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## Art comes for the Archbishop

### *The Semiotics of Contemporary Chicana Feminism and the Work of Alma Lopez*

The Virgin of Guadalupe is omnipresent in Chicano/a visual space. She is painted on car windows, tattooed on shoulders or backs, emblazoned on neighborhood walls, and silk-screened on t-shirts sold at local flea markets. Periodically, her presence is manifested in miraculous apparitions: on a tree near Watsonville, California; on a water tank, a car bumper, or a freshly made tortilla.<sup>1</sup> She is the sorrowful mother, a figure who embodies the suffering of Chicano/a and Mexican populations in the context of colonization, racism, and economic disenfranchisement.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is a polyvalent sign, able to convey multiple and divergent meanings and deployed by different groups for contradictory political ends. For example, the Catholic Church deploys the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in service of its regressive sexual politics. However, progressive movements have also carried the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe to signify resistance to colonization and economic exploitation, as in the War of Mexican Independence and in the United Farm Workers' struggle for economic justice. Chicano/a cultural workers—from graffiti artists to novelists—use the Virgin of Guadalupe as a sign of racial solidarity, for she is imagined to have brown skin,<sup>2</sup> or as a sign of transnational solidarity, for she is the patron saint of Mexico. Chicano/a artists have reproduced and reinterpreted the Virgin of Guadalupe in their *retablos*, paintings, murals, posters, films, performance, and literature. Almost without exception, Chicano/a films include the image of Guadalupe in their sets, nodding to her importance in Chicano/a visual

space. And merchants in Chicano/a neighborhoods use the Virgin of Guadalupe to sell their product: it is commonplace to see a mural devoted to the Virgin on the outside of a neighborhood liquor store or to find Virgin of Guadalupe auto “air fresheners” at the car wash.

Because of her ubiquity and her polyvalence, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is a sign that is especially available for semiotic re-signification and cultural transformation. Alma Lopez, a Chicana lesbian artist, has seized this semiotic possibility, creating a series of digital images that break open and transfigure previous interpretations and uses of the Virgin. Lopez’s images make manifest the sexuality and desire that are embedded in Chicano/a attachments to the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. As might be expected, Lopez’s work has been quite controversial. Her 1999 digital collage *Our Lady* (fig. 1) incited demonstrations, community meetings, and letters to the editor when it was displayed at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico.<sup>3</sup> Angered by Lopez’s image, a vocal group of Chicano and Catholic activists called for its removal from the museum. Rhetorically reducing the image to the language of fashion, these activists repeatedly described Lopez’s piece as a depiction of “the Virgin of Guadalupe in a bikini.” The demonstrators gained the support of Santa Fe Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, who called the piece “insulting and sacrilegious,” asserting that in Lopez’s image the Virgin is “shown as a tart or a street woman” (Office of Communications, Archdiocese of Santa Fe, 2001). Chicano nationalists tried to maintain control over the meaning of the Virgin of Guadalupe and contain her within the semiotic structure of the Catholic Church.

The protests that surrounded *Our Lady* caused considerable consternation and debate within Chicano/a communities in New Mexico and beyond.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, however, Lopez’s defenders successfully deployed First Amendment arguments and the New Mexico museum’s Committee on Sensitive Materials decided that the work would remain on display. Undoubtedly, free speech arguments have strategic value—that is, they protect a space for the public articulation of queer desire and the display of images that contest fixed and static ideas about cultural identity. However, First Amendment arguments cannot begin to account for the kind of cultural work achieved by queer and feminist Chicano/a art. Speaking from the position of a queer Chicana cultural critic, I argue that rights-based arguments assume that we (artists and critics of color, queers, and other



Fig. 1. Alma Lopez, *Our Lady* (1999). Courtesy of artist.

disenfranchised people) already have what we seek to defend: namely, equal footing with the imagined subject of Western liberal democracy. In my view, Lopez's art poses a critique and challenge that is about more than free speech or even equal rights.

Lopez's art breaks open a public, cultural space for the articulation of

queer Chicana desire. This desire is at once sexual and political. Her images seduce the spectator into new desiring positions by exposing Chicano/a libidinal investments—conscious and unconscious—in the Virgin of Guadalupe. Her images mobilize and disturb these investments, channeling Chicano/a desire in queer directions. Significantly, *Our Lady* refuses to indulge in the disavowal of the body that informs conventional, religious representations of the Virgin. Instead, *Our Lady* represents the inter-linkage of racial identities and sexual and political desires, while, at the same time, pointing to the constitutive ambivalence of the heart of Chicano/a—and other—identity formations.

