

The Oppositional Consciousness of Yolanda M. López

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ABSTRACT: *Based on an oral history interview, this essay examines the work of Yolanda M. López, one of the most significant Chicana artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It posits that her work portrays feminist intersectionality and oppositional consciousness, predating the Chicana feminist literature on these paradigms. Documenting her political activism and the aesthetic strategies that emerged from her involvement in the Chicano movement, the essay illuminates the conceptual, deconstructivist, and semiotic style of the artist, which is frequently overlooked by critics. It concludes with the observation that López's work recuperates Chicana empowerment.*

In the 1970s, when Yolanda M. López began to investigate media representations of Chicanas, she was shocked to notice that “not even Dolores Huerta” was present in the public images of the Chicano civil rights movement. Huerta’s role as cofounder of the United Farm Workers could not surmount the ideology of patriarchy that erased Chicana activists and leaders. When López began her analysis of the function of images, representations of Chicana activists, labor organizers, and student leaders were not prevalent, and the Catholic and Mexican icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe was the most popular female figure within Chicano public and private space. Guadalupe appeared on banners, placards, murals, and calendars, and in home altars and store windows, although it was difficult for López to find the icon at Catholic religious stores or parish shrines in her hometown of San Diego, California. For ten years, López explored the function of the sixteenth-century painting of Guadalupe, and as a result she produced one of the most widely circulated images in Chicana/o art history: *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe* (1978, fig. 1). Consistently reproduced in the 1980s and 1990s to represent major traveling exhibitions as well as regional group shows of Chicana and Chicano art, the oil pastel self-portrait



Figure 1. Yolanda M. López, Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe, from the Guadalupe series, 1978. Oil pastel on rag paper, 22 x 30 inches.

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drawing is probably the most recognizable work of art associated with the Chicano art renaissance.¹

Drawing on an extended life history interview, this essay examines the work of López and argues that it articulates the multivocal, or polyvalent, identity consciousness developed by U.S. Third World feminists, thereby enacting oppositional consciousness—the method, epistemology, and praxis described by Chela Sandoval (2000).² As it traces the oppositional consciousness within the art of López, the essay documents her earliest political activism and the subsequent aesthetic strategies that emerged from social protest. The larger study that gave rise to this essay investigates the artist's biography, documenting her family as a source of her artistic expression, her activism as a source of her conceptual approach, and her formal arts training as the place where she develops a language for her deconstructivist and semiotic aesthetic project (Davalos 2008b). It also places López's art within American art history. An underlying goal of the essay is to draw out the conceptual, deconstructivist, and semiotic approach that is usually overshadowed by the figurative composition, a misinterpretation that has led critics and scholars to misclassify her work as representational, figurative, or Catholic romanticism.

Since much of the work discussed here was created in the 1970s, I argue that it anticipates the 1980s feminist scholarship on intersectionality. I do not wish to imply that López was the first to visually render the matrix of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and, to some extent, sexuality. Rather, my intention is to balance the uneven scholarship on literature, performance, and visual arts. As Laura Pérez notes, scholars have not paid the same amount of intellectual attention to the visual arts as they have to literature and performance (2007, 13). We are familiar with the creative writing of and critical scholarship on Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chávez, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Helena María Viramontes, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa—to name a few. The Chicana/o studies canon is rich with Chicana feminist literary voices that braid race and class with gender consciousness. In addition, scholarship on these and other writers has brought sexuality, citizenship, migration, and language into the *trenza* of intersectionality.

Yet as Rita González (2003) points out, scholarship on Latina and Latino visual artists is lacking. Using the primary search engines of art history, such as Art Abstracts, Art Index Retrospective, and the Getty Research Institute's Union List of Artist Names, as well as six major teaching texts for twentieth-century American art history, González searched for

citations on a sample of ninety-three Latina and Latino artists, focusing on established artists in midcareer. She found that "few artists on [the sample] list had more than one article published about their work; and more often than not the few articles published consisted of brief exhibition reviews. In comparison, searching for one hundred of the most exhibited non-Hispanic White artists would yield thousands of entries" (2). Chicana artists fared especially poorly. For example, the survey revealed thirteen works on Amalia Mesa-Bains, eleven works on Carmen Lomas Garza, seven on Diane Gamboa, six on Judith Baca, five on Barbara Carrasco, one on Yolanda López, and none on Santa Barraza or Yreina D. Cervántez. In contrast, the indexes record thirty works on Luis Jiménez, twenty-two on Anthony Hernandez, eighteen on Carlos Almaraz, fourteen on Gronk, twelve on Rupert García, and eleven on John Valadez.³ The picture is very bleak. Therefore, I wish to intervene, and similar to the way Pérez positions her book-length study on Chicana art since the 1980s, I offer this essay as homage to López's work and her participation in the most important advance in ethnic and feminist studies: recognition of the intersecting and multiple subjectivities of women of color.⁴

Recent scholarship on López does not consistently or systematically account for the complexity of her consciousness.⁵ More critically, scholars rarely address within the scope of a single analytic piece López's shifting oppositional consciousness. Some authors emphasize her Mexican heritage, and others focus on her Latino and Third World orientation (Cordova 2005; Ferreira 2003). The majority of visual arts and social analyses describe her antisexism and her Chicana consciousness (Chabram-Dernersesian 1994; Goldman 1990; Keale 2000; Mazurana 1999). López was frequently associated with the visual arts and religious movement that redeemed feminine spiritual authority (Gadon 1989; Orenstein 1996; Stott 1995). For example, Gloria Feman Orenstein used López's Guadalupe triptych as an example of the California-based goddess art movement of the 1970s. This interpretation amused López because she was not concerned with the divine or with the sacred powers of women. Claire Joysmith (1995) did not analyze the Guadalupe triptych, but it was the central illustration for an argument about reclaiming female figures that empower mothers, grandmothers, and women's traditions. In contrast, López was interested in the power of working-class women rather than in feminine mystical power. As I argue below, López was not concerned with recuperating Guadalupe.

Within Chicana scholarship, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Angie Chabram-Dernersesian offer solid efforts to account for López's antiracist,

antisexist, and anticlassist orientation. Gaspar de Alba briefly describes López as "upholding Marxist ideologies of el Movimiento that focused on class and worker solidarity" (1998, 125). While this analysis suggests some of the multiple subject positions that compose López's oppositional consciousness, it elides the role her family played in developing López's criticism of capitalism. Chabram-Dernersesian acknowledges "linkages between sexism, racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and economic exploitation" (2006, 179) and argues that the Guadalupe triptych "echoes the resolution of many Chicana activists who clarified, once and for all" that liberation is not negotiable. In her short examination, Chabram-Dernersesian correctly connects López's triptych to the work of other Chicana feminists, including artist Ester Hernandez, who also explored female iconography. However, the brilliantly argued article by Chabram-Dernersesian is an example of the imbalance in Chicana literary criticism, performance, and art history, since the bulk of the analysis is devoted to textual works; the visual arts are addressed only briefly. This essay contributes to scholarship on López by considering her childhood and youth, analyzing a range of her artistic productions, including work produced within the Guadalupe series as well as work produced after it, and exploring the complex and multiple subject positions rendered in her visual project.

