

Chicana Critical Pedagogies:
Chicana Art as Critique and Intervention

Cultural critic Alejandra Elenes, in her article “Border/Transformative Pedagogies at the End of the Millennium,”¹ calls for research into new pedagogies that would engross students in a critical dialogue where complex cultural identifications and social practices are explored, with the intention of promoting new ways of relating to social and material relations. Such challenging new research in art practices can be found in the critical pedagogical interventions conducted by two leading Chicana artist/activists, and the resulting ruptures, displacements, and changed consciousness of students working within a university setting. This paper will outline contemporary Chicana critical pedagogy and its strategies as implemented by the artists Yolanda Lopez and Celia Herrera Rodriguez as they visit the University of Dayton campus during 2002.

In the above mentioned article, Alejandra Elenes argues for the necessity of “border/transformative pedagogies informed by Chicana/o cultural studies and feminist theory [which] can serve as a space of critical scrutiny that offer alternatives to essentialist constructions of Chicana/o identity and subjectivity, and to conservative educational discourses.”² Why the urgent necessity? Elenes outlines the rising anxieties among white populations in response to the racially based movements of the 1960s and 1970s. She argues these movements “transformed the meaning of American culture; they made identity, difference, the personal, and language itself political issues in very new ways. They made mainstream society – that is, white people, --

¹ Alejandra Elenes, “Border/Transformative Pedagogies at the End of the Millennium: Chicana/o Cultural Studies and Education,” in *Decolonial Voices*, eds. Arturo J. Aldama and Naomi H. Quiñonez (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2002), 245.

² *Ibid*, 246.

take notice of difference.”³ In other words, these civil rights movements fought against the material, economic, educational, social and political marginalization taking place in the U.S. by pointing explicitly to the factors through which difference (separation) occurs. The reconstitution of marginalized identities made “visible the normative registrars ‘white,’ ‘heterosexual,’ and ‘male.’ . . . [It made apparent how] the normativity of their unmarked identity camouflaged their privilege.”⁴ Elenes argues that “ideologically and psychologically there is a perception that whites are losing their hegemonic position, or that they are expendable. . . . Civil rights legislation and the programs aimed at remedying ‘past discrimination’ are seen as un-American because they confer group rights that are not gained through individual merit.” Spawned by such anxieties about “losing ground” and becoming a “minority of whites,” new polarizations, oppositions, and exclusion are becoming manifest within university classrooms and broader political arenas. In the very struggle not to elide conversation about the material effects of difference and its connection to social injustice, it becomes imperative to develop educational discourses that foster critical dialogue where various subjectivities can be explored while overlapping cultural identifications can be grappled with, negotiated through, and more clearly understood.

For two decades, Lopez and Herrera Rodriguez have used installation, performance and multi-media art as a means to stimulate just such complex interactions. The tenets of their artwork are to engage, educate, and create social change. Through the incorporation of traditional Mexican art forms (altares), indigenous practices (ceremonia y palabras) and contemporary interdisciplinary art forms (including sculpture, painting, video, music and spoken

³ Ibid, 247.

⁴ Ibid.

word) these artists continue to advance Chicano women's issues as they depict class and ethnic difference. Using the arena of cultural and intellectual institutions (museums, galleries and universities), these artists enlist a diverse range of students as co-creators who build communities of discourse as they make critical cultural investigations of racial, ethnic, and gendered social relations. Both are nationally known multi-media and installation artists who have been some of the most dynamic participants within the Chicano Arts Movement since the 1960s. Both created installations at the University of Dayton during 2002 that were accompanied by lectures and discussion circles.

Lopez and Herrera Rodriguez's installations -- while picturing migrant workers, chola youth, lesbian lovers, and other 'border crossers' -- also work to reconstitute women's histories, to challenge racist stereotypes, and to refashion more "complex" multi-dimensional subjectivities. Ms. Lopez produces posters, videos, installations, and educational materials that critique racial and gender stereotypes circulating in print and electronic media. Lopez sees herself as an "artistic provocateur" committed to the Chicano cultural tenet that art can be a tool for political and social change. Herrera Rodriguez's work addresses, in her words, "a violence of memory" that often silences the struggles and the strengths of women and indigenous cultures. As a challenge against such a "violence of memory," her work includes student discussion and research into the history of 'place' that includes topics ranging between ethnobotany, economic conditions, migration of diverse populations, local ancient indigenous cultures, and distant pre-Colombian mythology. While Yolanda Lopez uses processes and images appropriated from corporate and mass media arenas, Celia Herrera Rodriguez uses materials from the earth, in raw

form, to remind students that knowledge begins with, that epistemologies are built through the body, that a critical artistic practice must engage the body in action.