Working in digital collage, as well as other in media, Lopez—a relatively young artist—has already produced a sizable oeuvre, much of which is displayed on her Web site, at <[www.almalopez.net](http://www.almalopez.net)>. Lopez is a public artist and the Internet allows her work to circulate beyond the confines of the museum or art gallery. When Lopez's work appears in art exhibits and galleries, most of her prints are relatively small, and the three images I discuss in this essay are all 11" × 17." Lopez's images are more commonly viewed on computer screens, as individual users visit her Web site. The scale of Lopez's work is most important in her large digital murals, which have been installed on the outside walls of buildings in East Los Angeles and at San Francisco's Galleria de la Raza. In these works, Lopez locates herself within the Mexican and Chicano/a mural tradition, which changes community space by producing art on the walls of housing projects, public buildings, local businesses, and so forth. As another way of circulating her art, Lopez has produced art for the cover of a number of important books in Chicano/a cultural studies and for a number of important Chicano/a conferences. The book covers and posters circulate her art in bookstores, universities, living rooms, and dormitories.<sup>5</sup> Through her diverse artistic interventions, Lopez is having a significant impact on Chicano/a visual space.

In *Our Lady*, Lopez reconfigures the Virgin of Guadalupe, opening up her feminist and queer potential. *Our Lady* makes reference to the "original" image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (fig. 2), which hangs in the basilica in Mexico City.<sup>6</sup> In the original image, the *Virgen* is posed with hands in prayer and eyes cast down. She wears a long-sleeved gown, which covers her from neck to toe. Over her gown, a blue mantle drapes her head and the back of her body. The mantle is adorned with gold stars. She stands

upon a dark crescent moon, held aloft by a little angel. Lopez's *Our Lady* presents significant changes to the original version: in her image, Lopez draws attention to the brown female body by exposing more of it. Lopez's image features a photograph of Latina performance artist Raquel Salinas, her legs, arms, and midriff bare. Salinas is clothed only in roses, a symbol of the "proof" of the Virgin's 1531 apparition in Mexico. Lopez modifies some other characteristics of the traditional image: The patterned rose-colored gown, which usually obscures the Virgin's body, is here rendered as background. The Virgin's traditional starry blue shawl is now draped and folded on a platform at the bottom of the frame. A modified blue-gray cloak covers the model's shoulders—this one filled in with the image of the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui, the rebellious daughter. The angel who holds up the moon in the traditional image has been replaced with a bare-breasted (and pierced) Latina (Raquel Gutierrez) superimposed over a butterfly. Finally, and importantly, Lopez changes the stance of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who traditionally stands demurely with eyes cast downward and her hands together in prayer. In Lopez's image, the model has her hands on her hips and her gaze cast forward defiantly, toward the spectator.<sup>7</sup>

Lopez draws from earlier Chicana feminist artistic engagements with the Virgin of Guadalupe by artists such as Ester Hernández and Yolanda López. Hernández's *La Virgen de Guadalupe Defendiendo los Derechos de los Xicanos* (1975) and Yolanda López's *Guadalupe Triptych* (1978) also refigure the pose of the *Virgen*. These images represent the Virgin of Guadalupe in active stances and with contemporary Chicana identities: practicing karate or running a marathon, as a seamstress or an *abuelita* (grandmother). In other images, these two artists explore the sexual potential of the Virgin: Hernández's *La Ofrenda* (1988) depicts a tattoo of the Virgin on the back of a Chicana lesbian; while, Yolanda López's *Guadalupe Walking* (1978) portrays the Virgin walking in a dress and open-toed heels. Like Alma Lopez's *Our Lady*, these two images were received with threats and, in some cases, violence.<sup>8</sup>

The level of controversy that attends to feminist and queer revisions of the Virgin of Guadalupe reveals the high stakes of Chicano/a cultural identity—and its constitutive ambivalence. Images—such as the Virgin of Guadalupe—that purport to represent identity are inevitably locked in a paradoxical position, in that they can never fully achieve their goal: This is the gap between the signifier and the signified and the ambivalence at the



Fig. 2. *The Virgin of Guadalupe*

heart of representation and identity. To use an example, the declarative utterance “I am Chicana” can never capture the complexity of the subject, who both exceeds the declaration (is more than that) and inevitably falls short (can never be Chicana enough). As in this example, there is always a disjuncture between representation and the subject. Attempts to disavow this gap anchor the meaning of ethnic identity in static, fixed, and often

retrograde ways, resulting in what Emma Pérez—drawing on Michel Foucault—names a “fascist militancy” (1999, 124). Pérez productively considers Foucault’s provocation: “How does one keep from being a fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant?” (qtd. in E. Pérez, 123). Emma Pérez is correct in warning us of the potential political danger posed by those who try to control, police, and anchor the meaning of Chicano/a identity—or, by extension, the meaning of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Reading contemporary Chicano/a politics as a space where “power polices desire,” Emma Pérez argues: “We are threatened once again by a reemergence of uncompromising nationalist movements in which feminisms are dismissed as bourgeois, in which queer voices are scoffed at as a white thing, in which anyone who does not sustain the ‘family values’ of modernist, patriarchal nationalism is not tolerated and is often silenced” (1999, 124). In the case of the controversy surrounding Alma Lopez’s *Our Lady*, Emma Pérez is exactly on point, for it has been precisely those elements of the Chicano community that remain invested in “patriarchal nationalism” (namely, the church and male nationalist activists) who have been most vigorous in their attempts to silence the Chicana lesbian artist.<sup>9</sup>