Charting Differential Consciousness of U.S. Third World Feminists

Chela Sandoval argues that the differential consciousness of U.S. Third World feminists of color is mobile rather than permanently aligned with a singular ideology or form of resistance to U.S. social hierarchy. This mobility allows for a new subjectivity and mode of perception that accounts for the social conditions of racialization, sex and gender heteronormativity, and material inequality. The new mode, known as the differential mode or *mestiza consciousness*, combines four other political modes of resistance: equal-rights, revolutionary, supremacist, and separatist. It is the ability to merge existing political positions that makes the work of U.S. Third World feminists of color historic, particularly during the period of activism, scholarship, and creative expression that lasted from the late 1960s through the 1980s (C. Sandoval 2000, 44). A shifting consciousness that bridges multiple modes makes clear that the social conditions of racism, sexism, homophobia/heteronormativity, and classism are complementary and competing forms of social control. In the visual arts of Yolanda López,

an oppositional consciousness makes visible the previously invisible and unimaginable Chicana feminist working-class subject position. A shifting consciousness launches a new Chicana subjectivity, and it is rendered in López's image bank. One example is the Guadalupe series, in which López joins formerly separate political projects of feminism, cultural nationalism, and anticapitalism into a proposal for Chicana womanhood that empowers. In short, Sandoval posits that differential consciousness is the necessary position, tactic, and epistemology for authentic liberation.

Indeed, the bulk of Sandoval's project in *Methodology of the Oppressed* is devoted to a critique of the ways in which social theorists of postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial, feminist, and ethnic studies rely upon separatist disciplinary methods and practices that limit the possibility of social transformation. Ruby Tapia makes this observation in a review of the book, noting that Sandoval asserts that social theorists in these fields "have not spoken to each other or read each other's work," even though they share a vision for liberation (Tapia 2001, 734). Unfortunately, as a result of this intellectual seclusion, the contributions of U.S. Third World feminists of color are ignored or appropriated. The theoretical genealogies that Sandoval reconstructs through the advancements made by U.S. Third World feminists enable resistance and emancipation and plot a path for authentic liberation previously unimagined by the legitimated citizen-subject.

The shifting and braided consciousness of U.S. Third World feminists of color creates tools and methods for survival under global capitalism and its imperatives of racism, sexism, and imperialism. It travels between and mixes equal-rights, revolutionary, supremacist, and separatist tactics, creating a new modality in the process. Unlike the "formerly centered and legitimated bourgeois citizen-subject of the first world" that was "once anchored in a secure haven of self" but is now "set adrift under the imperatives of late-capitalist cultural conditions," the "historically decentered citizen-subject" has precisely the tools needed for survival (C. Sandoval 2000, 27). "The colonized, the outsider, the queer, the subaltern, the marginalized" (27) developed an oppositional consciousness "in response to such fragmentation" under colonialism, imperialism, material and political inequity, and other systems of oppression (33). Gloria Anzaldúa names this response "*la facultad*," by which she means a knowledge that emerges from fragmentation (1987, 38). López uses her knowledge of subordination and daily inequalities to create a visual world filled with dignified Chicanas and Mexican women. I turn now to her life and education to trace the foundations of her differential consciousness.

Family and Political Practices

Born in 1942, Yolanda M. López grew up in San Diego at a time when the town was developing a military-industrial complex to support U.S. involvement in World War II (Villa 2000). The household of her childhood comprised her grandparents, Senobio and Victoria Franco, who had migrated from Mexico in 1918; her mother, Margaret; and several uncles, including Uncle Mikey, who became her surrogate father after Senobio passed away when López was eleven years old (López 2007). Senobio's tailoring skills permitted him a remunerative profession in a town that otherwise locked Mexicans, Southern white migrants, and African Americans into unskilled and semiskilled jobs. His employer vouched for him during the 1940s and he was able to avoid deportation, but unfortunately his wife, Victoria, was not so lucky, and she was deported to Mexico in 1941. This incident outraged the family. López recalls, "Even though my grandmother had two or three sons in the [U.S.] military, they deported her. She spent about a year in Tijuana before she could migrate" back to the United States (2007). López credits the family's survival to Victoria's ingenuity and self-taught knowledge: her grandmother kept her adult children and sometimes their spouses as well as López and her younger sisters fed and clothed. No one went hungry. The multigenerational household allowed López to become close to her grandparents, who took her on frequent short trips to Tijuana and on a few extended vacations to Acapulco and Mexico City. According to López, her grandparents offered her unconditional love, protection, and comfort, and before her younger sisters were born they even considered raising her as their own child (2007).

The extended family household also offered her several models for womanhood, since Margaret worked outside the home for most of López's childhood and teenage years. Working first at the Grant Hotel and later at the Naval Training Center, Margaret was employed as a seamstress and presser. For a brief period during her second marriage she labored exclusively inside the home, but she returned to paid labor when her husband lost his job and could not maintain the myth of patriarchal economic authority. The artist recalls that her mother, like Senobio and his sons, enjoyed sewing well-made clothes, although she rejected other forms of domesticity such as cooking. When López was a teenager, Margaret created for her children fashionable outfits using inexpensive fabrics, a strategy that the artist would employ during her graduate training in order to challenge highbrow art. For Margaret, finding the time to sew must have been a challenge, since she

left for work before the sun rose and returned after it had set. With family time limited to the long bus rides to and from day care, López found she enjoyed the otherwise monotonous trips on public transportation because it allowed for intimate conversation between her and her mother. It was during these bus trips that Margaret taught her daughter to respect labor, to support unions, and to “never cross a picket line” (López 2007).

Victoria was also a model of female autonomy. She was the head of the household, even before Senobio died around 1953. With only a third-grade education, Victoria taught herself to read and managed a household by growing food and raising goats and chickens (and later, pigeons). Senobio respected her ingenuity and treated her with dignity, although her sons did not always grant her the same consideration. These two models of patriarchy—one polite and respectful of women, the other insisting that women perform the dirty work, pick up after men, and serve men first—taught López to question gender expectations. Nevertheless, the household largely supported women’s autonomy. López did not recall anyone chastising Margaret for staying out late on Saturday nights, divorcing two men, or eventually living on her own with her daughters (López 2007).