Chicana artists, at the forefront of interdisciplinary cultural analysis, bring to their art praxis a number of interventions including an emphasis on language, history and power, as well as an examination of how the construction of knowledge participates within relations of power. Their pedagogies include research, documentation, and performance of previously marginalized histories, as well as student and community based dialogue, analysis, and interpretation that assert a consciousness-raising function. They create art that challenges viewers to understand their subject position within the social fabric and to seek change within the larger social reality.

As a scholar and an artist, pedagogical interventions have been a primary activity for Yolanda Lopez. She has taught studio classes and lectured on contemporary Chicano art at the University of California at Berkeley and San Diego, and at the California College of Arts and Crafts. Active as the Education Director for the Mission Cultural Center, Lopez uses art to teach how public images, at times, reinforce racism and ignorance. Her widely-circulated posters and installations often draw upon images of her own communities, giving voice to marginalized peoples such as farm workers, sweatshop seamstresses and other working-class laborers. She also retools Mexican and indigenous icons, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe and an Aztec warrior, to signify contemporary cultural struggles. For example, her print “Who’s the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?” (1978), still widely circulated at national Chicano conferences, visually deconstructs traditional concepts of national, cultural, and geo-political North American identity. In the print, an indigenous male wearing a Toltec tribal headdress assumes the aggressive stance

of Uncle Sam. With a sharply pointed finger, he demands rethinking of who is the alien within these lands.

While at the University of Dayton in 2002, Lopez worked with students to install her media series "Cactus Hearts/Barbed Wire Dreams," a two-part installation with accompanying videos. In the first installation titled "Things I Never Told My Son About Being A Mexican," students collected and then Lopez put on display those many advertisements, food wrappers, toys, souvenirs and articles of clothing that reproduce notions of Mexicans as lazy, servile, alien or meek. (See figure 1.) Across a barren southwestern landscape painted on a 40' x 12' canvas tarp, Lopez hung a compilation of common products that reproduce stereotypes of Mexican women as maids and Mexican men as sleepy siesta takers or as other world aliens. All the products have been manufactured in America, packaged as "authentically Mexican," and targeted towards a largely Anglo constituency. Discussions with students explored how cultural stereotypes present notions of the sub-altern (Mexicans, domestic workers, and women in this case) as less educated, disempowered, and socially inferior. Students analyzed how such notions help build a sense of superior identity and empowerment within the mainstream (Anglo-Americans, professional, and men).

A majority of the images in this installation relate women and children to the domestic realm. Pictures of Mexican women as domestic care takers and as cooks predominate, and the pictures appear mostly on food packaging, kitchen accessories, and children's clothes destined for Anglo homes. Images of Mexican men as small, strange, alien beings appear most often on children's toys. The use of these items is both symbolic and productive. They mark gender

identities and they serve as props in racialized constructions of identity. As Dick Hebdige would argue, ownership of these items signals a type of membership within a given culture and help to proscribe the nature of social relationships.⁵ Lopez's concern is that:

These objects are part of the cultural environment our children share with the rest of America. These images really clue children in to the vernacular of derogatory terms. The images that you see on restaurants, of sleeping Mexicans leaning against the cactus with their big sombreros and the empty beer bottle imply an inferior status. . . . My point is not that Speedy Gonzalez is bad; my point is that Speedy Gonzalez contributes to creating the total visual and cultural environment in which we all operate. I am more interested in things like Speedy as part of the totality, the gestalt of how these images affect and define us.⁶

Lopez explained to students, "At one point I began to document the ads and products I found that were presenting negative ideas of Mexicaness."⁷ An example she included in the installation is a little action toy her son purchased at a San Francisco area Walgreen's. Named "Taco Terror," it is a small figure shaped like a taco with arms and legs, but with green skin and bulging red eyes akin to an extraterrestrial alien. The figure is wearing a combat helmet and is holding a semi-automatic weapon. He carries an I.D. card that identifies him as a "bean brain," who has "taco breath," and who likes to "grease" the enemy. The toy invites youth to participate in a performance that reinscribes social roles and racist assumptions attributed as normal to racialized and gendered bodies.

⁵ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, (London, New York: Routledge & Methuen, 1979), 12-16.

⁶ "Artist Provocateur: An Interview with Yolanda Lopez," Elizabeth Martinez, *Crossroads* (May 1993), 14-18.

⁷ Lopez first created the installation "Things I Never Told My Son About Being a Mexican" in 1984 at UC Santa Cruz. The installation evolved into a larger presentation titled "Cactus Hearts/Barbed Wire Dreams" first exhibited at Galeria de La Raza in San Francisco, 1986.