The controversy surrounding Lopez’s art exposes the danger of fascism that arises from attempts to erase ambivalence. The Virgin of Guadalupe has the potential to be the sign of this fascist impulse. In a psychoanalytic reading, Emma Pérez argues, “The nationalist imperative is to move back in time, a regression, a return to the mother, but the mother cannot be Malinche. She must be La Virgen de Guadalupe; she cannot be sexual” (1999, 122). Nationalists mobilize Oedipus to structure Chicano/a identity in a heterosexual direction, embedding it in relations of patriarchal power and the incest taboo. However, as lesbian scholars such as Teresa de Lauretis have argued, the meaning of Oedipal structures is never as static—or heterosexual—as it might first appear (1994).

In Alma Lopez’s art, the Virgin of Guadalupe is claimed by Chicana lesbians, troubling the heterosexual matrix of Chicano/a nationalism. The nationalists root their politics in a mythic past and an image of totality that insists on the mother’s heterosexual desire. However, Chicana feminism also mobilizes a notion of totality, although differently inscribed. In Chicana feminist art, the image of the Virgin signifies plentitude and omniscience: she is *nuestra madre* (our mother) who watches over us in the

context of racism, sexual violence, economic injustice, and, even, homophobia.

Postcolonial critic Homi K. Bhabha, explaining the working of identification, argues that “identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality” (1994, 51). In Chicano/a contexts, the Virgin is the sign of such totality, hence her significance to the production of Chicano/a identifications. While Chicano nationalists assume that identity is unified, fixed, and needs to be guarded from outside influence (such as queer sexualities), postcolonial critics such as Bhabha and Emma Pérez understand identity as something produced by always ambivalent and never stable psychic processes. What Bhabha means when he writes of “access to an image of totality” is a plenitude and fulfillment that can never be fully achieved: it is the desire for an impossible object, whether it be the mother or complete freedom.

The psychoanalytic concept of identification provides a tool for understanding identity as an open-ended process, never complete and always fraught with ambivalent desires. Identification is the process by which a subject introjects an object from the outside. Introjection takes an object from outside (another subject or an image) and incorporates it into one’s own ego. The relationship between young Chicana fans and late pop star Selena is an excellent example of the way that identification works in Chicana contexts. This identification is the subject of *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena*, a 1999 documentary by Lourdes Portillo. Her film opens with a scene of young Chicana fans lip-synching the songs of the recently deceased Selena. The young women emulate Selena’s style, body gestures, and dance moves. In this identification with Selena, the girls introject Selena into their own egos, or sense of self. The young girls are able to deal with the loss of their idol (in Freudian terms, their “ego-ideal”) by keeping her alive inside themselves. Sigmund Freud provides a more trivial example of this process of introjection: “A child who was unhappy over the loss of a kitten declared straight out that now he himself was the kitten, and accordingly crawled about on all fours, would not eat at the table, etc.” (Freud 1921, 109). This example of the lost kitten illustrates the relationship between identification and loss. The child’s pain over the loss of the kitten leads the child to incorporate the pet into his own ego (his sense of self): the child, in order to keep the kitten alive, becomes the kitten. In

psychoanalytic terms, the “ego” (a psychoanalytic term for identity) is comprised entirely of identifications with objects that have been lost.

When Chicana girls (and, not incidentally, Chicano drag queens) impersonate Selena, it is a melancholic identification that constitutes the ego/identity along the axis of loss (Selena’s death) and plenitude (Selena’s Chicana body). Chicano/a identification with Selena is—like all identifications—ambivalent and aggressive: her death, while experienced as an intense loss, is also an opportunity to replace Selena, that is, the opportunity to be the next pop star, to be adored and to be loved. In a footnote to her discussion of Selena’s death, Emma Pérez reports a conversation she had with Teresa de Lauretis (E. Pérez 1999, 158). The two scholars watched a 1995 *Univisión* interview with Yolanda Saldívar, Selena’s murderer and the president of her fan club. They speculate that Saldívar was less likely to be motivated by lesbian desire (this rumor circulated widely) than by the desire to be Selena: “a psychological condition experienced by obsessed fans who want to become the star” (E. Pérez 1999, 158). Like the infamous Aimee discussed by Jacques Lacan, Saldívar’s aggression, notes Emma Pérez, “has linked herself in memory, in history, to Selena” (E. Pérez 1999, 158). As is often the case in psychological phenomena, this extreme form of fandom shares a similar psychical structure to the more benign forms of fan desire: in both cases, identification with the star masks an aggressive component.