While growing up in San Diego, López did not think of herself as a Mexican American girl. Her first language was Spanish, her family ate Mexican food and frequently traveled to the border, and Victoria’s dark skin, hair, and eyes clearly marked her as indigenous Mexican; nonetheless, López’s schooling shaped her identity. She was taught to recognize George Washington as a forefather. At a young age, López associated Mexican culture with tourist art and *arte popular*, and these markers were not part of her family’s experience or aesthetic (López 2007). While in college, however, she learned from other students of color to recognize that assimilation was the goal of her childhood education, and she no longer wished to deny the historical presence of Mexicans in California, her heritage, or the role women played in shaping Chicano communities.

The education in public schools was largely subtractive of her home language and culture, but within the family and elsewhere López and her sisters were encouraged to develop their creative expression. Her uncles taught her to appreciate working with one’s hands, and she delighted in watching them make furniture and rebuild bicycles and car engines. The entire household enjoyed music and theater, read popular magazines, and created toys and playthings for Margaret’s girls. Victoria cared for a garden and arranged family photographs and *recuerdos* near a crucifix, although the family was not religious.⁶ She allowed López to create hats from pie tins and

flowers. Aesthetic expression was also reinforced at the Bayside Settlement House, where López and her sisters attended day care: the program took them on trips to museums and the zoo, taught them how to create dolls and games, and provided them with a library of books and magazines. Margaret also shared with her oldest daughter her hobby of arranging images in scrapbooks, a leisure activity that developed among women during World War II. While this feminine craft supported consumerism, domesticity, and Eurocentric and middle-class images of beauty, it was for Margaret and López a chance to reformulate mainstream images into their own visual and gender narrative. López and her mom cut pictures from glamour magazines, initiating López’s first explorations into the collage and photomontage techniques, and they imagined lives outside of gender expectations.

Her sensibility to push against gender norms is seen in her childhood dream of becoming a set or costume designer. During her teenage years, after working in the costume department at the Globe Theatre, López hoped to study for a career in animation. She set her sights on attending the Chouinard Art Institute, which was known as a major force in training and employing West Coast artists. But these adolescent dreams were born of the notion that her artistic talent was not useful and that she would therefore need a career in set or costume design. She enjoyed Disney full-length animation movies, but she did not have a deep desire or aspiration to emulate the Disney animators or costume designers that had trained at Chouinard. She simply did not know how or why an artist could make a living; more important, she saw no immediate necessity for her art, although her uncles, grandparents, and mother were constantly creating clothes, furniture, and other useful household items. It was not until she became involved in student activism at San Francisco State College and later in the Mission District, where she met Emory Douglas of Oakland’s Black Panther Party, that she began to focus on the power of images to create social change (López 2007).

Deconstruction of Images

López grew up in a generation that was critical of the liberal state. Living in the San Francisco Bay Area, she found her political voice on the picket lines of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) at San Francisco State College. There she developed the ability to organize on behalf of workers, women, and people of color while at the same time referring to herself as a Chicana. When twenty-four-year-old López transferred to San Francisco State College, she was already participating in the cultural revolution in

Northern California. She had ventured into the counterculture scene through fashion, style, books, and music. In March 1968 the TWLF, a multiracial and multiethnic student coalition at State College, began mobilizing to demand ethnic studies, a voice in faculty hiring, and admissions and financial aid policies that would create a student body more reflective of the demographic profile of the city. Underlying their activism was a determination to "overturn the pejorative meaning" of the term "Third World" and to create solidarity across lines of race, ethnicity, national heritage, color, and immigration status in their struggle to win these demands (Cordova 2005, 8).⁷ After the administration failed to deliver on its promises, the group of African American, Latina/o, Native American, and Asian American students led a five-month strike using radical tactics that included building occupations, chanting, trash can fires, amplified speeches, picket lines, and sit-ins.

Several factors influenced López's decision to join the strike rather than attend classes. First of all, her mother had raised her to respect worker solidarity, a political strategy she continues to practice. She would not have crossed a picket line under any circumstances. Second, her household was filled with people who were self-taught. For López, learning was never confined to the classroom. Another major factor in her decision to join the TWLF was the participatory democracy she learned at home, which was reinforced in multiple ways. López remembers excitement in the family as they watched several Democratic conventions. She recalls that her mother took all three sisters to "stuff envelopes for Jack Kennedy's [presidential] campaign" in 1960 (Cordova 2005, 15). In addition, her mother's union membership signaled the importance of collective action, and the collective action of the students proved invaluable for the TWLF when the president of the university attempted to split the coalition by making promises to the Black Student Union. This sense of shared interests and goals was the high point of López's education at State College. Throughout the five-month student strike, López learned to see herself as a person of color whose history and experience was connected to that of African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and other Latinos. She also began to identify as a Chicana, shedding the constraints of a childhood in which the curriculum of Americanization and denial had taught her to see herself as a descendant of Mayflower Pilgrims (López 2007).

The Third World Liberation Front taught López that inclusive political action and self-determination could coexist. A shifting consciousness allowed her to understand the structural inequalities common to people of color while

affirming the need for Chicanas and Chicanos to become the producers of their own history, creative imagination, visual library, and futures. López began to question the production and function of images, and this was more than an epistemological exercise. She noted how some images and image makers were valued over others and understood that the valuation was a matter of unearned power due to race, class, or gender privilege. In fact, as she continued her activism she formulated an artistic goal to deconstruct images and to propose new representations of Chicanas and Chicanos.

After the strike came to a successful end, López and some friends focused their organizing skills on the Mission District. There they founded a youth empowerment group that changed into Los Siete de la Raza, a defense committee for seven young Latino men accused of killing a police officer. As the organization grew, it offered services as well as advocacy to the largely immigrant Latino community. The direct political engagement of Los Siete de la Raza helped López strengthen her identity as an artist.

It was through Los Siete that she met Douglas, minister of culture for the Black Panther Party. He taught her inexpensive methods for laying out the Los Siete newspaper, *¡Basta Ya!* More important, his direct style and combination of text and image inspired her to identify as a political artist.

One of the reasons I liked Emory Douglas . . . what I learned from Emory . . . is that he loves his people so much. He's done a lot of beautiful, haunting [images]. . . . He did a very poignant piece . . . the profile of a black man with a helmet—it was an Army man . . . and in his helmet were pictures of Vietnamese dead and murdered black people in the United States. And there was just a single tear going down the side [of his face]. And it was so beautiful. And one of the most, I felt, eloquent [anti-war] statements. . . . He was talking about their humanity; he was talking about their humanness. And that's what it was. So it wasn't like a stereotypic image of a black person. (López 2007)

Activism within Los Siete provided López with her "function as an artist" (López 2007). She created the artwork and graphic designs for the newspaper as well as the buttons, placards, and posters used at mass demonstrations to rally support for Los Siete. Because the media portrayed the Latino defendants as "hoodlums" and "militants" (López 2007), López was determined to examine the role and function of these images by offering new ones (figs. 2, 3). Indeed, just as Douglas crafted images of Black leaders as strong, intelligent, and ready for military conflict in contrast to the happy sambo, the illiterate and lazy drug user, or the baffoon, López was determined to show that Latino youth were not gang members. For



Figure 2. Cover of ¡Basta Ya! no. 5 (October 1969).

