

Postwar American Avant-Garde (AE 117)
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“We the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain”: Chicano/a Art and Poetry

FROM Rafael Perez-Torres, ‘Nomads and Migrants: Negotiating a Multicultural Postmodernism, *Cultural Critique*, No. 26 (Winter, 1993-1994)

Postmodernism and multiculturalism, seldom discussed as if they belong together, might remind us of bickering partners. Each of these contested terms serves as a center of attraction, collects friends, makes enemies, coordinates allies, sets up networks of information. These networks seldom cross. The camps that identify themselves with these positions offer each other only the most cursory nod of recognition. This despite the fact that post-modernism and the multicultural share many affinities: a valuation of marginality, a suspicion of master discourses, a resistance to empty conventions. Maybe part of the problem is that these polysyllabic terms-postmodernism and multiculturalism-seem to engender more questions and tensions than answers and resolutions.

FROM Stuart Hall, in ‘Minimal Selves’ in Lisa Appignanesi (ed.) *Identity* (London: ICA Documents 6, 1987) cited by Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, in Zamora, L. (ed) *Contemporary American Women Writers: Gender, Class, Ethnicity* (London: Longman, 1998)

Thinking about my own sense of identity, I realise that it has always depended on the fact of being a *migrant*, on the *difference* from the rest of you. So one of the fascinating things about this discussion is to find myself centred at last. Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centred. What I’ve thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be *the* representative modern experience! This is ‘coming home’ with a vengeance! Most of it I much enjoy-welcome to migranhood.

FROM Sonia Saldívar-Hull, ‘Feminism on the Border: From Gender Politics to Geopolitics’, in Héctor Calderón, José David Saldívar, Roberto Trujillo, José David Saldívar, Héctor Calderón (eds) *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* (Duke University Press, 1991)

The Chicana feminist acknowledges the often vast historical, class, racial, and ethnic differences among women living on the border, but the nature of hegemony practiced by the united powers of patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, and white supremacy promotes an illusion of an irreconcilable split between feminists confined within national borders. We must examine and question the First versus Third World dichotomy before we accept the opposition as an inevitable fissure that separates women politically committed in different ways from any common cause.

FROM ‘Mappings’ in Lucy Lippard *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: New Press, 2000)

The boundaries being tested today by dialogue are not just ‘racial’ and national. They are also those of gender and class, of value and belief systems, of religion and politics. The borderlands are porous, restless, often incoherent territory, virtual minefields of unknowns for both practitioners and theoreticians. Cross-cultural, cross-class, cross-gender relations are strained, to say the least, in a country that sometimes acknowledges its overt racism and sexism, but cannot confront the underlying xenophobia-fear of the other-that causes them. Participation in the cross-cultural process, from all sides can be painful and exhilarating. I get impatient. A friend says: remember, change is a process, not an event.

Adrian Piper cited by Lippard

Cultural racism is damaging and virulent because it hits its victims in particularly vulnerable and private places: their preferences, tastes, modes of self-expression, and self-image . . . When cultural racism succeeds in making its victims suppress, denigrate, or reject these means of cultural self-affirmation [the solace people find in entertainment, self-expression, intimacy, mutual support, and cultural solidarity], it makes its victims hate themselves.

FROM chapter 4 ‘Mixing’ in *Mixed Blessings*

A great many contemporary artists from hugely diverse backgrounds are currently approaching the prospect of cultural mixing on a grander, if more carefully scrutinized scale than ever before. As a result, a magnificent tangle of contradictions arises. To mix means both to mate and to battle. Mixing is the central metaphor, the active social component of the intercultural process. It incorporates the interethnic violence that characterizes the history of this hemisphere, as well as the possibility of a “rainbow future,” when everyone is of “mixed race” and that barriers of race-as-class are destroyed. The term applies not only to “racial” blending, but to cultural and even esthetic mixtures and collaborations, introducing a full spectrum of contradictory decisions about identity and change.

Lucy Lippard on *Getting Them Out of the Car* 1984

Valadez's work stands out from conventional figurative art not only because of his striking color and compositions, but also because he works from real, active, daily life, if often from the darker side. "I paint something that's not attractive very attractively," he says. "I'm interested in how people blend in or clash with the urban landscape, . . . in depicting social issues such as ethnicity, classism . . . I came from drawing dead Mexicans because I figured that's how people wanted to see us, either ejected or dead."

Valadez has made many murals within the Chicano community and he monitors L.A. street life, working from his own photos and those in the news: "In downtown L. A., death is environmental and economic" . . . Sexual and racial tensions are often his subjects, as this impressive work on the self-destructive aspects of Latina culture, with its equation of the dead *vato* and the crucifixion, the night and day juxtaposition of dyings and slaughtered fish on the beach.

Judy Baca quoted by Lippard in *Mixed Blessings* (170)

For me the process of making art is the transforming of pain. First there's rage, below that rage is indignation, below that indignation is shame, below that hope, and at its corniest base, love. After I got through all of that I could love myself, my art, my people, who I really was. That's how the Great Wall got done. The art process takes pain to its furthest transformation.