For her fans, Selena’s brown female body signifies a plenitude in the context of a racial imaginary that devalues, degrades, and disparages female and brown bodies. In hegemonic U.S. cultural texts, brown female bodies are simultaneously sexualized and repudiated, desired and found disgusting. The brown female body is invested with particular social meanings resulting from her position at the intersection of racial and sexual categories; her body becomes the repository for U.S. cultural anxieties about both sexual and racial difference. In the case of Selena—as with the Virgin of Guadalupe—the brown female body is the cultural sign that encourages Chicana identification, even though, on the surface, these two figures appear to be very different. Selena’s body is exposed, celebrated, and commodified, while the Virgin’s body is hidden and disavowed. Politically, however, identification with Selena and the Virgin both allow for a certain recuperation of the brown female body, a possibility that can occur with public figures, either religious or pop.

Sandra Cisneros, in her essay “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” directly addresses the issue of Chicana investment in the representation of brown female bodies. Cisneros’s essay powerfully engages the slippery, mutually embedded categories of racial and sexual difference. Writing of her relationship to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Cisneros reveals a desire to lift the Virgin’s dress, to see her underwear and her sex:

When I see *La Virgen de Guadalupe* I want to lift her dress as I did my dolls’ and look to see if she comes with *chones*, and does her *panocha* look like mine, and does she have dark nipples too? Yes, I am certain she does. (1996, 51)

Cisneros’s desire to see the Virgin’s body underscores the complexity of the nexus of racial and sexual difference in the formation of Chicana subjectivity. Within a cultural context where brown bodies and female bodies are undervalued, Cisneros wants to see her own image of her body (her “body-ego,” in Freud’s terms) reflected in a sacred icon. Perhaps paradoxically, she also constructs her self of body-ego in relation to a pornographic film featuring a white woman.

Cisneros writes, “Once, watching a porn film, I saw a sight that terrified me. It was the film star’s *panocha*—a tidy, elliptical opening, pink and shiny like a rabbit’s ear. To make matters worse, it was shaved” (Cisneros 1996, 50–51). If the sight of the Anglo porn star’s genitals evoked in Cisneros feelings of horror, it was because of a difference that was at once racially and sexually coded. Here, the Lacanian concept of lack has application not (only) to the lack of the phallus but to the lack of the “white slit” that Cisneros witnessed in the pornography film. Cisneros interprets the porn star’s genitals in relation to her own self-image: “I think what startled me most was the realization that my own sex has no resemblance to this woman’s. My sex, dark as an orchid, rubbery and blue purple as a *pulpo*, an octopus, does not look nice and tidy, but otherworldly” (1996, 51). Cisneros uses figurative language to describe her genitals (“an orchid,” “an octopus”). The image of her Chicana body is constructed through language, including the language of pornography, religious iconography, and poetic metaphor. In short, her brown, Chicana body is not an essential characteristic but rather a position within a grid that figures racial and sexual difference inside particular social symbolic structures.

Cisneros’s description of her horror at the sight of the porn star’s

genitals recalls a scenario imagined by Freud: the scene of castration anxiety. In Freud's scenario, a young boy is surprised to learn that his mother does not have a penis. The scene of castration constitutes the boy as threatened: his penis could be taken away. At the same time, the scene reveals to the boy that he is "endowed," that is, he realizes that he has something his mother does not. A few notes of caution for those who would reject Freud's account outright: First, this is an allegory of sexual difference and should not be read literally. Second, this account of the constitution of male subjectivity is firmly entrenched in historically situated, patriarchal social relations: it is not ahistorical. Finally, the male subjectivity that is constituted in this scenario is thoroughly ambivalent. In her Lacanian reading of this scenario, Judith Butler argues that being endowed with the penis (or, in other terms, "phallus") is "a symbolic position . . . which is only partially and vainly approximated by those marked masculine beings who vainly and partially occupy that position within language" (1993, 63). The scene of castration constructs a masculinity that is in perpetual crisis.

David L. Eng makes productive use of Freud's allegory of castration in his book *Racial Castration*. He argues that feminist and queer theories that deploy "psychoanalytic theory to deconstruct naturalizing discourses of sexual, and in particular heterosexual, difference must be rethought to include viable accounts of race as well" (2001, 5). Eng thoughtfully undertakes this project by reading race back into psychoanalysis, finding in the case of castration that "castration is always racial castration" (2001, 5). Drawing on Eng's theoretical intervention (which I can only gloss here), I read Cisneros's essay in terms of racial castration anxiety.

