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The Promise of the Jaguar: Indigeneity in Contemporary Chicana/o Graphic Art

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Much of the artwork produced by Chicanas/os from the 1960s forward often stages significant elements of indigeneity as a resurgent message and meaning crucial to their representations. While Chicanas/os have positively asserted their Indigenous identities at least since the 1960s, others have attempted to minimize or mythologize this reality resulting in what many scholars have articulated as the de-Indigenization of Chicanas/os (Forbes 1973; Bonfil Batalla 1996; Cintli Rodríguez 2014). Nonetheless, Chicana/o art has maintained Indigenous narratives and history as a kind of visual archive that asserts both the spiritual and cultural force of claiming Chicana/o indigeneity. And, while the 1960s often presented an essentialist Aztec form of Indigenous identity, many Chicanas/os by the late 1970s and early 1980s were illustrating a diversity of Indigenous identities. The art examined here was part of the “Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Roots, Resistance, and Resurgence” exhibit. This exhibit was held at the University of California, Santa Barbara from February to June of 2015 in the main library. The artwork of this exhibit provides a powerful sampling of the visual and narrative evidence that graphic prints can constitute a methodology for collective cultural memory and identity. For the purposes of this essay, I examine four graphic prints from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s in the section of the exhibit titled “Indigeneity in Contemporary Chicano/

Latino Graphic Art.” Overall, two Indigenous themes emerge in this selection of artwork that cannot be ignored: the centrality of the jaguar and the prominence of women as powerful transmitters of culture.

Furthermore, in focusing on these themes, I contend the thread of Indigenous survival in Chicana/o contemporary art operates as a visual and creative de-linking from the logic and rhetoric of civility that has been historically utilized as a physical and psychological strategy of colonization. These prints disavow the settler state and even challenge Native nation’s insistence on blood quantum in order for community members to be acknowledged as Indigenous. I detail how these artists invest in Indigenous alliance building across the Americas by privileging organic cultural and political formations and local cultural practices rather than blood quantum alone for membership in Indigenous communities. This framework intervenes in the settler state’s logic of containment since that logic heavily relies on blood quantum and federal recognition policies as a method of local control. Again, while many Native nations still map their genealogical citizenry through this same vein, countless other Indigenous peoples in the Americas affirm their indigeneity through culture, land, and lifeways. For example, during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s a large part of the Chicana/o community came to consciousness around the assertions of self-

determination and indigenism (Vargas 2010:3) and the subsequent development of Chicana/o art was shaped around these key themes (Vargas:93). For these Chicanas/os, recuperating their Indigenous (Aztec, Maya, Yaqui, etc.) identities allowed them to clearly understand the systematic processes of racialization and domination in the United States as American Indians offered an analogous relationship to the settler state. These politics and histories, then, are part of the premises for understanding the artworks examined in this essay and their reliance on Chicana/o indigeneity as described within the parameters noted above.

Additionally, as Laura E. Pérez (2007) has adeptly noted, many of the artistic representations in this essay are spiritual representations. They also, however, specifically disavow exploitation of land and life based on decolonial ethics that do not necessarily have to be rooted in a spirituality. Thus, I locate and theorize this art within two analytical frameworks: 1) a decolonial aesthetics that centers radical critiques of colonial and neocolonial logics and practices; and, 2) visual sovereignty, a term articulated and outlined by Michelle Raheja (2010) that underscores the liberatory politics of various visual texts. These analytics provide the framework for understanding how these artworks embody a Chicana/o Indigenous epistemological formation of the world. The analytics of decolonial aesthetics and visual sovereignty also help to ascertain how these graphic arts present time and space distinctly against the grain of the settler state; how these artworks represent a particular rootedness in resistance to settler colonialism in general; and how they assert alternate futures in which such

rootedness and futurity are not staged as dichotomous or linear but organic and fractal.