Along with the installation, Lopez presented a 28 minute video, “When You Think of Mexico: Commercial Images of Mexicans in the Mass Media” (1986) that offers the artist’s analysis of these images and shows how symbols deliver their meaning. The video examines the means through which the entertainment industry, food manufacturers, and other corporate interests create myths about Mexicans. Students are challenged to contribute to the visual analysis of the so-called "good" (picturesque) Mexican and the "Bad" (illegal) Mexican, and to articulate how symbols deliver their meaning both overtly and more subtly through unspoken cultural contexts. Sophomore and junior-level students reflected on such things as liquor and travel ads that clearly stage a stereotypical "good" Mexican woman as small, domesticated, and bent – in opposition to an Anglo European woman as tall, worldly, and upright. Students’ analyses also examined how TV and radio news often criminalizes "evil illegal aliens as scary and barbaric invading hordes” and made connections to the ways that class oppression, social antagonisms, and political apathy are reinforced and maintained by corporate entities.

All of the media materials placed in the installation allude to unequal power relations between Anglos and Mexicans and reflect essentialist tendencies that construct static images of Latinos. While Lopez offers a scholarly and witty critique of cultural stereotypes that circulate in print and electronic media, she also connects the derogation to rising racial tensions and exclusions:

Outrageous stereotypes have appeared in United States entertainment, advertising, news media, and films portraying Mexican-Americans at times as lazy, servile, picturesque, and at other times as severely threatening. Such misrepresentations adversely affect

access to education, employment, housing, health care, and economic resources. . . . I am interested in methodology, in putting things in context, in relation to the survival of a people.⁸

Lopez's commitment to an art pedagogy that links activist education and visual expression to social change is best exemplified in the second installation titled "When You Think of Mexico," included in the media series "Cactus Hearts/Barbed Wire Dreams." (See figure 2.) Students became researcher-collaborators as they sought out recent local and national news stories about Mexicans and Mexican Americans. One wall of the Rike Center Gallery became filled with a series of articles from San Francisco, San Diego, Dayton, and Houston newspapers testifying to institutionalized practices of racism. Those practices include environmental devastation wrought upon minority barrios, limited access to equal educational and economic opportunity, under funded schools, inadequate health services, unsafe working conditions, and illegally low wages. Visual and conceptual links were established between the news items on this wall and the demeaning images from the "Things I Never Told My Son About Being Mexican" installation on the adjoining wall. Repeating images visually point to stories about California's anti-immigrant propositions 187, 209, and 227 – all are propositions largely based on the hysteria manifested by such constructions of immigrants, Mexican Americans, and Chicanos as "criminals" who are undeserving of certain rights. The visual material clearly argues that what is at stake here is "access to basic material human needs such as health care and education."

⁸ Julia P. Herzberg, "Re-Membering Identity: Visions and Connections," The Decade Show: Frameworks for Identity on the 1980s, Nilda Perez, et al, (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art. 1990), 37-59.

For Lopez, having students examine the ways that Anglo and Chicano identities get formed through these processes is crucial. In particular, Lopez's work examines the broad realm of American cultural production, calls attention to the mechanisms by which selves are produced and reproduced, and scrutinizes the ways in which "identity is constructed across difference." One student, Katie Condron, responded to the participatory and self-reflective nature of the art by writing, "This work not only informed me of the cultural ignorance that still exists today, but through the art, I was able to understand the repercussions of such negativity and the fact that it can no longer be tolerated. It has me asking what part I play in all this and what action I must now take."

Lopez's installations participate within the broader post-modernist movement initiated in the 1980s to interrogate the notion of an autonomous, free and sovereign self. As postmodernist art began to explore dialogic models that considered the self and identity as provisional rather than static constructions, Lopez began to look at identity formation in the United States and the border region as a weaving of differing dialogic, power-informed threads. We understand Lopez's work as effecting a critique of representation, it investigates and puts on display the provisional and arbitrary nature of racialized identity as it gets formed by powerful corporate forces. Hers is a practice of appropriation whereby images are borrowed wholesale; there is no aura, no quasi-sacred emanation of uniqueness and authenticity. Lopez's unsettling approach to content is an exploration of the mechanisms through which the sense of self gets shaped. In her varied deployment of images and texts lifted from the mainstream of social, institutional, and commercial discourses, social attitudes are gradually revealed to be an effect of multiple forces, a provisional point of intersection, a site for ongoing exchange and contestation.

Given this, In a 1993 interview, Yolanda Lopez posed the question "how do we deal with these tightly constructed social attitudes, how do we deal with the racism and sexism in institutions that are socially complex and, in ways difficult to define, corrupt. . . . We are at a crossroads right now . . . we must all deal with the role of the United States in the global economy, and by implication, with the concept of sovereignty and national identity."⁹ This crossroads we find ourselves at is also a precarious border region. Here the term border alludes to the cultural, regional, political, linguistic and psychological meanings of the Chicano border experience. Our artistic challenge on theoretical and creative levels is to find a contemporary vocabulary for addressing today's societal concerns. Indeed, Lopez strongly asserts that:

"It is important for us to be visually literate, indeed it is a survival skill. . . . The media is what passes for culture in contemporary U.S. society, and it is extremely powerful. It is crucial that we systematically explore the cultural mis-definition of Mexicans and Latin Americans that is presented in the media. . . . This list of stereotypes goes on incessantly, reminding us that we live in a society where Mexico is too narrowly associated with banditos, señoritas, servants, tacos, hot sauce and undocumented people. This corrupted understanding of who a Mexican is, becomes extremely important because it affects our access to education, employment, housing, health care, and economic resources."¹⁰

Theorist Michel Foucault points to the ways that institutions (corporate agriculture, mass media) -- through representations, pictures and stories -- craft positions of strength or of disempowerment that human subjects then occupy. Social science scholars also argue that

⁹ Martinez, 18.