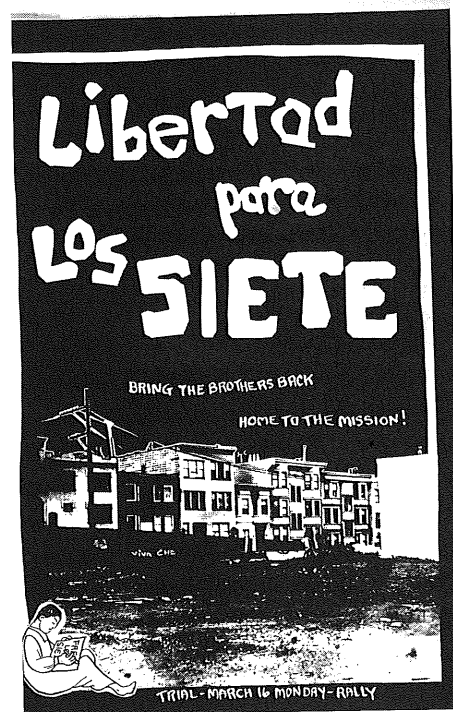


Figure 3. Yolanda M. López, Libertad para Los Siete: Bring the Brothers Back Home to the Mission! Printed in ¡Basta Ya! no. 8 (March 1970).

example, she provided illustrations and graphic designs for articles that told how two of the defendants were student organizers who assisted Latinos with college applications (Ferreira 2003, 296).

Influenced by Douglas, she realized that the audience for new images of Latinos was the Mission District community itself. The masthead of the newspaper and the photomontage and collage techniques are examples of López's effort to reimagine Chicanos and other Latinos. By overlapping a variety of images, López could document the diversity within the Latino community. In the masthead of the earliest editions, an open hand holding a broken chain visually represents new possibilities. The palm gestures up to the sky as if to signify the hope and future of Chicanos and Latinos. Unlike the closed fist raised to signify solidarity and Black power, the open hand and powerful forearm presents an empowerment already achieved; the struggle is over and it was a success. The chains of institutionalized racism, capitalist exploitation, and exclusion are literally broken. Using this and other images in *¡Basta Ya!*, López offered radically new representations of Chicanos and Latinos, and she avoided romantic images of noble native people or overly idealized themes and motifs. That is, she did not indulge in an exotic or sentimental view of Mexicans and their ancestors.

Enacting Differential Consciousness: Its Shade, Form, and Color

In 1970 López decided to return to school to complete her bachelor's degree in painting and drawing, and she enrolled at California State University, San Diego. While studying there, she created several portraits of her grandmother in order to "show her at different ages: young, middle-aged, and older" (López 2007, figs. 4–6). Working from photographs and using the techniques of photomontage and collage, the series of portraits is her first homage to "ordinary women," a phrase she uses to describe the commonplace fashion, comportment, and simple appearance of Mexican-origin, working-class women. The phrase "ordinary women" is meant to counter the objectifying visual vocabulary of the media; it was not meant to position women as lowly or intellectually inferior. Instead it asserts the everyday and nonenticing corporeal presence of women. López's eye began to focus on the nonglamorous or nonsexualized woman, and the work visually legitimated elderly skin, eyes, arms, and breasts that sag or droop from age and labor. Moreover, Victoria was in her late eighties when López created the portraits, and the goal was to render an elderly woman as fully active, which López



Figure 4. Yolanda M. López, *Victoria F. Franco series* (1 of 4), 1974. Mixed-media collage, 18 × 15 inches.

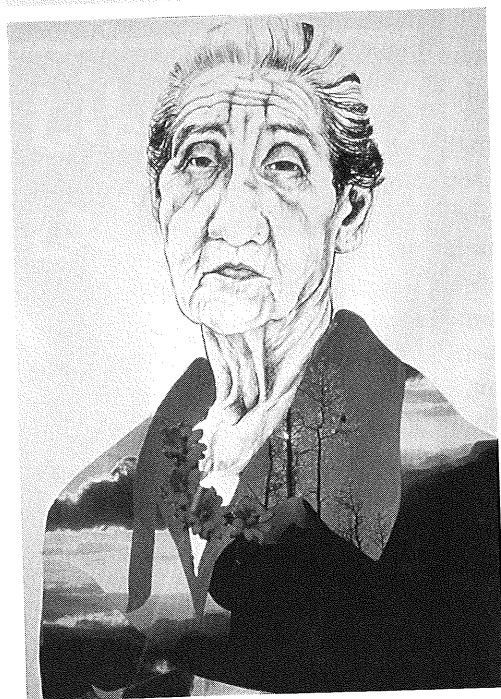


Figure 5. Yolanda M. López, *Victoria F. Franco series* (3 of 4), 1974. Mixed-media collage, 18 × 15 inches.



Figure 6. Yolanda M. López, *Victoria F. Franco series* (4 of 4), 1974. Mixed-media collage, 18 × 15 inches.

signified through coloration: "I did it in color, because I wanted to express she's alive—in color" (López 2007). The early series is also an example of her experimentation with multiple images of Mexican-origin women. López did not assert a single portrait but crafted at least four portraits, each showing a distinct aspect of Victoria's beauty and experiences.

Funding from the Ford Foundation allowed López to immediately enter the master of fine arts (MFA) program at the University of California, San Diego in 1975.⁸ During this time López enhanced the artistic vision she had been developing while living in San Francisco. Her graduate training with artist-scholars Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler provided a language for her feminist deconstructivist and semiotic approach that had initially emerged on the front lines of the Third World Liberation Front strike and with Los Siete in the Mission District. She explores concepts, signs, and meanings; unlike her contemporaries, she is little interested in figuration and pigmentation, internal self-expression, or abstraction. Her monumental compositions, notably the series *Tres Mujeres/Three Generations*, are explorations in the large format; the formal approach draws on feminist analysis of images and the gaze (figs. 7–9). In this series produced for her MFA exhibition, López successfully joins the feminist critique of the patriarchal



Figure 7. Yolanda M. López, Self-Portrait, from *Tres Mujeres/Three Generations* series, 1975–76. Charcoal on paper, 8 x 4 feet.



Figure 9. Yolanda M. López, Grandmother, from *Tres Mujeres/Three Generations* series, 1975–76. Charcoal on paper, 8 x 4 feet.



