, particularly her fascination with massive beings living within and among the clouds. See Davalos (2016).

[14] These works are part of the series *California Horizons* (2000-2007).

[15] Ken Burns's documentary, *The War* (2007), grossly ignored Mexican Americans' contributions to World War II. In 1999, Maggie Rivas-Rodríguez of the University of Texas, Austin, spearheaded the US Latino and Latina World War II Oral History Project. She has collected more than 650 interviews with men and women who participated in World War II.

[16] The invention of an alternative history is the same creative strategy used in *Atomik Aztec* (2005) by speculative fiction writer Shesshu Foster and in the video performances, *Indig/urrito* (1992)

by visual artist Nao Bustamonte, and *El Naftazteca: Cyber Aztec TV for 2000 AD* (1995), by Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes. Alternative fiction is also the genre of the 2004 film, *A Day without a Mexican*, although Sergio Arau's comedy imagines the opposite of Vallejo's universe. The twist is important, because Vallejo's alternative history alleviates social anxiety by eliminating oppression, whereas Arau's fiction produces collective angst as it draws into the spotlight a national economy that relies on the cheap labor of Mexicans. However, I suggest that Vallejo has not visually reproduced Jean-Paul Sartre's interpretation of Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, which appears in the book's preface ([1961] 2004). Sartre imagines the destruction of white people. As artist Fred Wilson declares about his work in museum collections, Vallejo's series is an effort "to root out . . . denial" and thereby to begin "a healing process" of the collective human psyche (Wilson quoted in Sayre 2006, 111).

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