¹⁰ Yolanda Lopez, artist statement accompanying installation at the University of Dayton, 2002.

representations, stories and art works are discursive objects, and carry in them the possibility of upsetting subject positions. They argue that representations have the power to convey “efficacy beliefs” -- beliefs that -- “shape expectations about one’s own actions, the affective and unconscious dimensions to our sense of agency.”¹¹

Following the maxim that “agency is a feminist belief about human fulfillment,”¹² Lopez also presents Mexican women as agents of change who, in their union logos, take the advance guard in promoting women’s and workers’ rights. The artist appropriated images from some of the installation’s newspaper articles and redeployed them in the print titled “Women’s Work is Never Done: An Homage to Delores Huerta.” (See figure 3.) In her print, she presents contemporary agricultural workers wearing heavy veils, gloves and masks in an effort to protect their bodies from harsh lethal chemicals used in agriculture. However, the women are rallying around a FLOC (Farm Labor Organizing Committee) banner. In their fight for justice in the workplace, the women transform burdensome protective attire into proof of the atrocities visited upon their bodies. The kinds of activism Lopez, Delores Huerta and the women in this poster participate in “encourages women to believe they can act in the collective best interest exactly because it is collective . . . the individual and the collective are implicated in one another, and therefore the personal becomes political.”¹³

Like Lopez, Celia Herrera Rodriguez's work seeks to empower communities of women; the most important themes assert the power of using one's voice to redress personal and social

¹¹ Daniel Miller and Christopher Tilley, eds., *Ideology, Power and Prehistory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) , 14.

¹² Judith Kegan Gardiner, “Introduction,” in *Provoking Agents: Gender and Agency in Theory and Practice*, Judith Kegan Gardiner, editor (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1995), 13.

¹³ *Ibid*, 6.

history and to heal the wounds of an associated psychic history. Many of her works depict the silences that women face and the fact that these silences stem out of women not being ready to articulate their voice to the world.¹⁴ Herrera Rodriguez is a painter, performer, and installation artist whose work reflects Chicano, Native American, Pre-Columbian and Mexican thought. Rodriguez received a master's degree in painting from University of Illinois–Champaign-Urbana. She studied Art History, Theory and Criticism at the Art Institute of Chicago and has taught at Stanford, UC Santa Cruz, UC Berkeley, and the Art Institute of Chicago. One of the most important tenets of her work is to give voice and texture to lost histories, creating a mytho-poetics of indigenous women's place in the world. Her performances have interrogated the fragmented nature of decolonized histories, the tenacity through which stereotypes persist, and the profound degree to which cultural mixing informs Chicano consciousness.¹⁵ Her work with students at the University of Dayton included the formation of a discussion circle, research into personal and socio-mythic histories, and the co-creation of an altar installation located within the first floor gallery of the university's library. (See figure 4.) A primary objective in the collaboration was to stimulate within students a deeper sense of engagement with place and those human relationships pertaining within. Through this focus on place, Herrera Rodriguez evokes Foucault's approach to excavating vast and multiple histories, but within a local and specific terrain.

Following recent analysis within cultural studies, place is understood to be socially constituted and socially constituting. To rejoin Lopez's question of "how do we deal with tightly

¹⁴ Celia Herrera Rodriguez, unpublished Artist's Statement, 1991, 1.

¹⁵ As performed in "Cositas Quebradas/Broken Things," "Three Elements of Consciousness," "Evolution of a Servant," and "What Part Indian Am I? - Eyes, Tongue, Ears," performed at NACCS 2001 Tucson; ProArts Gallery, 200, Oakland; Center for the Arts, 1996, Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco; Red Mesa Center for the Arts, 1993, Gallup, NM, respectively.

constructed social attitudes, how do we deal with the racism and sexism. . . . [how do we] deal with the role of the United States in the global economy, and by implication, with the concept of sovereignty and national identity?" Herrera Rodriguez would have students understand their sense of themselves as forged from within profound political, symbolic and social investments embedded in place. Cultural historian Mary Kay Vaughan explains:

The ways we perceive, value, and occupy physical space are themselves shaped by our spatially organized communities and sites within them that socialize us, create symbolic meaning, and articulate unequal power relations. . . . This notion of social space is closely related to the concept of identity. Indeed, identity is shaped at sites of socialization. Identity, as defined here, cannot be reduced to notions of economic interest or positioning in relations of production. It is also deeper, more intimate and specific . . . it is historically embedded in local experience and constructed through memory and practice.¹⁶