Judy Baca in *Cultures in Contention* (eds.) Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier (1985)

Our people are internal exiles. To affirm that as a valid experience, when all other things are working against it, is a political act. That's the time we stop being Mexican-Americans and start being Chicanos . . . If you deny the presence of another people and their culture and you deny them their traditions, you are basically committing cultural genocide.

Yolanda M. López and Moira Roth, 1994, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, New York: Harry N. Abrams

"For women artists of color--despite their concern with women's issues--ethnicity more than gender has shaped their primary identities, loyalties, and often the content of their art. Also from the start the women's art movement has been dominated by Euro-American leadership....Thus, despite the many efforts and good intentions of white women in the arena of political art, racial separation and racism existed *de facto* within the Feminist Art Movement from the beginning."

FROM "Yolanda M. López Works: 1975-1978," San Diego, 1978.

http://mati.eas.asu.edu/ChicanArte/html_pages/YLopezIssOutl.html#artmaker

"Essentially, she [the Virgin of Guadalupe] is beautiful, serene and passive. She has no emotional life or texture of her own....Because I feel living, breathing women also deserve respect and love lavished on Guadalupe, I have chosen to transform the image. Taking symbols of her power and virtue I have transferred them to portraits of women I know....As Chicanos we need to become aware of our own imagery and how it functions. We privately agonize and sometimes publicly speak out on the representation of us in the majority culture. But what about the portrayal of ourselves within our own culture? Who are our heroes, our role models?"

López in an interview with Amalia Mesa-Bains:

"The ideal was white, and I was not. I didn't understand it in those terms as such, but I knew very well that I didn't look like that. So I never considered myself pretty or anything like that."

(*Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmations*, 1991, R. G. del Castillo et al [Eds.], Wright Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles: Los Angeles, p. 137)

http://mati.eas.asu.edu/ChicanArte/html_pages/YLopezIssOutl.html#artmaker

Yolanda López cited in in Shifra Goldman, "Portraying Ourselves": Contemporary Chicana Artists in Arlene Raven, Cassandra Langer, and Joanna Frueh (eds) *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology* (1988)

For many Chicanos [the Virgin of] Guadalupe has a religious and spiritual force. But I suspect her real power exists as a symbol of our national pride. There is something also nostalgic in our attitude towards her. She is an image infused with a certain kind of sentimentality for us. I looked at Guadalupe as an artist, as an investigator of the power of images. I was interested in her visual message as a role model. Essentially she is beautiful, serene, passive She has no emotional life or texture of her own. She exists within the realm of magical mythology sanctified as a formal entity by religious tradition. She remained the Great Mother, but her representation is as plastic as our individual fears and aspirations.

Because I feel living, breathing women also deserve the respect and love lavished on Guadalupe, I have chosen to transform the image. Taking symbols of her power and virtue, I have transferred them to women I know. My hope in creating these alternative role models is to work with the viewer in a reconsideration of how we as Chicanas portray ourselves. It is questioning the idealized stereotypes we as women are assumed to attempt to emulate.

ROM Gloria Anzaldúa, *La consciencia de la mestiza / Towards a New Consciousness* (1987)[see Norton Anthology of American Literature vol e)

The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza's* dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness.

In a constant state of mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, la *mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to? [...]

La *mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and towards a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. [...]

The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war. [..]

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races). [...]

The *macho* is the result of hierarchical male dominance. [...] Around Latinos he suffers from a sense of language inadequacy and its accompanying discomfort; with Native Americans he suffers from racial amnesia which ignores our common blood, and from guilt because the Spanish part of him took their land and oppressed them. He has an excessive compensatory hubris when around Mexicans from the other side. It overlays a deep sense of racial shame.

The loss of a sense of dignity and respect in the macho breeds a false machismo which leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them. [...]

The dominant white culture is killing us slowly with its ignorance. By taking away our self-determination, it has made us weak and empty. [...]

"*Pocho*" cultural traitor, you're speaking the oppressor's language by speaking English, you're ruining the Spanish language," I have been accused by various Latinos and Latinas. Chicano Spanish is considered by the purist and by most Latinos deficient, a mutilation of Spanish.

But Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. Change, *evolución, enriquecimiento de palabras nuevas por invención o adopción*, have created variant of Chicano Spanish, *un nuevo, lenguaje. Un lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir*. Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language. [...]

Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalised the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language difference against each other. [...]

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. [..] I will overcome the tradition of silence [...]

Los Chicanos, how patient we seem, how very patient. There is the quiet of the Indian about us. We know how to survive. When other races have given up their tongue, we've kept ours. We know what it is to live under the hammer blow of the dominant *norteamericano* culture. But more that we count the blows, we count the days the weeks the years the centuries, the eons until the white laws and commerce and customs, will rot in the deserts they've created, lie bleached. *Humildes* yet proud, *quietos* yet wild, *nosotros los mexicanos* Chicanos will walk by the crumbling ashes as we go about our business. Stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable, we the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain.