

DIGITAL ART, CHICANA FEMINISM, AND MEXICAN ICONOGRAPHY: A Visual Narrative by Alma Lopez in Naples, Italy

María Herrera-Sobek, Guisela M. Latorre,
and Alma Lopez

While in the 1970s Chicana/o art was largely defined by the prevalence of silkscreen posters and murals, the 1990s and early 2000s saw the emergence of digital art among Chicana/o artists. Los Angeles-based artist Alma Lopez has been at the forefront of this revolution. Her visually compelling, computer-aided montages have tackled deeply contested issues such as immigration, racism, religion, colonization, and queer identity, to cite just a few. In spite of being a talented painter and printmaker, with a BA and an MFA in art studio from the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), and University of California, Irvine (UCI), respectively, Lopez has gained most of her visibility from her digital media work. Scholars such as Luz Calvo and Reina Alejandra Prado Saldívar have identified Lopez's art as a Chicana feminist visual discourse that thrives on the flexibility and dynamism of digital expression.¹ This technology allows the artist seamlessly to combine preexisting imagery with her own original artwork and photography. Lopez belongs to a generation of Chicana/o artists—including such luminaries as Judy Baca, Patricia Rodriguez, and John Leños, among others—who have begun using computer technology as their preferred medium for creative expression. By doing so, they are entering territory such as the realm of science and technology that has traditionally excluded their presence as artists of color. These artists are also employing strategies that echo those deployed by other disenfranchised groups in the Americas,

such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas, who initially transmitted their political communiqués over the Internet. Lopez's use of digital imagery also counters the paradigm of the digital divide constructed near the end of the millennium, which maintained that only the dominant culture holds access to technology.²

Lopez is particularly known for rearranging traditional Mexican iconography in her digital montages, often decontextualizing these images from their patriarchal structure. In other words, Alma Lopez enacts what Chicana feminist scholar Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano calls the "repositioning of cultural icons" by reformulating Mexican figures such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Sirena from the popular culture *lotería* game, Popocatepetl, Coyolxauhqui, and so forth.³ Lopez's work is part of a larger tradition within Chicana artistic practice that seeks to overturn the patriarchal ideologies attached to many Mexican cultural and religious icons and motifs, a movement initiated by artists such as Yolanda M. López and Ester Hernández in the 1970s. By appropriating these symbols and images, Chicana artists subvert and deconstruct the systems of power that have historically oppressed women of color. When art historian Charlene Villaseñor Black began to examine the presence of religious imagery in the work by Chicana artists, she found that they utilized Catholic iconography in ways that transcended their intended traditional and often patriarchal use and interpretation. Villaseñor Black ultimately asserted that for these artists "Catholic imagery participate[d] in contemporary discourses of gender, race and social class."⁴ What many Chicana artists like Alma Lopez realized, however, was that most religious iconography could take on a life of its own when absorbed and reinscribed by the collective consciousness of the oppressed and disenfranchised across the Americas.

Lopez's feminist and queer reconceptualization of traditional Mexican religious imagery, however, has generated its share of controversy and public outcry.

When the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, exhibited her digital print *Our Lady* (1999), Latina/o and non-Latina/o religious groups, including the city's own archbishop, campaigned to remove the image from the museum walls. Ultimately, what seemed to spark public outrage in Santa Fe about *Our Lady* was the possibility that a woman of color could exert a sense of spiritual agency on how religious iconography is formulated. Two years later, Lopez's digital mural *Heaven 2* (2000), installed outside of San Francisco's Galería de la Raza, was defaced with homophobic remarks written over it. In both images the artist depicted the intersection between Latina/o culture, religion, and sexuality, three topics that are rarely discussed in relation to one another; moral taboos and silences surround these subjects, particularly sexuality. The controversy surrounding Lopez's images also pointed to the multilevel nature of oppression, in which race, class, gender, and sexuality *in combination* play a critical role in the marginalization of aggrieved communities.