Herrera Rodriguez envisions the specifics of place as a space of vast dialogues that link peoples, economies, cultures, politics and a sense of morality. She evokes a sense of the local geography because it offers a rich web of memories and ideas that impact identity. Students inform their own sense of personal identity by mining the local geography, by developing a sense of place, and by understanding the contemporary social realm as it has been complicated by the past. The complications of the past include enforced slavery and forced removals as well as significant cultural borrowings and mutually defined economic interdependencies. As we begin to excavate the local terrain, we uncover a place forged not only from limited patrimonies, rather

¹⁶ Mary Kay Vaughan, "Cultural Approaches to Peasant Politics in the Mexican Revolution," The Hispanic American Historical Review, Volume 79, Issue 2, Special Issue: Mexico's New Cultural History: Una Lucha Libre (May, 1999), 277-282.

from a web of fragmented myths, partial images, displaced signs, partially incoherent mixed-languages, and mestizo blood lines.

Herrera Rodriguez draws students into this space of the local, the immediate, and the personal. She links them to the particular and the specific. But the history she encourages is not unified, not seamless. Rather, we develop a sensibility towards a new kind of historical fiction and how we might use these histories towards a new hybridized cultural logic, one articulated by Frederic Jameson as a position of questioning “the hierarchical placements of Self and Other, Centre and Margin.”¹⁷ New pedagogies expanded out of Foucault’s examination of empire, history, discourse and pedagogy. He found “as history constantly teaches us, discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle.”¹⁸ Chicana scholar Teresa Córdova argues towards a pedagogy that begins with the understanding that “all relations are relations of power,” and that focuses analysis upon “the dynamics of social relations as relations of power.”¹⁹

Herrera Rodriguez challenges students to interrogate universities, museums, historical surveys and other places of academically legitimized discourse in the effort to uncover subtleties of oppression made manifest through, yet also hidden by power-based institutions. For example, the title of the work installed within the University of Dayton’s central library begs a connection between buried histories, access to cheap abundant food supplies, and empathy towards migrant

¹⁷ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 188.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” in *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader*, Robert Young, editor (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 372.

¹⁹ Teresa Córdova, “Power and Knowledge: Colonialism in the Academy,” (1994) in *Living Chicana Theory*, Carla Trujillo, editor (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1998), 18.

Mexican laborers. The first part of the title "What does this have to do with the price of beans?" challenges the paucity of critical inquiry that would link economics and race to social injustice. The second part of her title, "An altar to migrant workers," affirms the connection between America's abundant and cheap food supply borne out of the work of migrant laborers. The art installation is a floor mound that looks like a gravesite; hidden within are numerous allusions to indigenous peoples' cultural histories. The work is constructed from seven hundred pounds of soil and other organic materials, symbolically insinuating the threat of contamination and pollution latent within those typically excluded from the hermetic confines of the academic library. The art is a place where two hundred pounds each of beans and corn have been "dumped," a direct reference to NAFTA policies that enable the unloading of millions of tons of U.S. grown, government subsidized produce into Mexico.

Herrera Rodriguez's student collaborators researched local, Midwestern economic history. They found that Ohio farmers are primary beneficiaries of government corn subsidies and "free trade" arrangements destined for Latin America. The art installation takes into account the economic machinations specific to this place and attempts to symbolize the political tensions of a place where NAFTA policies enable the "dumping" of millions of tons of U.S. grown, government subsidized produce into another country struggling to maintain its own agricultural productivity. American corporations are able to unload produce into Mexico at artificially low prices because, as Michael Pollan explains, "The \$190 billion farm bill President Bush signed June 2002 provides farmers \$4 billion a year for ten years to grow more corn, this despite the fact that we struggle to get rid of the surplus we already produce. The average bushel of corn (56

pounds) sells for about \$2 today; it costs farmers more than \$3 to grow it.”²⁰ The dumping of U.S. produce (corn and beans) in Latin America undermines the local agrarian economies of small landowners and contributes to their displacement from the campos. In his analysis of NAFTA’s impact, Bill Lenderking argues, “When Mexico’s relatively inefficient and labor-intensive agriculture is exposed to competition from the United States, many Mexican farm workers are displaced.”²¹ Displaced Mexican farmers migrate north into the U.S. desperately looking for agricultural employment. Indeed, the Midwest region in which University of Dayton students originate is that area of the country most impacted by the influx of Latino migrant labor. Census statistics indicate that during the past decade, more than 56 percent of the population growth in the Midwest was attributed to Latinos.²²

Foucault’s argument towards the writing of “new histories” influenced postcolonial thought by pointing to “place” as a site of relations and networks of meaning offering complex histories. Understanding this model, Herrera Rodriguez challenged students to excavate the complex histories within the Miami Valley river region in southwest Ohio and to interpret them as multi-layered, heterogeneous, telling many stories which contribute to an expanded notion of cause and effect within each history. Students uncovered numerous contingent histories, analyzing the borders and interdependencies occurring between them. Enforced settlement, land possession, ethnic conflict between people indigenous to this place, yet also establishment of the

²⁰ Michael Pollan, “When a Crop Becomes King,” New York Times, July 19, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/19/opinion/19POLL.html?ex=1028357740&ei=1&en=>.