For, in some sense, Cisneros's fantasy of lifting the Virgin's dress is also a search for the penis—that is, for a symbol of cultural power denied to Chicana subjects. Here, "the" penis would figure both sexual and racial difference. Cisneros's claim that she is searching for a "*panocha* like hers" hides another desire: that is, to find the Chicana mother's penis. This claim, of course, takes Freud's scenario in a different direction. However, if we read castration to be about the binary of presence/absence, then, perhaps, it is productive to consider "race" (imagined as manifested on or through the body) in these terms. The enigma of the meaning of "race" for racialized subjects produces a number of questions, captured in Cisneros's allegory of lifting the Virgin's dress—which can only be interpreted as a



Fig. 3. Alma Lopez, *Encuentro* (1999). Courtesy of the artist.

scenario to find the social symbolic meaning of her sexed and raced body. What she finds is an ambivalent position: while she claims to find her body under the Virgin of Guadalupe's gown, Cisneros's rhetorical consideration of pornography demonstrates that the Chicana body is overdetermined by the cultural binary of virgin/whore and presence/absence.

Lopez's *Our Lady* provides yet another response to the binary of virgin/whore, presenting the materiality of the brown female body as a site of desire. While Cisneros explores Chicana identification (implicitly, heterosexual, because of the author's explicitly heterosexual—though queer-friendly—public identity) with the Virgin's brown body, Lopez presents the



Fig. 4. Alma Lopez, *Lupe & Sirena in Love* (1999). Courtesy of the artist.

brown body of the Virgin as desirable, perhaps, even as seductress, thus encouraging and inciting a queer reading. The queer potential of the Virgin of Guadalupe is made explicit in *Encuentro* (fig. 3), which depicts the celestial meeting of *la sirena* and *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, and in *Lupe & Sirena in Love* (fig. 4), which depicts the two in a sexual embrace.

*Encuentro* introduces three iconic elements that recur throughout Lopez's work: *la Virgen*, *la sirena* (the mermaid), and *la mariposa* (the butterfly). The viceroy butterfly—an orange butterfly with black markings—is a recurring motif in Lopez's images. In an artist statement, Lopez discusses her choice of the viceroy butterfly, which resembles, and indeed mimics, the better

known monarch butterfly. The monarch butterfly, unlike the viceroy, is poisonous to its predators. Lopez explains:

The Viceroy pretends to be something it is not just to be able to exist. For me, the Viceroy mirrors parallel and intersecting histories of being different or “other” even within our own communities. Racist attitudes see us Latinos as criminals and an economic burden, and families may see us as perverted or deviant. So from outside and inside our communities, we are perceived as something we are not. When in essence we are very vulnerable Viceroy butterflies, just trying to live and survive.  
(Lopez 1999)

There is a play of recognition and misrecognition suggested by the metaphor of the viceroy butterfly. Ultimately, this butterfly (the queer Chicano/a subject) must forego the possibility of recognition; in order to survive, she must mimic the monarch (someone less vulnerable than herself). In *Our Lady*, the placement of the bare-breasted, pierced Chicana superimposed on the viceroy butterfly sustains the metaphor equating the butterfly with the queer Chicano/a subject. Like Cisneros, Lopez uses figurative language and images to represent Chicana subjectivity and bodies.

To represent the Virgin of Guadalupe’s love interest, Lopez chooses the mermaid from the popular Mexican game *lotería*. In *lotería*, as in bingo, players hold a card with a grid. In the Mexican version, the grid is filled not with numbers but with images that map a Mexican national imaginary and construct Mexican identity.<sup>10</sup> In this way, the game figures identity in much the same way as I have discussed it in this essay, as a grid in which one finds one’s (albeit ambivalent) place. The categories of people depicted on the *lotería* cards reflect (often problematic) national, class, racial, and gendered categories. Perhaps, the most problematic cards are those that figure race: there is a card picturing a black dandy entitled *El Negrito*<sup>11</sup> (fig. 5) and another picturing an Indian wearing a feather headdress and carrying a bow and arrow, entitled *El Apache* (fig. 6). Similarly, racialized gender is reproduced in a conventional fashion. In a card entitled *La Dama* (fig. 7), a slender, light-skinned woman wears a ladies suit and carries a matching handbag. Masculinity is portrayed on a card entitled *El Valiente* (fig. 8), portraying a mestizo working-class man wielding a machete, and on another even less flattering card entitled *El Borracho*, which portrays a



Fig. 5. (left) *El Negrito*, lotería card  
 Fig. 6. (right) *El Apache*, lotería card

drunk mestizo man with a bottle stumbling on a sidewalk. *El Catrín*, in contrast, shows a light-skinned, upper-class effete man dressed in a tuxedo. Within the grid of *mexicanidad* mapped by *lotería*, *la sirena* stands out as a hybrid subject: she is part woman, part fish. This *sirena* appears to be of *mestiza* heritage, because instead of the usual blonde hair this mermaid has long wavy black hair. She is yet another figural representation of Chicana subjectivity.