Figure 8. Yolanda M. López, Mother, from *Tres Mujeres/Three Generations* series, 1975–76. Charcoal on paper, 8 x 4 feet.

gaze and rejects racist objectification of Mexican women and Chicanas. This dialogue of critique and rejection serves as the conceptual backdrop of the series. The refusal of the patriarchal male gaze visually renders the work of film critic Laura Mulvey (1975), who in the same decade argued that Hollywood film depends upon the fetish, the spectacle, and the sex object in its representation of women. López advances the argument in two ways. First, by noting that Mexican women and Chicanas are objectified differently than white women, the portraits remind us that looking is also racial. Second, by presenting women in plain and unadorned ways, the portraits reject a heteronormative stare. The portraits offer new images of Chicanas and Mexicans, bringing into view representations of brown-skinned Latinas that are not possible under sexism, racism, and economic exploitation and middle-class bias.

As implied by the monumental presence of the women in *Tres Mujeres/Three Generations*, who engage the viewer with their gaze, a major part of the MFA exhibition was its dialogic premise. López forged a collaboration between the art department and El Centro Cultural de la Raza, a community arts organization in San Diego's Balboa Park. She joined with El Centro in order to bring residents from her hometown to the university gallery. Operating in the cultural nationalist mode of pride in heritage but also registering rights politics and the acknowledgment of women's presence, the exhibition invited Chicanos and Mexicans to bear witness and to claim ownership in the university. As López wrote about the series in her artist's statement,

Tres Mujeres represents one of the first systematic efforts on my part to explore the presentation of Raza women as we see ourselves. It is a subject that has long interested me as an artist. And it is in general the subject matter of this exhibition. (1978)

This statement indicates her deliberate attempt to dialog with Raza, or people of Latin American heritage; she was interested in Raza-gazing, exploring how "we see ourselves." She produced this type of looking by providing transportation across town from the southeastern neighborhoods of San Diego to the university in La Jolla. Yet the exhibition also shifts its political register to women, those not yet present as citizen-subjects in the nation-state or within Chicano cultural nationalism. This feminist mode avoids the romanticism she saw inside and outside of Chicano communities.

My intention was to consciously work against traditional commercial stereotypes. . . . A common Chicano/Latino experience in contemporary

American culture is the lack of positive visual representations of Latin Americans as normal, intelligent human beings. This omission and the continued use of such stereotypes as the Latin bombshell and the passive long suffering wife/mother negate the humanity of Raza women. (1978)

Through *Tres Mujeres/Three Generations* and also the Guadalupe triptych, López proposed new signs in the semiotic landscape by representing three generations of women. Both series visually render a mestiza or indigenous Mexican woman (Victoria), a Mexican American woman (Margaret), and a Chicana (the artist). In the statement, López weaves in a gender analysis and expands the discussion of Chicano cultural nationalism and its privileging of patriarchy. López aimed to challenge the racist and sexist portrayals of Latinas. The charcoal-on-paper portraits of *Tres Mujeres*, a set of nine in total, accomplish this complex oppositional consciousness through the "simple device of scale" and by having the model "confront the viewer directly" (1978). The gaze of patriarchal heterosexism and racism is cut off by the larger-than-life direct gaze and frontal posturing of the women. It is an invitation to view ordinary women as heroes, but their valor is accomplished through proportion rather than through flattery or sexual appeal.

Tres Mujeres/Three Generations, more than the Guadalupe series, is a semiotic exposition of the female human form. López accomplishes this in two ways. First, the line drawings offer minimal but realist interpretations of the female form. A woman stands, sits, or leans. She wears an apron, baggy pants, or a housedress. The portraits are uncluttered and feature expanses of blank space; in fact, they isolate each woman in space. Each female figure has no landscape or surroundings, and she exists in a blank and, thus, illusory space. She stands and leans without a wall or sits without a chair; each woman exists nowhere and everywhere. López uses only the title to anchor the viewer, a point to which I will return. But their isolation in space is not intended to heighten or reinforce objectification of the female body. The portraits are not for "pleasurable looking" (Mulvey 1975, 17); rather, they are mirrors for Chicanas. But the scale transforms the portraits into affirmations of Chicanas and Mexican women that are otherwise obscured. As both semiotic investigation and feminist psychoanalysis argue, this mirror is the articulation of subjectivity, but again López advances the discourse of recognition through multiplicity and size. And this is her second method of accomplishing a semiotic analysis.

She creates not just one portrait but three of each woman, and the different generations and body types are important. The ages, experiences, and physicality of the women are vital to López's semiotic presentation.

Moreover, each sitter is asked to duplicate the pose of the other two, an experiment in body language and mimicry to suggest new signs and subjects. The following titles reveal who is mimicking whom and the original pose:

Grandmother: Victoria F. Franco [also known as *Grandmother*]

Mother: Margaret F. Stewart [also known as *Mother*]

Daughter: Portrait of the Artist [also known as *Self-Portrait*]

Grandmother Sitting as Mother

Artist Sitting as Mother

Grandmother Standing as Mother

Artist Standing as Mother

Grandmother Standing as Artist

Mother Standing as Artist (1978)⁹

Each title reinforces the act of imitation and repetition, a process that Judith Butler argues is essential to gender formation—and, Jonathan Inda adds, to racialization (Butler 1993; Inda 2000). The nine monumental drawings express Chicana and *mexicana* similarity (imitation) and difference. The series is a collective articulation of multiple subjectivities and the recognition of the self in relation to others. However, a shift occurs when López names herself "the artist" rather than the daughter or granddaughter: it is a maneuver that pushes against the law of the father and asserts a self that does not depend upon the patriarch. This identity outside of patriarchy evokes the separatist or insurgent mode.

Braiding Political Modes

Mapping an equal rights project within the work of López is not difficult to do, since much of her activism and her artistic product aimed to rectify the inability of the nation-state to secure liberty, equality, and justice for its residents. Her aesthetic choices clearly point to insurgent rather than reformist strategies. A celebrated poster that presumes the ideology of equal rights is *Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?* The messenger formulates the radical mode or consciousness with an angry snarl and jabbing finger. This revolutionary political gesture questions the nation's early settlers of European heritage,

pointing out their immigrant status; by implication it demands the same open border, economic and political opportunities, and legal protections for recent immigrants as the colonial settlers enjoyed (Lipsitz 2001, 77). But the poster is also a vision of settlers' fear: the indigenous inhabitants will take back their land and territory and deport everyone else. The text—European settlers are illegal aliens—and the image of a man dressed in an Aztec headdress propose a time and place where the European conquest has not happened, or at least has not succeeded. Insurgent and separatist modes are used ironically and with humor, a strategy that demonstrates the creative and tempered shifts of a differential consciousness.