²¹ Bill Lenderking, “The U.S.-Mexican Border and NAFTA: Problem or Paradigm?” in U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, Oscar J. Martinez, ed. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996), 193.

²² Marcelo Siles, “The Browning of the Midwest,” Lansing: University of Michigan Julian Samoras Research Institute paper, 2000.

Underground Railroad north through Ohio towards the promised land of Detroit and entry into Canada.

Throughout our discussions, students began to acknowledge issues of power and oppression, and to look to the possibility of mutual appropriation between groups. Students were invited to understand degrees of reciprocity and to forge a sense of their place as one that becomes open to dynamic negotiations and encounters. In Herrera Rodriguez's lecture on contemporary artists, it became clear that cultural dynamics today are unstable, fragmentary, yet capable of reinvention and remaking of hybrid spaces. Those spaces are dense with the acknowledgements of multiple histories, desires, and losses. Herrera Rodriguez encouraged students to understand themselves as citizens of such highly contested "encounter zones." Mary Louis Pratt argues that subjects of such decolonial spaces "are constituted in and by their relations to each other . . . in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices."²³ As many Chicanas of recent years argue, the creation of place as site of hybrid encounter encourages a kind of inter-subjective border-crossing, a movement between opposing subjectivities and the co-construction of new, shared identities. As groups come together in dialogic negotiation and acknowledgement of issues of power and oppression, they look for possibilities of mutual appropriation.

Throughout this collaborative process students also proposed their own research questions, including: How does one's background impact influence one's style of art? Why and how does culture play such a huge influence on our lives? Are the various cultures in America

²³ Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), 18.

becoming more and more lost and forgotten about? Why? Just how do we show, as a major theme of this installation, the connection between nature and humans as well as between our present and our indigenous past? It became apparent to all that symbolic expression could be conveyed through the choice of materials, through the selection of particular colors and images, and through the very choice of production processes. An example of negotiated reciprocity unfolded from the encounter between a West Coast Chicana/Indian woman and largely Midwestern Anglo-European students.

In reference to many pan-indigenous origination stories that point to the back of the sea turtle as the First Place (place where earth was first formed), the students and Herrera Rodriguez shaped the installation soil into a turtle-shaped mound. Across a tarp, the artist and students placed 300 pounds of earth, then 200 pounds of beans and 200 pounds of corn. Students gathered texts about Ohio Valley pre-Colombian cultures and sought out alternate oral histories from the Miami Valley Native American Association located in Dayton. They identified those flowers indigenous to the area which could produce the requisite colors needed by American Indians as they place colors to honor the spatial forces associated with the cardinal directions. The students acquired ten dozen each of gumphrena, sunflower, hydrangea, and coneflower (red, yellow, blue, and black) for the installation. Using the designs and motifs of the principal deities from the important mound-building cultures in Ohio (Adena and Hopewell culture groups) students projected and traced faint images of those forms onto black vinyl screen. The sea turtle bore the four spatial directions (evoked by the flowers) on his back while surrounded by an ocean elaborated by the use the beans. Above the turtle, hanging at the outside perimeters of the installation, were the six foot black screens. The Adena and Hopewell designs – a bold human

hand and a circular spider's web – appeared on the screens as faintly as faltering memories. (See figures 5 and 6.)

The group covered the turtle mound with flowers and noted the similarity of mound building to the Latin American alfombra traditions. The alfombra is a grave covering made by communities as they commemorate ideals, events, or those who have died. Alfombra construction is especially active during Dia de los Muertos (Days of the Dead) in Mexico and Semana Santa (Holy Week) in Central America. The custom is a mixture of Spanish and indigenous customs.²⁴ In Mexico and Central America, celebrants create an image on the ground using colored sawdust, sand, seeds, flower petals, corn kernels, and seashells. The tradition has traveled to the United States as members within Latino, Chicano, and Mexican communities construct altars and alfombras in observation of certain religious and cultural events. The process of building the alfombra evokes themes of lamentation and memorializing, as well as rebirth and regrowth. The construction of the alfombra requires kneeling at the ground as one places flowers, candles, written remembrances, and prayers upon the arrangement. As individuals handle raw earth and lays out areas rich with seeds, beans, and kernels amongst straw, working in tandem with a community of careful, meditative persons, it becomes inevitable to think in terms of cycles, rebirth, and change.