Given the importance of Alma Lopez's work to the history of the Chicana/o arts movement, we have been fortunate in the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UCSB to have developed a close working relationship with the artist over the past five years. In 2003, we curated an exhibition of her work on the campus's MultiCultural Center. Lopez's opening reception and public lecture for the show were both resounding successes among the students, faculty, and staff of our department as well as among the local community. "The MultiCultural Center Theater was overflowing Thursday afternoon with UCSB students, staff and faculty buzzing with excitement for the appearance of a controversial Chicana artist and UCSB alumna," read the headlines of the local campus newspaper, the *Daily Nexus*.⁵ It was also during that time that Lopez agreed to donate her papers to the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archive (CEMA) housed in UCSB's Davidson Library. After all, she had helped to establish the Royal Chicano Air Force (RCAF) Papers in CEMA back in the

1980s while still an undergraduate at UCSB working for the school library; it seemed only fitting that twenty years later she should have her material housed next to *veteranos* of the Chicana/o arts movement such as the RCAF.

For more than a year now, Alma Lopez has been teaching courses in Chicana and Chicano studies at UCSB, thus introducing a studio art component to our curriculum. Many Chicana/o and Latina/o students who have found a hostile and adverse environment in studio art classes regard her classroom to be a safe space where they can articulate their creative consciousness. Together with them, Lopez directed the first student-produced mural in UCSB's Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies, a long overdue project given our department's critical role in the history of Chicana/o studies as an interdisciplinary project.

In May 2005, María Herrera-Sobek invited Alma to speak at a conference she and Francisco Lomelí were cosponsoring with an Italian scholar, Mara de Chiara, from the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" in Naples, Italy. She delivered an extremely well received presentation of her work to an international group of literary scholars. Her presence and success in this Italian conference underscored how Chicana/o art was beginning to gain recognition outside of the United States, particularly in Europe. Herrera-Sobek was fortunate to tape her lecture, in which Lopez spoke candidly about her art, focusing on a number of important images and the motivations and passions that drive her work.⁶ We present her talk here in its entirety, along with the specific images she discussed. This is a critically significant historical document in itself, for it records for posterity this Chicana artist's important presence in Italy, a center of male European artistic tradition. Lopez's presentation is followed by a commentary by Guisela Latorre. This commentary includes reactions to the issues Lopez raised during her talk, as a way to establish a dialogue with the artist's ideas and sensibilities.

**Alma Lopez, Universita degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale,”
Naples, Italy, May 2005**

I am delighted to be here, in Naples, Italy, since it is such a beautiful place. I came with a fellow artist from Austin, Texas, Ana Salinas. We arrived here last Thursday but visited Rome and Florence before coming to Naples since there is so much amazing and incredible art to see here in Italy. For example, there is the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo’s *David*, and many, many more great artists who are really outstanding. However, all of them are men—although it was extremely exciting to see Artemisia Gentileschi’s work. I saw her paintings in one of the galleries located on a side street—easy to miss if you are just looking for the main museums. I hope there are people who can tell me about other women artists—or is it that there are only male artists in Italy? Still, I hope that there are women artists now because although men’s artwork is really amazing, it is also very important to include women’s voices. We should know their passions, ideas, and/or thoughts, because art is about expressing our reality, and therefore, if it is only one reality, then it becomes very skewed.

I will be discussing and presenting my work here today at this conference. I am really honored to be on this panel with María Herrera-Sobek. I had the great pleasure of designing a cover for one of the books that she [edited] titled *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends* (2000). (Figure 1).

For this book cover, I did a painting of the Chicana singer from Corpus Christi, Texas, Selena Quintanilla. Included in the edited volume are essays discussing Selena’s musical contributions. Selena, as we all know, was killed when she was very young—in her twenties; I wanted to honor her with an artwork that reflected on and talked about her singing and the great potential she had as a performer. Nevertheless, her life was tragically cut short at the



Figure 1.

Alma Lopez, *Selena in the Sky with Roses*, 2000, digital print. Cover illustration for *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Trends*, edited by David R. Maciel, Isidro D. Ortiz, and María Herrera-Sobek (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000). Reproduced by permission of the University of Arizona Press.

height of her singing career. When I had the opportunity to do the cover for Herrera-Sobek's book, I was really pleased, because I admired Selena very much, and I wanted to pay homage to her with one of my artworks.