This mobility allows López to align experiences across time and space. Two posters in the series *Women's Work Is Never Done* illustrate how she bridges past and present social conditions to express a different future. *Your Vote Has Power* was López's invention to frighten then-governor Pete Wilson and other proponents of California's anti-immigrant Proposition 187 (fig. 10). To render this nightmare, López selects a fertile Latina who votes to confront the xenophobic misperception of Latinas as welfare mothers who burden society. In this new social imaginary, the Latina—taken from a journalist's photograph of an Ecuadorian woman—supports democracy and self-empowerment as indicated by the repeated X, a sign of her past voting record. The image of a dark-brown-skinned woman who casts her ballot while also caring for a child requires new mental calculations: Latinas are politically informed, active, and at the same time caretakers; they repeatedly engage in democracy, and they do so to maintain their liberties and ensure their children's future liberties.

The poster is a unique articulation of Latina autonomy and intellect coupled with motherhood and leadership. The series title, *Women's Work Is Never Done*, an old adage, calls attention to the economic exploitation of women and particularly women of color, but an ironic twist of meaning changes it into a description of women's leadership. Latina leadership is never done because the Latina's knowledge is needed to ensure society's future survival and democracy. Latinas must protect the world from those unwilling or unable to participate in a democratic society and childrearing. Is López pointing her finger at Wilson and his xenophobia? At deadbeat fathers? At cynics who forego democratic participation? I suggest that López's multivalent consciousness allows for a critique of each: it is an anti-racist, antisexist, anti-imperialist, and pro-participatory democracy message.

Another poster from this series also joins activism and labor of women across time and space. *Homenaje a Dolores Huerta* is a silkscreen print that

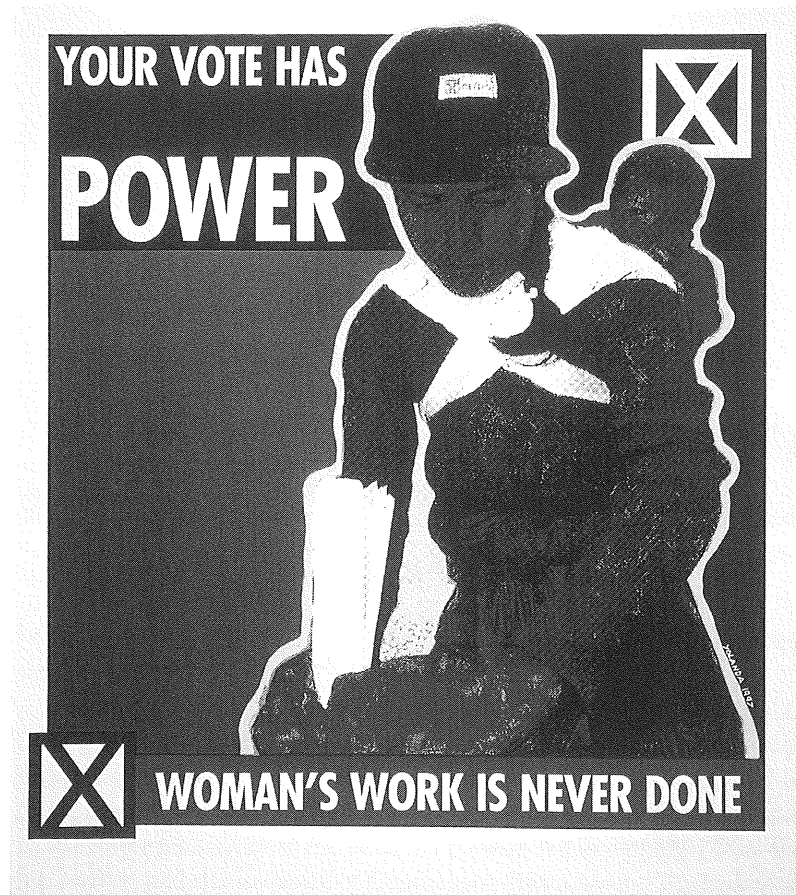


Figure 10. Yolanda M. López, *Your Vote Has Power*, from *Women's Work Is Never Done* series, 1997. Silkscreen, 24 × 20 inches.

commemorates three decades of women's labor in the fields, women's leadership, and the continued struggle for workers' rights and dignity (fig. 11). Repairing the damage of patriarchal authority, López pairs Huerta, as the symbol of historic UFW activism, with California broccoli workers, who represent the contemporary fight for safe labor conditions and economic justice. Four Latinas, wearing hats, scarves, and gloves to protect themselves from pesticides and the sun, dominate the center and right side of the print. They gaze away as if to suggest apprehension, up as if to imply hope, and down as if to document their exhaustion. These women are not present to pay respect to Huerta. Their labor is a testimony—women's work in the



Figure 11. Yolanda M. López, *Homenaje a Dolores Huerta*, from *Women's Work Is Never Done* series, 1995. Silkscreen, 20 × 20 inches.

fields, on the picket lines, and in the union halls is never done. The poster is a bitter reminder of the ongoing battle and endless labor of women; for this reason, López venerates the history and presence of Latina activists and fieldworkers.

Perhaps the most compelling composition of antisexism, antiracism, and anticapitalist exploitation is the installation *The Nanny* (fig. 12). The installation is set into a corner and makes use of two perpendicular walls. A grey uniform hangs on a white screen. On either side of the screen are two advertisements, one for the wool industry and the other for travel to Mexico on Eastern Airlines; both degrade dark-skinned indigenous Mexican women by contrasting them to light-skinned white, beautiful, and smiling women (Pérez 2007). The installation challenges viewers to consider the so-called



Figure 12. Yolanda M. López, *The Nanny*, from *Women's Work Is Never Done* series, 1994. Mixed-media installation.

hidden labor of Latina domestic workers and the matrix of racism and sexism that undergirds the low wages paid to these workers.

An analysis of the uniform, however, suggests that López is articulating the nanny's potential political consciousness. The uniform has several images silkscreened or drawn on the fabric: Guadalupe covers a pocket on the chest; a naked infant, taken from a portrait of the artist's son, is placed in the lower register, near the womb; a plumed serpent emerges from the hip pocket; and the necklace of Coatlicue is drawn around the bodice. A necklace of human hearts and hands symbolically indicates female power over life and death. A cultural nationalist reading would presume that the nanny is, therefore, an Aztec female goddess.

But López does not allow the viewer to romanticize the nanny and turn her into the all-powerful preconquest goddess. The romantic or sentimental interpretation is blocked by the arrangement on the floor. A large white laundry basket contains dirty clothes, toys, and objects to remind the viewer that the nanny works in two households. This double labor provides some economic support for her own family, but because of her low wages and physically demanding work, it also ensures a distance between the nanny and her own children. Coming home late at night, she is simply too tired to enjoy leisure time or play with her children. If her power to create life is doubled, so is her labor. The basket also illustrates the harsh realities of

domestic work. The nanny washes the clothes and dishes, cleans the house, and cares for the employer's children. She is asked to perform other duties, but usually for no extra remuneration.