For Herrera Rodriguez, it has been important that students understand the cultural logic behind a Chicana woman's deployment of Mesoamerican and American Indian spiritual beliefs in her own art practice. The revival of Native American and Mesoamerican histories,

²⁴ In the Maya culture, when important dignitaries would pass by, flowers were laid down to announce their presence. The mixing of plants with sawdust, sand and other materials into design patterns is a Moorish custom that was passed on to Spain. Later Spain brought alfombras to Latin America.

mythologies, and spiritual practices has been intimately linked, since the broad based activist movements of the 1960s, to the formation of previously-marginalized collective histories.²⁵ For African American cultural activists in the early 1960s, and by 1965 for Chicano and American Indian activists, participation within the national movements to assert economic and civil rights required de-colonization of cultural identity. This multi-part process sought to affirm previously degraded racial and ethnic categories as well as to reconstruct and revalue previously erased histories. As Rudolfo Anaya would assert, the task of the artists is “this process of self-naming, or self-definition . . . which restores pride and infuses renewed energy.”²⁶ Within this process of cultural recovery, the ties that had bound indigenous peoples across the Americas, and especially those reaching across the Southwestern region of Mexico and the United States, would symbolize a continuous history and a strengthened consciousness of living without borders.

Herrera Rodriguez told numerous stories indicating how mound-building honored the earth that rises out of sacred waters; how in this instance the mound honors laborers who risk their lives to work for the welfare of their families; but especially the installation honors various kinds of border regions and the courage to cross those spaces. Herrera Rodriguez highlighted the boundaries between earth and water by outlining the border in gold through the use of corn kernels. In Mexico, indigenous people still refer to themselves as *la gente de maize* (the people of the corn), upholding the symbol of corn as the link between the earth and knowledge.

Although no water was present at this installation (except for the air-borne moisture a warm front

²⁵ The investigations that lead to those pre-colonial retrievals received their greatest impetus from the postcolonial critic Franz Fanon. In 1961 Fanon argued how dominant culture “turns to the past [of the oppressed] . . . and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it . . . devaluing pre-colonial history . . . reducing native culture to barbarism and irrelevance.” See Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam Markmann, translator (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 169.

²⁶ Rudolfo Anaya, “Aztlán,” in *The Anaya Reader* (New York: Warner Books, 1995), 369.

might have carried into the climate-controlled library during February) and although no kernels were placed into the soil, plants sprouted at the perimeter where seed and earth lay in close vicinity. The inherent tenacity and intelligence within the seed to seek productivity surrounded by such foreign conditions contributed yet another layer of meaning within the altar.

Most significantly, the imagery depicted on the veils hanging throughout the installation points to the border region between life and death. On several of the screens installed around the earthen mound, Herrera Rodriguez painted images of *tzitzimimes* (female spider warriors) as guardian spirits who assist the dead in their journey across final borders. (See figure 7.) The image can be found in numerous pre-colonial Mesoamerican and Native American cultures, such as Teotihuacan and Apache. According to Aztec mythology, *tzitzimimes* were spider women who were the spirits of those who died in childbirth. A woman's ultimate sacrifice of her own life for the life of the child makes of her a warrior. She is both feared and revered in her culture; feared due to her tenacity in adhering to her call to be a mother, and revered for the sacrifice of her life, much like martyrs are today held in high esteem. These spider women travel between the borders of life and death, the material, physical realm and the immaterial, spiritual dimension. They bear great strength demonstrated through this ability to change, transform, and transgress the veil that separates realities. Herrera Rodriguez has painted them as they are born out of their own webs. Their webs represent the veil, the border between the physical and the immaterial. The web is also in the shape of the four-petaled Aztec flower out of which issues the breath of life. Additionally, the four petaled shape alludes to the four chambered cave, the site of Aztec origination, from which issued the first life.

The tzitzimimes, or spiders, represent the concept that all humanity are born of the earth and return to the earth after death. The spider women who, in Herrera Rodriguez's painting, are born out of the veil, devour the bodies of the dead and help return them to their place of origin – the earth. For Herrera Rodriguez, the image of the tzitzimime communicate a concept of basic human equality. We enter the world and depart through the same means. Originating as a Mexican petroglyph, Rodriguez incorporates into the spider image a contemporary Chicana reference to tzitzimime as powerful social warriors who pierce the false veil of ideology that separates people into class, race, and gendered categories. In her installation "What has this got to do with the price of beans?," her question calls us to be critical, to look for interdependencies and mutualities, subtle relationships that pertain within our social web --to understand our social and economic facts -- that our cheap food supply we never question is intricately linked to all important labor provided by migrant workers. Tzitzimime women pierce the false veil of ideology that separates us from them.