As we have seen, *Encuentro* is structured by the combination of three elements—*lotería*'s mermaid, the traditional Virgin of Guadalupe, and a butterfly. Semiotics holds that meaning is derived from two axes: selection (the paradigmatic axis) and combination (the syntagmatic axis). Meaning is constructed from the manner in which elements are selected and combined. The string of symbols on the *lotería* card is an excellent example of what semioticians call a "paradigmatic axis." Out of a set of possible



Fig. 7. (left) *La Dama*, lotería card

Fig. 8. (right) *El Valiente*, lotería card

lotería characters, the artist selects one, *la sirena*. Just as the artist selects *la sirena* instead of, say, *el apache*, she chooses the viceroy butterfly instead of the monarch butterfly and *La Virgen de Guadalupe* instead of an image of Tonantzín (a pre-Columbian goddess). And yet, because these other—unchosen—elements exist in what Victor Burgin calls the “popular preconscious,” these elements linger in the field of meaning evoked by Lopez’s image, the “pre-text” (Burgin 1996, 60). The popular preconscious is defined by Burgin as “those ever-shifting contents which we may reasonably suppose can be called to mind by the majority of individuals in a given society at a particular moment in history; that which is ‘common knowledge’” (1996, 58). Burgin, however, does not account for the different knowledges of those not in “the majority.” In the case of the elements in Lopez’s work, the pre-text is not common knowledge for hegemonic U.S. subjects, while it most likely is recognized by Chicanos/as.

Of course, this does not mean that the image is unreadable to non-Chicanos/as, but simply that the pre-text will yield a different set of images along the paradigmatic chain. For example, the composition of Lopez's *Encuentro* recalls Michelangelo's portrayal of the creation of Adam on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, a scene that is in the preconscious of many, but not all, educated in Western cultural traditions. Thus, it should be clear that chains of association are open-ended, which means that a "meaning" of any particular image is never fixed or sealed. Rather, there are multiple meanings and the same image will register differently (produce another set of associations) with each spectator, depending in large part on their cultural location.

Subaltern artistic practice makes use of a postcolonial preconscious, which is distinct from the "common knowledge" of the society at large. The subaltern's specialized knowledge produces a particular kind of viewing pleasure for those who "get it." For example, a chain of linguistic associations along the paradigmatic axis suggests queerness: *mariposa* (butterfly) is connected to the words "marimacha" (dyke) and "maricón" (fag) through the prefix "mari" (and the prefix is etymologically linked back to María, the Virgin Mary). Moreover, queer meaning is also constructed along the syntagmatic axis; that is, by the combination of two female forms in a sexual relationship.

In *Lupe & Sirena in Love*, the three iconic elements of *Encuentro*—the mermaid, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the viceroy butterfly—are combined with more images: the cityscape of Los Angeles; the wall at the Mexico-U.S. border replete with a mural of the traditional image of la Virgen, superimposed with "1848," the year of the signing of the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo; and a photograph of a man being chased by an agent of the *migra* (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization "Service"). Three blond cherubs holding a gold ribbon and bouquets of roses frame this scene. In this image, there is a depth of field and layering of images, which contrasts with the relative flatness of *Encuentro*.

Finally, both *Encuentro* and *Lupe & Sirena in Love* suggest a Chicana lesbian primal scene: the fantasy of *nuestra madre* (our mother) in a sexual embrace with another woman.<sup>12</sup> This imagined scene stages the conception of queer desire in explicitly Chicano/a terms. In *Lupe & Sirena in Love*, queer desire is inseparable from its racial and cultural context and from its geographic location in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands. Moreover, the sense

of place mapped in Lopez's images reflects geography more akin to psychic space than physical space.<sup>13</sup> By placing the Los Angeles cityscape and the fence at the Mexico-U.S. border in one frame, Lopez begins to map Chicana psychic geography as a transnational formation. Moreover, its geography is not that of the rational, imperialist cartographer but rather the layered space of the unconscious, where past and present, here and there, can exist in one image.

Collage, by self-consciously recycling images, enacts the postmodern notion that one cannot begin from outside of existing image regimes. Instead, cultural workers intervene by reworking preexisting images and remapping existing fantasies. Collage as an art form takes existing images and through a process of selection and combination shifts the terms of their meaning. Collage is not unlike the process of the constitution of the postmodern subject, who must piece together a self, however fragmented and shifting, by sampling bits and pieces from different histories, iconographies, and relationships. Lopez uses the digital format to make transparent the process of assembly and juxtaposition. Digital collage differs from traditional collage because digital images are endlessly available and cut-and-paste technology allows artists to resize, blend, and create images that appear "seamless." Lopez's images, however, are not seamless; instead, they call attention to the cut-and-paste technique used by the artist to piece together her statement.

Ironically, one of Lopez's most vociferous detractors, New Mexican artist Pedro Romero Sedeño, astutely reads her work as "a hodge-podge of ideas digitally mixed." He compares Lopez's art to Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein, who, "in his lab, assembled human body parts, and was able to fabricate or interpret his own kind of being" (Romero Sedeño, 2002). While Romero Sedeño intended this interpretation pejoratively, I think that his analogy is evocative, suggesting both Chicano/a and postmodern aesthetic practices, and the possibility of assembling new subject positions from a "hodge-podge." The form of Lopez's work draws attention to the process of fabrication and thus to the hybridity of Chicana identity. Her work challenges Chicano/a nationalist ideologies that disavow mixedness in favor of a fantasy of "pure" Chicano/a identity.