I have done several covers for books, which is really surprising, since I am actually a visual artist who started as a muralist painting large, public art pieces. Later, I branched out, doing posters, book covers, paintings, and a substantial number of digital artworks. The work I will be showing and discussing at this conference will be primarily my digital artwork.

Numerous images in my work have been inspired, to a large extent, by creative



Figure 2.

Alma Lopez, *Thunderweavers*, 1999, digital print. Cover illustration for *Thunderweavers*, by Juan Felipe Herrera (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000). Reproduced by permission of the University of Arizona Press.

writers. I have collaborated on several occasions with fiction writers and poets.

The artwork titled *Thunderweavers* (1999) (figure 2) is one of the very first book covers that I did for a Chicano poet named Juan Felipe Herrera.

Thunderweavers is a poetry storybook depicting the revolutionary struggle taking place in Chiapas, Mexico. In addition to expressing my commitment to social justice and revolutionary movements, it is also important for me to do work that is beautiful.

The artwork titled *No More Wars* is a recent poster that I did for the annual conference of the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS) taking place in Los Angeles in 2003. (Figure 3).

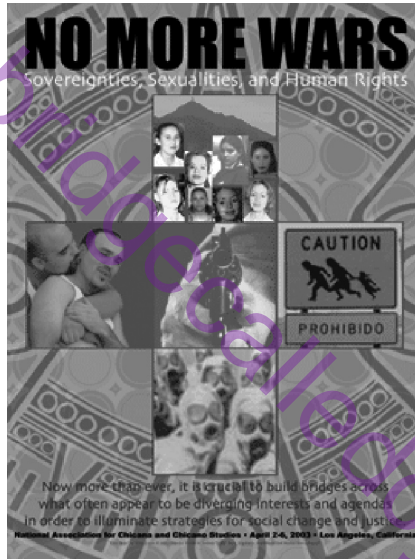


Figure 3.

Alma Lopez, *No More Wars*, 2003, poster design for NACCS 2003. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

I wanted to illustrate what the conference theme was about, mainly “No More Wars: Scholarship, Sexualities, and Human Rights.” I was inspired by the images of the women in Juárez who were being murdered. Juárez is a city in Mexico across the border from Texas next to El Paso. This poster also depicts my interest in issues of immigration, sexuality, and homosexuality. I like to explore how we are all under the threat of these issues as well as other issues related to violence. The artwork titled *Desert Blood* (2002) is a poster that I did in collaboration with an amazing Chicana feminist writer named Alicia Gaspar de Alba. (Figure 4).

She just published a mystery novel also titled *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005). As soon as I saw the title of her book I thought: “I am going to do an image for this book. It would be a poster, not necessarily a book cover.” I



Figure 4.

Alma Lopez, *Desert Blood*, 2002, poster design. Special thanks to Ana Salinas. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

collaborated with my friend Ana Salinas to do an image specifically for Alicia's book. Foremost in my mind was that I wanted to let people know about this horrible violence taking place just south of the U.S. border. Many of the young women murdered had migrated to this area of Mexico (i.e., Juárez) because they were looking for work as a result of NAFTA and the work found in the *maquiladoras*, or factories on the border.

I began my life as an artist by painting murals, as I mentioned earlier. I was born in Mexico but grew up in Los Angeles during a time when there were all these murals being painted. There were artists engaged in doing these amazing, incredible murals. As I was growing up, I really identified, culturally speaking, with the big murals being painted around Los Angeles. But I could not identify



Figure 5.
Alma Lopez, *María de los Angeles*, 1997, digital mural, Estrada Courts, Los Angeles.
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

with these murals in terms of gender because most of them were very male oriented. Therefore, when I began painting murals I wanted to do images that were predominantly female. And this is the artistic trajectory I took on in the mural I did titled *María de Los Angeles* (1997) located in Estrada Courts, East Los Angeles. (Figure 5).