The romantic impression of the nanny is further dissolved by a color reproduction of the airline ad, placed on the floor near the basket of dirty clothes and thus within the space of the nanny's world. López places a cutout of the light-skinned smiling woman near a cutout of the dark-skinned woman (fig. 13). Between them is a magazine on Mexican cuisine, and the smiling white woman's hand gestures toward the magazine as if to offer it to the indigenous woman. The extended hand and the magazine signify the double consciousness of the nanny. She is aware of the way she is viewed by her middle-class white female employer. She cannot escape the patronizing gaze or degraded position. While the nanny is paid to labor in the home of white middle-class families, her knowledge of her own heritage, symbolically represented by the magazine on Mexican cuisine, is insufficient or lacking. The white woman is the authority or expert who knows best and must teach the nanny how to do her job. This double consciousness surfaces through daily exchanges—the small and large gestures of racial superiority—in which middle-class employers instruct their nannies in cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. The presumed ignorance that



Figure 13. Yolanda M. López, *The Nanny* (detail), from *Women's Work Is Never Done* series, 1994. Mixed-media installation.

necessitates these instructions serves to justify the low wages the nanny is paid. From this experience of overlapping sexism, racism, and economic inequality, the nanny develops a critical consciousness of her condition.

"Ordinary Women" as the Proposal

López's investigation of images is part of a larger Chicana feminist movement to locate and create alternative identities for Mexican-origin women. It is an aesthetic method that emerges from her upbringing, her activism in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and her training in graduate school. Her formal education honed an existing antisexist and antiracist orientation, but it also provided her with a language for the ways in which she would look at, analyze, and deconstruct images. That is, her aesthetic productions are evidence of shifting strategies against containment, submission, erasure, and absence. The work defies the nationalist presumption of a singular or homogeneous citizen and the fantasy of the neoliberal nation-state's promise to guarantee liberty and equality. In formulating a critique of the potent figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe and offering alternatives for women, López paralleled in some sense the work of other Chicana feminists engaged in recuperating historical figures known as "monstrous women," such as La Malinche (Malintzin Tenepal, the so-called mistress and translator for Hernán Cortés) and La Llorona (the weeping woman who cries for her dead children).¹⁰ Yet unlike recuperations of La Malinche and La Llorona, which uncover valuable skills, honor survival strategies, or simply acknowledge the ways in which patriarchy or colonialism have injured, erased, or elided these historical women, López's renderings of Guadalupe did not point to *la virgencita's* endearing qualities. On the contrary, she highlighted the ways that Guadalupe functioned to support the subordination of Latinas within the home, church, and society.

This divergence is significant. While Chicana and Chicano artists such as Yreina D. Cervántez, Rupert García, Celia Herrera Rodríguez, Santa Barraza, René Yáñez, and Amalia Mesa-Bains created tributes to Frida Kahlo, La Malinche, La Llorona, Emiliano Zapata, Dolores del Rio, and other Mexican figures in order to recuperate a historical and cultural legacy, López invoked Guadalupe to question her meaning for contemporary Latinas.¹¹ She was not interested in recovering the previously lost qualities of Guadalupe that may have been subordinated by racism or sexism. According to López, Guadalupean iconography functions to support these ideologies.¹² López raises the questions: What does Guadalupe permit for

Chicanas and Mexican women? Does the long gown represent control? What is the meaning of her posture? Does it signify her passivity? Does her virginity idealize motherhood within Chicano and Mexican communities?

Through an investigation of Guadalupe iconography, López recovered "ordinary women" and expanded popular representations of Chicanas and Mexican women by depicting them at work, engaged in activity without a man, or aging and near death. They are distinctly unglamorous. She did not wish to portray the predictable and romantic image of the folkloric Chicana with braids, peasant blouse, and *juaraches*, an image that reinforces the Spanish fantasy heritage made popular by European and European American settlers in the Southwest. Nor did she invoke the urban aesthetics of Chicano nationalism by showing the loyal woman in the arms of her cholo or pachuco. In both cases, Chicana autonomy and diversity is invisible, hidden, or denied. Therefore López created women of marked plainness and banality, and her intentional compositions avoid the heterosexist male gaze and draw out the power, beauty, and wisdom of women.

López depicted women of various ages, sizes, occupations, skin colors, cultural identities, and connections (or not) to men. Her proposal for Chicana womanhood emphasizes multiplicity and complexity and challenges the singular gendered subject of Chicano nationalism, La Chicana. Now acknowledged as a problematic ideology, Chicano nationalism structured solidarity and unity through the heterosexual family, and like other feminists, López did not support this ideology. Several factors influenced her ability to question the romantic image of the Chicano family and community. As a child, she witnessed two women, Margaret and Victoria, take responsibility for and control of their households. While organizing in the Mission District, she saw firsthand the gender inequality within the movement as well as the material differences throughout the Chicano community. Her objective, therefore, was to portray the diversity of Chicana womanhood. The multiple subject positions conveyed in her work depict survival under the forces of sexism, racism, and political and economic injustice. Her consistent compositions of women without men implicitly resist heteronormative constructions of women. By expanding the space for challenges against heteronormativity, López also opens up the possibility for discursive and aesthetic interventions against homophobia and affirmations of lesbian desire.

Making use of various tactics and ideological positions, her work belongs within, and in some regions predates, the artistic and cultural projects that express oppositional consciousness. It is a mobile and contingent

art strategically critical of the images and institutions that have provided her with a material and aesthetic foundation. It is the oppositional mode that allows for disidentification and countermemory; without it López could not construct a proposal for female subjectivities, racial equity, transnational solidarity, class consciousness, or self-determination. As Chela Sandoval argues, oppositional consciousness emerges from everyday strategies of survival, and López began to articulate these strategies in the early 1970s through quotidian images of working women: the voter, the seamstress, the nursing mother, and the runner, to name a few (1991, 3).

The rejection of an image and its message relies upon oppositional consciousness, especially when the deconstruction of the master narrative builds toward new meanings. When López takes apart or analyzes an image, she turns to the oppositional mode to aesthetically express a multitude of displacements. The artist sees the previously unseen, looks beyond the icon, and pulls out new forms and symbols. Similar to the work of Emory Douglas, López's conceptual projects make the unreal real; she takes the previously unimaginable social bodies of Chicanas and Mexican women and figuratively expresses a new reality. By moving into the realm of what is unthinkable—or at least unimaginable to heteronormative patriarchy, racism, classism, imperialism, and other institutions of oppression—López calls up countermemory, that is, histories and pasts not yet told by or not acknowledged within these institutions and systems. The open hand holding a broken chain on the cover of *¡Basta Ya!* was an example of this countermemory, as the battle against social and political freedom had not yet been won. Such is also the case in *Your Vote Has Power*, since white privilege and supremacy cannot imagine an intelligent, fertile Latina who regularly participates in democracy. Nor can patriarchy envision a Chicana who controls her own body with ease, as in *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe*. American myths of Manifest Destiny and immigrant assimilation cannot admit to the realities of annexation and extermination of indigenous populations, but López presents this countermemory in *Illegal Alien*.