Herrera Rodriguez urged the predominantly female participants (drawn from an Art and Feminism class) to connect their personal space with the public space they would forge as they worked collaboratively. In large part the work, she asserted, would be about each participant standing at the crossroads, finding, and articulating one's voice. In Herrera Rodriguez's words "It's very difficult to express yourself in another culture, including patriarchal culture, which establishes a whole other set of rules of conduct. Part of us is always wounded in that process." The artists argues against the notion of Palabras Muertas, what she calls being "tongue tied," against the idea that women are demoralized because they are feared, they are feared because they are constantly emerging from domination. As women find themselves at the crossroads,

their research into borders signifies new perspectives on physical, political, economic and cultural bounds. Indeed, students found numerous lines had crossed them personally – the creation of geopolitical lines, the cultural loss of antepasados (ancestors), the academic bar against language that embraces ambiguity as it seeks to combine seemingly contradictory elements.

Incorporating this attitude of giving voice, one of the participants, Elizabeth Daly remarked:

I feel her artwork argues towards cultural survival. Her artwork is a clear vehicle for a protest on the rights of farmers, the power women hold in their hearts, and the cruel dismissal of Mexican people, especially farmers. Herrera Rodriguez was very passionate when speaking about how migrant farm workers are not treated like humans in some cases, getting devastatingly low wages, and surviving inhumane working and living conditions to the point where they are sprayed or dusted right along with the bugs. We, as women, need to be brave, strong, take risks, and experiment, no matter how scary it may be. This message was most powerful for me, and her artwork and lectures are something that I will remember for the rest of my life.

The artists' insistence on always bringing activist and educational components into the art arena signals an important transition from the nationalist politics of the 1970s into a broad based cultural activism of the 1980s. David Deitcher in his article "Taking Control: Art and Activism," identifies cultural activism as "those cultural practices - including teaching and filmmaking, writing and art production - that persisted as islands of resistance after the dissipation of the

massive protest movements of the 1960s and early 1970s."²⁷ For activists, context plays a crucial role in determining the status and meaning of cultural artifacts. It is the social conditions in which a cultural practice arises, and in which it functions, that determine its potentially critical and interventional character."²⁸ Deitcher explains that:

Since the 1970s' contingency has been widely recognized for the crucial role it plays in determining the status and meaning of cultural artifacts. For example, in museums and art galleries the institutional as well as the phenomenological circumstances of display determine the status and meaning of works of art. In a similar sense, the social conditions in which a cultural practice arises, and in which it functions, can determine its potentially critical and interventional character.²⁹

Chicana critical collaborative art repositions artists, teachers, and students to critique cultural discourses and practices that inhibit, restrict, or silence their identity formation, agency, and creative production. Since the 1970s Chicana activists have looked to the Latin American critical pedagogies and collaboration elaborated by Paulo Freire in his text Pedagogy of the Oppressed.³⁰ His critique of education argued that any curriculum which ignores racism, sexism, the exploitation of workers, and other forms of oppression at the same time supports the status quo. It inhibits the expansion of consciousness and blocks creative and liberating social action for change. In Freire's view of education, performative, collaborative acts are crucial because:

learning to take control and achieving power are not individual objectives. For poor and dispossessed people, strength is in numbers and social change is accomplished in unity.

²⁷ David Deitcher, "Taking Control: Art and Activism," in The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity on the 1980s, Nilda Perez, et al (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, 1990), 184.

²⁸ Ibid, 186.

²⁹ Ibid.,

³⁰ Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Myra Berman Ramos, translator (New York: Continuum, 1970).

Power is shared, not the power of a few who improve themselves at the expense of others, but the power of the many who find strength and purpose in a common vision. Liberation achieved by individuals at the expense of others is an act of oppression. Personal freedom and the development of individuals can only occur in mutuality with others.³¹

Within its aesthetic context, Chicana critical installation art is collaborative and performative as it deconstructs socially and historically determined speech. Through this, it enables the expression of multiple subjectivities and the development of just such mutuality. A pragmatic form of cultural criticism, performance art serves as critical pedagogy whereby speech codes are taught, contested, and re-presented in the form of new ideologies, identities, and cultural myths.³²

Transformative pedagogy relates to various types of discourses, critical, feminist, radical and/or queer where education is seen as the mutual construction of knowledge amongst teacher and students, not as the passive transmission. Both Yolanda Lopez and Celia Herrera Rodriguez take active roles in determining the shape as well as the context for dialogue. Both use art as powerful tools for outreach and social justice efforts, yet in very different ways. One takes a critical, analytic perspective on the public realm and its power to shape personal subjectivities, the other enlists the personal, subjective space of spiritual performance in order to raise questions concerning quite public socio-economic histories. Rather than relying on a singular, totalizing perspective that would present one history as a unified, logical, closed metanarrative, the

³¹ Henry A. Giroux, "Doing Cultural Studies: Youth and the Challenge of Pedagogy," Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture, and Schooling (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 162.

³² Charles R. Garoian, Performing Pedagogy: Toward an Art of Politics (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999), 5.

students developed an understanding about the relations between privileged and exclusion, between centralizing powers and subjugated knowledges.