This public work was commissioned and is one of the very first digital murals that I worked on; it was part of a larger series of works undertaken at [the] Estrada Courts Public Housing Community Center. Estrada Courts is a housing project known for the large number of murals painted during the 1970s and 1980s. More specifically, this mural is about matriarchy and depicts the grandmother, the mother, and the daughter all connecting to



Figure 6.

Alma Lopez, *Las Four*, 1997, digital mural, Estrada Courts, Los Angeles. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

pre-Colombian Mexico and also to the postconquest image of the Virgen de Guadalupe, featured in the center of the composition. I wanted to portray both the mothers and the daughters.

Another mural that I did in Estrada Courts was titled *Las Four* (figure 6) which consisted of actual photographs depicting young women who lived in the housing projects. We met them when they congregated in front of their homes sitting on the steps of their porch. We would ask them about what it was they wanted out of life, yet we noticed right away that there was disrespect toward the young women from some of the young men in their neighborhood, and I thought to myself: “These young women sitting in these front steps, whatever they do, they are going to make an incredible contribution to life.”

Therefore, it is important to respect them and think of them as people who will make incredible and important contributions, just like the four women featured in the background of the mural, who at one time were probably young women sitting in front of their steps, in front of their homes, hanging out with their friends. The women depicted in this mural are very well known in Chicana and Chicano studies and history. One of them is Dolores Huerta, who was the cofounder of the United Farm Workers, a very important organization in the United States. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is another famous woman featured in my mural. She was a brilliant playwright and poet known as the “Tenth Muse.” Sor Juana was an amazingly accomplished woman in seventeenth-century Mexico. She was a strong feminist, and this ideology was expressed in her writings. Another figure in the mural is the *soldadera*. In every single revolution and in every single struggle there are men and women fighting. Yet somehow, the women get lost in the writing of history. For example, in the revolutionary movements in Mexico, we know of Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa, but we do not know about the women fighting with them. The *soldadera*, therefore, stands for the women who have been involved in revolutionary movements. Included in this digital mural is another contemporary revolutionary figure from Guatemala, Rigoberta Menchú, who received the Nobel Peace Prize for furthering indigenous rights in that country.

Much of my work deals with complex, hard-hitting narratives. My digital piece called *Heaven 2* represents what my idea of heaven looks like. (Figure 7).

Depicted in this mural, you will find a friend of mine, Claudia Rodríguez, who is portrayed rejecting religion with her outstretched hand; she is particularly rejecting institutionalized religion. The religious figures are telling her what heaven is, and she is gesturing with her hand as if to say: “No. I know what heaven is.” She is looking at her lover, who is being brought to her by an



Figure 7.

Alma Lopez, *Heaven 2*, 2000, digital mural, Galería de la Raza, San Francisco. Special thanks to Claudia Rodríguez, Stacy Macías, Tía Chana, Cristina Serna, and Mirna Tapia. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

angel. At the foot of the bed is my mom's tía Chana. Tía Chana here represents community or family, who sometimes do not quite understand differences, but they are there for us, just like we are there for them. Tía Chana here is saying: "¡Ay, las chicas!"

To the right of the mural, we see a picture of Claudia again, but this time she is with her then partner Stacy Macías. They are sitting on the moon, just hanging out, having a good time. The mural is in Galería de la Raza, 24th and Bryant Streets in the Mission District in San Francisco, California. It is a large, digital billboard mural on vinyl, situated outdoors. A plaque accompanies the mural and explains what it is that I am trying to convey.

Our Lady (figure 8) was featured in several exhibitions, but it wasn't until I showed it in New Mexico that men especially became all riled up. They thought this image was very blasphemous, because here you have a modern-looking woman, a beautiful young woman (the model was my friend Raquel Salinas, a performing artist), representing the Virgen de Guadalupe. Raquel had just turned



Figure 8.

Alma Lopez, *Our Lady*, 1999, digital print. Special thanks to Raquel Salinas and Raquel Gutiérrez. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

forty or forty-one and was still very beautiful, healthy, and strong. She taught performance art to the local community in Los Angeles. In the composition, she is standing, posing as the Virgen de Guadalupe—but in a position of respect for the Virgen. It was primarily men who objected to this image; they were the ones who voiced most of the complaints. They did not quite understand why I would do such a thing. “Why would you present the Virgen completely *desnuda* [naked]?” they said. But here you can see she has a little miniblouse and miniskirt, kind of like a Jennifer Lopez [laughs]. But they were really offended; they thought it was blasphemous; it was horrible! I thought to myself: “What is wrong with this image?” We often see female nudes in the history of Western art, yet we find nothing wrong with them. Raquel is actually not nude here; she is covered in flowers and a veil. But what many people said to me was the problem

rested on her attitude. It is not what she is wearing on her body; it is what she is wearing on her face. It is the attitude she displays; her gaze. Instead of looking down in a passive manner, she is looking straightforward, as if to say: “What?”

Furthermore, I was commenting on the clothes the Virgen de Guadalupe traditionally wears. I grew up with the image of the Virgen; her image appears in a lot of Chicana/o literature and art because we are so familiar with her. We grew up with the Virgen in our homes and everywhere else in our culture. I, however, have always been curious about all the clothes that she wears, these big and heavy garments that prevent her from moving freely—she cannot walk because they are all wrapped around her. At the time, I was having conversations with my friends, especially Raquel Gutiérrez, who represents the angel in *Our Lady*, about the Virgen de Guadalupe. I was also reading a short essay called “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” by Sandra Cisneros, in the book *Goddess of the Americas/La Diosa de las Américas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe* (1996), edited by Ana Castillo.⁷ This was in a book of essays by Chicanas/os and Mexicanas/os on the Virgen de Guadalupe. In her text, Cisneros writes about growing up with the Virgen de Guadalupe, and toward the end of the essay, she expresses a curiosity about what she would be wearing underneath all those clothes. I thought: “Yes, I wonder what she would be wearing?” When I thought more about what the Virgen de Guadalupe might be wearing, I came to one conclusion: “Oh, she would be wearing roses, because roses were the sign given by her to Juan Diego to offer to the Bishop of Mexico when she first appeared.” Roses are now associated with the Virgen and are the symbol representing her because they were material proof of her apparition. This is the reason I decided to cover her with roses. With regard to the dress that the Virgen traditionally wears, I decided to blow it up and depicted it as the curtains found in the composition together with the robe.

Toward the bottom of *Our Lady's* composition, I included an angel but a different kind of angel than previously painted in traditional representations of the Virgen. She is personified by my friend Raquel Gutiérrez.

After the entire controversy with *Our Lady* in New Mexico, during which I received close to one thousand e-mails about the image, I decided to construct a Web site [almalopez.net] and to feature all these e-mails there. I have e-mails from people who did not like the image, people who liked the image, people who said horrible things about me, and so forth. But to me, what was important was that the painting was provoking an interesting conversation about an image. I did not take any of those e-mails personally, but when my own sister saw them, she said, "Oh Alma, how can you put those e-mails on your Web site. They are horrible." I just responded, "M'hija, they do not know me. They do not know who I am, so what they are saying, they are not really saying about me. What they are saying is more about themselves than about me."

After I was involved in this public controversy, a publisher asked me to do another book cover. The cover I did is somewhat autobiographical and reflects what had been happening during the controversial period I just described.

During this turmoil and controversy, the Chicana curator of the New Mexico museum where *Our Lady* was exhibited was even threatened. The director of the museum where my work had been featured was later fired. For me, it was really about defending the right to express myself as the person that I am, that is to say, an artist and a Chicana. Therefore, this image (figure 9) is very much autobiographical and reflects the events that took place regarding the controversy with my work on the Virgen de Guadalupe. In this piece, titled *Adelita*, I had another friend and performance artist pose as a revolutionary figure, a *soldadera*. She is holding her guns, and her bullets cover and protect

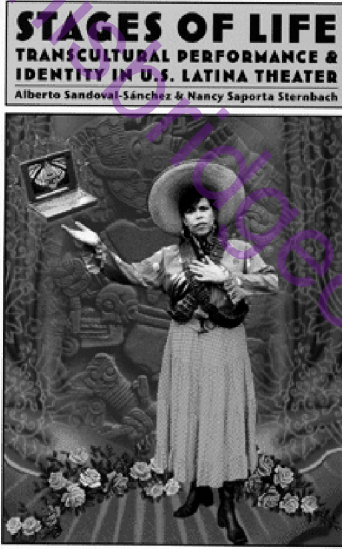


Figure 9.

Alma Lopez, *Adelita*, 2001. Cover illustration for *Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theater*, by Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001). Reproduced by permission of the University of Arizona Press.

her heart. She seems to say, “This is my heart; I will protect it in order to express what I have inside of it.” Her medium of expression is the computer, since she is a playwright. But that is also the way I express myself as an artist because much of my work is digital.

There are two volcanoes right outside of Mexico City; one is called Ixtaccihuatl and the other Popocatepetl. There is an Aztec legend related to the two volcanoes. According to the legend, Popo (short for Popocatepetl) was a warrior who had gone to battle and had returned to marry Ixta, the princess of his tribe. However, she did not think he was going to make it back from battle, and she, therefore, committed suicide right before he got back. So when he saw



Figure 10.

Alma Lopez, *Ixta*, 1999, digital print. Special thanks to Cristina Serna and Mirna Tapia. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

her just barely dead—the story resembles *Romeo and Juliet*—he took her body up to the highest point in Mexico, trying to see if the snowflakes found at the top of the mountain would wake her up. Instead, he also died. I grew up with this image at home because it was usually printed in calendars and given at the end of the year or at the beginning of the New Year. The calendars were given as gifts by commercial establishments such as restaurants, bakeries (*panaderias*), and other places. Usually we would have one of these calendars hanging at home. Other places one could find this image were on lowrider cars and on murals outside of local stores.

I used to wonder about the image and think: Isn't anybody else horrified about this story? Here is a princess who supposedly kills herself for Popo and you

wonder: Does she really need Popo? Is her life not worth anything unless she is hooked up with Popo, unless she is married to Popo? I thought that in a way these were the ideas that were being thrown at me and other girls as we were growing up. These particular ideas of marriage and of having to marry are commonly used to socialize the young. Yet there are numerous other options one can follow than just having to get married. It does not have to be just this one option of having to marry, and having to marry somebody of a different gender, the opposite gender, that is, a man. If you are a woman, you do not have to marry a man, and if you are a man, you do not have to marry a woman. I was always horrified that the legend narrated these events. But these stories are still told even today. In the popular media, such as Disney movies, all the films have fairy tales and are structured in the same manner. For example, there is the Little Mermaid, who gives up her talent in order to marry the prince, and she cannot even tell him, because she cannot be aggressive or assertive. It has to be the prince who makes the move. I would always be horrified by this type of socialization. When I was thinking about this image [Ixta. See figure 10], I thought, well maybe Ixta is not dead; maybe she is sleeping. And maybe if she is sleeping, perhaps she is waiting for Popo to leave. But Popo never left and that is why she is frozen. Here in my story, as I have re-created it: Popo has left and now we have another Ixta. Depicted are the picture of my two friends, Cristina and Mirna. They are situated on the border between the United States and Mexico, looking from Mexico to California.

Much of my work has to do with literature with the numerous stories that are narrated. Growing up, you hear a great number of *cuentos*, lots of stories. Chicano and Chicana writers tell a lot of *cuentos* and use a lot of imagery. The imagery and the stories can be translated into visual work. You see much imagery in literary works, and this imagery crisscrosses at different points; with art, the literary and the artistic vision come together at different points. Thank you.

Commentary

Alma Lopez opens her talk with a brief yet pointed critique of the artistic traditions from the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods, visual histories that are now deeply ingrained in the art historical canon. Having traveled in Florence and Rome prior to arriving in Naples, Lopez visited the various museums that exhibit work by artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Raphael, and the other monumental figures that make up Italy's cultural and historical patrimony. Impressed by the breadth and beauty of their work but somewhat irritated by the male domination of the country's visual history, the artist finds herself looking for something else, an alternative to Italy's masculine mystique. Her search is fruitful, for within a small gallery located on a side street on the margins of the state-sponsored mainstream museums of the country, she encounters the amazing work of Artemisia Gentileschi. Gentileschi was a seventeenth-century female Italian Baroque painter who excelled in the genre of history painting, a field dominated by male artists such as Caravaggio and Annibale Carracci. Known for her amazing technical skills and dramatic use of chiaroscuro, Gentileschi has been lauded by feminist art historians for highlighting women's experiences and subjectivities in the content of her artwork. Gentileschi's artistic success, however, came at a high price. She was denied entry into the professional academies of art because she was a woman in spite of her great promise and talent and would later be raped by a tutor her father hired to teach her art.⁸ Gentileschi's experience with rejection as a female artist and with sexual violence as a gendered other within the seventeenth-century Italian art scene resonated with Lopez's own experience as a Chicana artist in the contemporary U.S. art world, which remains hostile to work by women of color. Moreover, Lopez's heightened consciousness about sexual violence through her various images on the Juárez murders predisposed the artist to Gentileschi's struggles as a woman artist in a patriarchal system.

Because of the preponderance of literary scholars in the Naples conference, Lopez placed particular emphasis on the various book covers she had done over the years. The majority of these images graced the covers of important monographs and anthologies in the field of Chicana/o studies, thus inserting her work in direct dialogue with the intellectual debates that define this discipline. The covers functioned as more than just mere decorative elements for these publications; the works made intellectual contributions that complemented and enhanced the academic and literary content of each book. For instance, by putting *Selena in the Sky with Roses* on the cover of *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends*, the artist argued that the Tejana singer also contributed to the development of the Chicana/o artist renaissance occurring since the 1960s, thus echoing some of the similar arguments made about Selena by Roberto R. Calderón, whose chapter on the singer opens the anthology. In the anthology *Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theater*, Lopez's digital print *Adelita* on the cover, as she explained in Naples, becomes an allegory of the artist herself after the period of turmoil she experienced because of the controversy surrounding *Our Lady* in Santa Fe. Like the *soldaderas* in Mexican history, the artist becomes a *guerrera*, a woman warrior or *guerrillera* one who fights against hegemonic repressive governments, defending her particular revolutionary cause. The computer floating next to her then becomes a signifier of what connects Lopez as a visual artist to the various Chicana/Latina theater performers discussed in the book; the computer here is a tool for revolutionary creativity but also a symbol of what Chela Sandoval would call the cyborg consciousness of the Third World Feminist sensibility.⁹ Though primarily a visual artist, Lopez through her various book covers has situated herself quite prominently within the Chicana/o literary and scholarly tradition as well.

As the artist also pointed out during her presentation in Naples, much of her non-book work also enters into dialogue with literary production. Such was

the case of *Our Lady* itself, which asked some of the same questions about the Virgin of Guadalupe that Sandra Cisneros posed in her essay “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” published in Ana Castillo’s anthology *Goddess of the Americas*. Like Cisneros herself, Lopez was also puzzled by *la Virgen’s* apparent asexuality, a trait meant to be admired and emulated by Mexicanas and Chicanas. *Our Lady*, like “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” sought to resexualize Guadalupe, thus making her a more human and realistic role model to the everyday Chicana. The inscription of a sexual subjectivity and agency into this figure of religious and cultural devotion, of course, did not sit well with the archdiocese of Santa Fe and with various other traditional and mostly male Catholics of the area. The figure’s alleged nakedness became the focal point of much of this outrage. Nevertheless, Lopez argued that representations of nude and seminude figures are very much part of Christian visual traditions, as many of the Italian scholars in the audience knew all too well; one must only look at the seminude figures of Christ on the cross or St. Sebastian tied to a tree with arrows piercing his body. Yet the artist argues that the Santa Fe controversy was not about what Raquel Salinas wears on her body, but rather what she wears on her face, namely a defiant gaze. For three decades now, feminist scholars have maintained that representations of women in visual culture have been traditionally subjected to a process of objectification defined by the gaze of an assumed male spectator, the intended audience for these images.¹⁰ This gaze is unidirectional, privileging heterosexual men’s desires and pleasures and thriving on women’s passivity and disempowerment. The return of the heteronormative male gaze then disrupts this dynamic, thus endowing women in visual representations with agency and personhood. Raquel Salinas’s pose and eyes in *Our Lady* epitomized the feminist return of the gaze that challenges the physical and discursive control over women’s bodies, defying the containment of female agency within gendered objectifications.