There is, I think, a further similarity among collage, post-colonial hybridity, and the Chicano/a aesthetic stance called "*rasquachismo*."<sup>14</sup> Tomás Ybarra Frausto has described *rasquachismo* as a "stance rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability, yet ever mindful of aesthetics" (1996, 171). Poverty

fuels the practice of *rasquachismo*, for it is a “making do,” a piecing together, selecting from bits and pieces recovered from other uses or cheaply acquired. Ybarra Frausto finds that such “utilization of available resources makes for syncretism, juxtaposition, and integration” (1996, 171). However, reliance on things at hand does not mean that a highly developed code does not exist, nor that items are selected at random. Rather, *rasquache* aesthetics provide an apt example of a language structured by rules of selection and combination. In *rasquachismo*, the rules of selection run counter to bourgeois sensibilities and, indeed, this is part of their pleasure.

Like *rasquachismo*, digital art uses selection and combination to create new meanings. Lopez does not attempt to create a queer Chicana viewing pleasure from scratch; instead, she culls from existing images of Mexican and Chicana women. She chooses from popular art forms, rather than from so-called high art; she selects her “bits and pieces” from the existing repertoire of working-class Chicano/a visual culture. While Lopez, as an artist working in digital media, has access to high technology, she uses that technology to develop a digital *rasquachismo*. Like many Chicano/a artists, Lopez does not reject the popular cultural practices; instead, she deploys *rasquachismo* as an aesthetic stance. She selects and combines images from popular and available sources, she uses layering and bright colors, and she juxtaposes religious iconography to photographs of her friends.

In both its popular practice and its academic production, *rasquachismo* exhibits a particularly non-normative—indeed queer—pleasure, as in the following definition proffered by Ybarra Frausto:

In the realm of taste, to be *rasquache* is to be unfettered and unrestrained, to favor the elaborate over the simple, the flamboyant over the severe. Bright colors are preferred to sombre, high intensity to low, the shimmering and pattern filling all available space with bold display. (1996, 172)

In this vivid account, a queer camp aesthetic is embedded in a distinctly Chicano/a artistic practice through the “unrestrained,” “the flamboyant,” and “the shimmering.” *Rasquachismo* is not an essential characteristic of either gay or Chicano/a communities, but rather, an aesthetic stance that is historically and culturally produced.

In its rejection of bourgeois sensibility, *rasquachismo* is a cultural practice that doesn’t care what the neighbors think, wears too-bright colors and a flower in its hair. An example of Chicano/a *rasquache* aesthetics is depicted

in the novel *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gomez*, by gay Chicano author John Rechy. In his introduction to the second edition, Rechy describes his encounter with a woman who becomes Amalia, the protagonist of his novel:

[At Thrifty's Drugstore] I . . . encountered one of the most resplendent women I've ever seen, a gorgeous Mexican-American woman in her upper thirties, a bit heavier than she might like to think, but quite lush and sexy. She wore high-heeled sling shoes—and a tight red dress, to show off proud breasts, but she had added a ruffle there to avoid any hint of vulgarity, a fashion that defied all fashion except her own. She had a luxuriance of black shiny hair, and into its natural waves she had inserted . . . a real red rose. (2001, vii–viii)

Throughout this novel, Amalia is constructed as an icon of Latina suffering and working-class beauty, by an author most widely known for his portrayals of gay hustlers. Amalia's style is staunchly *rasquache*, produced by a gay author in admiration for such women. This novel stages an extradiegetic identification of the gay Chicano author with the working-class, *rasquache*, Chicana protagonist. Rechy's brilliant staging of this identification reveals an intersection of queer and Chicano/a working-class desire.

Mobilizing a similar *rasquache* aesthetic—with its embedded queer potential—Lopez has revised and recontextualized Chicana fascination with the Virgin of Guadalupe. In *Encuentro* and *Lupe & Sirena in Love*, Lopez stages a primal fantasy: that is, a fantasy that constitutes a desiring subject. As in other primal fantasies that produce cultural locations and incite all kinds of desires (sexual, political, and racial), Lopez's art focuses attention on Chicana feminist and queer Chicana subject formation. Lopez depicts a scene of lesbian seduction as a founding moment of Chicana subjectivity. In so doing, she places a queer Chicana love story on the same symbolic terrain as the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe and thus transfigures the Virgin of Guadalupe. Making productive use of the visual image of everyday Chicano/a life, Lopez's images begin to create a Chicana feminist and queer iconography. Far from starting from something completely "new," Lopez's art reworks (and reveals) the political-sexual desire that is latent in the omnipresent image of the suffering Virgin. By mobilizing the semiotic processes of selection and combination and occupying the Chicano/a aesthetic stance of *rasquachismo*, Lopez's images successfully invite and sustain queer interpretations of the Virgin of

Guadalupe and open polymorphous and perverse spaces for sexuality and desire in Chicano/a imaginaries.