Moreover, the aesthetic political project of deconstruction consistently acknowledges the viewer, the author, the message, and the channel or medium by which the message is conveyed. This semiotic venture is one that supports López's avoidance of romanticism or sentimentalism. Each work pulls the viewer back to the construction of the object, forcing her or him to reconcile and ultimately abandon the celebratory relationship to the image or a sentimental reading of the artist. López's grandmother or the reference to *las abuelitas* may tug at our heartstrings, but the portrait of

Victoria from the Guadalupe triptych as well as other portraits of López's grandmother are ruthlessly honest in their references to death, its inevitability or its nearness. Likewise, *The Nanny* requires us to accord dignity to domestic workers but it does not romanticize their labor conditions. The installation, with its laundry basket of dirty clothes and bottles of cleaning solution, suggests that the nanny is hired to care for children but is required to perform other domestic chores as well. The tableau prompts a mental consideration of what it is like to clean other people's dirty laundry or care for other people's children while your own are left alone. Similarly, in *Homenaje a Dolores Huerta*, the women farmworkers are our contemporary warriors in the battle for better wages and working conditions, but it is difficult to become celebratory about their position since the scarves covering the women's faces and the rubber gloves protecting their hands convey the dangers of pesticides. López has no tolerance for the social detachment that can emerge from sentimentality and romanticism.

The power of her work also stems from its complexity, as López uses these aesthetic articulations to challenge overlapping systems of subordination and control. Oppositional consciousness allows for a tactical maneuver against these interlocking systems of dispossession. Within one aesthetic project, López can voice cultural nationalism and simultaneously outline its limitations for women. Or she measures racism as it functions to support imperialism in Latin America but does not flatten the differences among Latino populations. She turns away from heterosexist patriarchal assumptions that only value women in their relationships to men, as mothers, daughters, or wives, but she never disowns the mother. Her work is never about a singular social position or form of injustice; it inhabits the matrix of domination and privilege, acknowledging that her own Chicana identity carries more political value than her grandmother's undocumented status. Within Chicano communities, López recognizes the authority carried by images of *las abuelitas*, and her compositions aim to undermine the romanticization of the ancestors or the appropriation of indigeness.

In short, she proposes new subjectivities but encourages Chicanas to invent themselves again and again as she questions the image, its context, and what it accomplishes for them. The project is never static. Underscoring López's art is a pedagogy of liberation, and the method of deconstruction is a tool that can be applied to multiple representations, those created by Mexican-origin people and those created by non-Mexicans.

Finally, because the site of recuperation is the Chicana and Chicano body, her political project need not depend on the neoliberal nation-state

or other sites or sources of regulation. The subjects of López's work wait for no one, and yet the artist would be the first to question the utopia imagined by the active or self-possessed female figure. After all, her mother's body behind the industrial sewing machine is not in perfect health, and the nanny she brings to public attention must still divide her time between her own children and those whom she is paid to tend. López is uncomfortable with sentimental projections onto her mother and grandmother, even onto herself, and she consistently argues for the valuation of "ordinary women," not the female superheroes who manage work and kids, fight for workers' rights, and still have time for themselves. The viewer may find joy and hope in the images, but the celebration of new forms of Chicana subjectivity need not arise from idealization. This is her "proposal" (López 2007).

Notes

The wisdom and experience that Yolanda M. López shared with me is so precious; I continue to seek outlets that allow me to share it. I am deeply grateful to her. Colin Gunckel's editorial wand made magic; it is possible to repeat Wendy Belcher's spell and I am thankful. Anonymous reviewers at *Aztlán* made the work stronger. Finally, I acknowledge Tiffany Ana López for tutoring me in the fine art of effective argumentation. All errors are mine.

1. *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe* was used to illustrate reviews, press announcements, and critical analysis of major traveling exhibitions, such as *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965–1985* and *The Once and Future Goddess*, as well as regional group shows of Chicana visual arts, such as *Chicana Voices and Visions* at SPARC. Furthermore, it is typically reproduced and made to represent all of Chicana and Chicano art in major art history textbooks. Some works by López have been published with various titles; in this essay, I use the titles that López herself preferred.

2. The author's two-day interview with López was conducted in Los Angeles in 2007, and the transcript is housed at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Library and Archive.

3. The survey was published in 2003, four years before the first scholarly book on Gronk was published. See Benavides (2007).

4. Although I do not have the space to address the significance of intersectionality as the major paradigm to advance the fields of ethnic and feminist studies since the 1980s, the insertion of race, class, gender, and sexuality challenges the assumed sameness among mainstream feminists, cultural nationalists, and imperialists. Moreover, the acknowledgment of multiple subjectivities interrogates disciplinary conventions in the humanities and social sciences. See also Davalos (2008a).

5. Betty LaDuke (1986) produced the first major scholarly analysis of Yolanda M. López's work, including two series of the MFA exhibition in 1978, that have rarely been exhibited or critically examined since then. See also LaDuke (1994).

6. Yolanda and her sisters were allowed to attend a Catholic church on their own, but her connection to Catholicism ended when a priest refused to bless one sister who died at age twenty-two in a car accident (López 2007).

7. This section benefits from rigorous original research by Cordova (2005), Ferreira (2003), and T. F. Sandoval (2002).

8. López (2007) acknowledges that Arturo Madrid helped her directly to secure the highly coveted Ford Foundation scholarship.

9. The titles are written here as they appear in López's 1978 MFA exhibition brochure. In some other publications on the artist, the shorter titles in brackets are used for figures 7–9.

10. On La Malinche, see Romero and Harris (2005) and Del Castillo (1977). On La Llorona, see Cano Alcalá (2001), Alarcón (1990, 1998), and Anzaldúa (1998). For the quoted phrase, see Chavoya (2006, 93).

11. Carla Trujillo (1998) offers to recuperate Guadalupe for lesbian Chicana feminists, but she does so by questioning the meaning of the Virgin for contemporary women, much as does López.

12. Although López is not interested in recuperating Guadalupe, she uses works such as *Nuestra Madre* (1981–88) to uncover "the thin veil of Christianity" by "superimposing an image of an actual Aztec statue from the state of Coxcatlán, Puebla over the Virgin's radiant mandorla." Most scholars identify the statue as a depiction of Tonantzin or Coatlicue, Nahuatl goddesses known for their powers to create and extinguish life. The first quote comes from López (2007) and the second from Villaseñor Black (forthcoming).

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