Like many Chicana/o artists before Lopez, humor and wit are critical components in her oeuvre. In this commentary, we could not pass up the opportunity to highlight the artist's discussion of Tía Chana in her digital mural *Heaven 2*; after all, most Chicanas/os/Latinas/os have a Tía Chana in their families, someone who is always in our lives, providing continuous support and love in spite of generational differences and conflicts. While the mural celebrates Chicana queer love and desire, placing it within the realm of the sacred and spiritual, the figure of Tía Chana becomes, as Lopez herself explains, a symbol of family and community, an allegory of the older generations who often have a conflicted attitude toward younger Chicanas's expressions of sexuality. But Tía Chana possesses a bordered space within the mural's iconography; she is neither complicit with the patriarchal ideologies that condemn Chicana lesbian identity personified in the mural by the priest and altar boy, nor is she necessarily on board with Lopez's queering of the notion of heaven. Ultimately, Tía Chana's dismissive gesture in the mural is whimsically affectionate rather than reproving and admonitory.

While Lopez's work is informed by the spirit of collective consciousness and community engagement celebrated in the Chicana/o arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s, she is representative of a turn-of-the-millennium generation of artists who understand the critical role that gender and sexuality play in the oppression of people of color. Her personal identity as a queer Chicana represents, more than a sexual orientation, a political position that challenges essentialist and static notions of cultural and national identity. Lopez's cultural production embodies a Chicana feminist consciousness of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that is characterized by the utilization of new strategies for decolonization, one of them being the use of digital media. The warm reception and critical recognition that Lopez received in Naples ultimately

revealed, however, that the artist's visual formulations about empowerment, decolonization, and feminist consciousness transcended the geographical and cultural specificity of the Chicana/o community from the U.S. Southwest.

Notes

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¹ See Reina Alejandra Prado Saldívar, "Goddesses, Sirenas, Lupes y Angel Cholas in the Work of Alma Lopez," *Aztlan* 25, no. 1 (2000): 195–203, and Luz Calvo, "Art Comes for the Archbishop: The Semiotics of Contemporary Chicana Feminism and the Work of Alma Lopez," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 5, no. 1 (2004): 201–24. See also Catherine Ramírez, "Deus ex Machina: Tradition, Technology, and the Chicanafuturist Art of Marion C. Martinez," *Aztlan* 29, no. 2 (2004): 55–92.

² Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Introduction to Part One," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2003), 164.

³ Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "The Lesbian Body in Latina Cultural Production," in *Entiendes? Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*, edited by Emilie L. Bergmann and Paul Julian Smith (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 183.

⁴ Charlene Villaseñor Black, "Sacred Cults, Subversive Icons: Chicanas and the Pictorial Language of Catholicism," in *Speaking Chicana: Voice, Power, and Identity*, edited by Leticia Galindo and María Dolores Gonzales (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999), 134.

⁵ Stephanie Tavares, "Chicana Artist Kicks Off Exhibition," *Daily Nexus*, 24 January 2003, 1.

⁶ We thank Brianna Dávila for transcribing the recording of Alma Lopez's presentation in Naples.

⁷ Ana Castillo, ed., *Goddess of the Americas/La Diosa de las Américas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).

⁸ For more information on Gentileschi, see Mieke Bal, ed., *The Artemisia Files: Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and Other Thinking People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁹ Chela N. Sandoval, "New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, edited by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000), 375.

¹⁰ For more on the male gaze and the feminist return on the gaze, see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18; Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); and bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).