In conclusion, reading Lopez's artistic reimaginings of the Virgin of Guadalupe through Sandra Cisneros's desire to see the Virgin's brown body has revealed the constitutive lack that fuels all Chicano/a identifications with the Virgin of Guadalupe. It becomes clear that the imagined brownness of the Virgin has always structured Chicano/a allegiance to her. Chicano/a desire for a brown-skinned Guadalupe is formed in and through the social and historical institutionalization of racial hierarchies, a direct result of the colonization of the Americas and its enduring racial legacies. However, the imagined collective allegiance to a sexless brown mother has come at considerable cost: women's active sexuality. The cultural work of Cisneros and Lopez stretches Chicano/a collective imaginaries, shifting the terms by which Chicano/a subjects understand themselves, desire others, and act on the social world.

#### NOTES

I would like to thank Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, Tomás Ybarra Frausto, and the anonymous readers at *Meridians* for their productive and generous critiques of my essay.

1. The 1993 discovery of an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe on a tree near Watsonville is referenced by Cherríe Moraga in her poem "Our Lady of the Cannery Workers" (1996) and her play *Watsonville: Some Place Not Here* (2002).
2. In this essay, I use the term "brown skin" to signal a collective cultural belief about Chicano/a bodies and not to reify some bodies or skin colors as more or less authentic. Indeed, "brown" Chicano/a bodies come in all shades. Brownness is a position within a social symbolic structure and is, I argue, constructed through language and fantasy, and it is not, as some might assume, an essential or biological characteristic.
3. *Our Lady* was part of *Cyber Arte: Tradition Meets Technology*, an exhibit that ran from 25 February to 28 October 2001.
4. Lopez has documented this debate, collecting e-mails from detractors and supporters, newspaper articles from around the world, and letters to the editor on her Web site at <<http://www.almalopez.net/html>>. This site is an invaluable resource for researchers.
5. For example, Lopez has designed the covers of *Puro Teatro: A Latina Anthology*, ed. Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach (University of Arizona, 1999); *Chicano/a Renaissance*, ed. David R. Maciel, Isidro D. Ortiz, and María Herrera-Sobek (University of Arizona, 2000); and *Velvet Barrios*, ed. Alicia Gaspar de Alba (Palgrave, 2003). She also designed posters for the "Otro

- Corazón: Queering the Art of Aztlan” (10 February 2001, University of California, Los Angeles) and for the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies Conference (2–6 April 2003, Los Angeles, CA).
6. The “original” image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is thought to reference a statue of the Virgin Mary in Estremadura, Spain, which was also known as the Virgin of Guadalupe. Others understand the Virgin of Guadalupe to be a refiguration of a pre-Columbian goddess. As in all representation, the notion of an “original” referent is complicated.
  7. Lopez always names and thanks her models in public descriptions of her work. This gesture draws attention to the fact that her photographs depict particular subjects, with names, histories, and a relationship to the artist.
  8. These images and their reception have been widely discussed by Chicana visual theorists, such as Angie Chabram-Dernersesian (1992), Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (1995), Alicia Gaspar de Alba (1998), Laura Elisa Pérez (1999), and Deena González (2003).
  9. While the men were the most vocal detractors of Lopez’s art, some Chicana and *nuevomexicana* women also joined in the public critique. Such women present a challenge to my argument, and I hope that future research might be done—perhaps an ethnographic study—to explore their political and cultural formation.
  10. The signifying system of *lotería* is further complicated by a series of verbal descriptions of each card. In many versions of the game, instead of the caller simply yelling out “*la sirena*,” she will instead provide a popular saying. For example, for the mermaid card, the saying is “*Con los cantos de sirena no te vayas a marear*” (Don’t get dizzy with the songs of the mermaid). Thus, the meaning of *lotería* images is anchored not only to the descriptive title of each card but also to the popular saying that accompanies them.
  11. ALLGO, a queer Latino/a organization in Austin, Texas, has created a queer version of *lotería*. In a smart rhetorical move, they recast “*El Negrito*” as San Martin de Porres, a popular black saint from Peru and renamed the card “*El Santo*” (the saint) (ALLGO, 2002).
  12. See de Lauretis (1994, 81–142) for her recasting of the primal scene as a site of lesbian desire, and Emma Pérez (1999, 110–14) and Calvo (2001, 74) for discussions of the primal scene of colonialism and the formation of Mexican and Chicano/a subjectivities.
  13. Anzaldúa (1987) also maps this psychic space in her theorization of “the borderlands.”
  14. Thanks to Tomás Ybarra Frausto for his helpful suggestions regarding *rasquachismo*.

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