Locating Decolonial Aesthetics in Chicana/o Graphic Art

The Transnational Decolonial Institute (TDI+) is a group of scholars from around the world who are working to define and implement decolonization in various geopolitical contexts. In 2010 these scholars opened an exhibit on what they termed “Decolonial Aesthetics” in Bogotá, Colombia. The following year they had a “Decolonial Aesthetics” workshop and exhibit at Duke University that was curated by Walter Dignolo. TDI+ recently released a manifesto on decolonial aesthetics saying these are “genealogies of re-existence in artistic practices” (Transnational Decolonial Institute, 2013). Within this framework, Dignolo and Vázquez argue, “aesthetics [are] an aspect of the colonial matrix of power, of the imperial structure of control that began to be put in place in the sixteenth century with the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit and the colonization of the New World, and that was transformed and expanded through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and up to this day” (2013). By contrast, decolonial aesthetics can be identified as those that radically deliver a re-existence of life and knowledge against the settler state working to dissolve the colonial matrix of power. Indeed, as coloniality operated to dominate the political, economic, and knowledge bases of Indigenous life, it also strategically sought control “over our senses and perception” (Dignolo and Vázquez 2013). Thus, a decolonial aesthetic can be understood to make visible “decolonial subjectivities at the

confluence of popular practices of re-existence, artistic installations, theatrical and musical performances, literature and poetry, sculpture and other visual arts” (Mignolo and Vázquez 2013). Finally, then, viewing the art prints in the “Indigenous Peoples of the Americas” exhibit within a decolonial aesthetic challenges the practice and idea of art canonization because there is no goal to establish and control a canon of art within this decolonial framework. Rather, and quite differently, there persists a hope that, just as there are multivalent logics of coloniality, there are also multivalent logics of decoloniality—one of which is the assertion for revolutionary artworks to be staged as plural in both their interpretations and political possibilities.

Visual Sovereignty in Chicana/o Graphic Art

Furthermore, Michelle Raheja’s work on visual sovereignty is another critical framework for expanding a radical liberatory politics to visual texts. While she utilizes the term to explicitly read Indigenous filmmaking, here I employ her understanding of this concept to the framing of art prints. In *Reservation Reelism* she argues that visual sovereignty extends sovereignty beyond the juridical realm to the arts and adds: “visual sovereignty permits the flow of Indigenous knowledge about such key issues as land rights, language acquisition, and preservation, which narrativizes local and international struggles” (Raheja 2010:194-196). While definitions and deployments of terms like sovereignty can be quite different for every Indigenous group in the Americas, and even contested as a settler logic (Alfred 2009), it remains a

cornerstone of Indigenous life and decolonizing efforts towards self-determination. Ultimately, as Scott Richard Lyons has noted, sovereignty is “nothing less than our attempt to survive and flourish as a people” (2000: 449). Yet, it is important to point out that sovereignty is not solely tied to resurrecting a past but rather to ensuring a present and future. To wit, Lyons argues:

Sovereignty is the guiding story in our pursuit of self-determination, the general strategy by which we aim to best recover our losses from the ravages of colonization: our lands, our languages, our cultures, our self-respect. For indigenous people everywhere, sovereignty is an ideal principle, the beacon by which we seek the paths to agency and power and community renewal (2000:449).

Thus, visualizing not only the survival of Indigenous peoples but the thriving multimodal and creative ways our communities flourish assists in realizing certain forms of sovereignty that are not tied to the settler state or its courts of law. In short, artworks that embody a decolonial aesthetic envision various implementations of self-determination that are beyond those articulations of sovereignty that rely on the settler colonial state for recognition.

Victoria Ocelotl

The silkscreen print *Victoria Ocelotl* (“Jaguar Victory”) by Yreina Cervántez from 1983 details the revolutionary commitment evidenced in decolonial aesthetics (Figure 1). Cervántez was born in 1952 and raised near San Diego, California close to a Native American reservation. She is one of the most prominent Chicana artists and the

majority of her artistic renderings showcase Indigenous themes. She has been producing art for over thirty-five years with watercolor as her strongest medium. This print was first printed at Self Help Graphics in the Atelier printmaking program. The print foregrounds an Indigenous Mayan woman who is facing away from the viewer; she is identified by her traditionally braided hair and a *huipil* (a traditional hand-woven garment) with two jaguars on it; the left border of the print also has images of jaguars that run up and down it; and there are three distinct jaguars in the sky of the print. The Mayan woman holds a rifle, a modern symbol of protection, strength and resistance, but the image suggests that her strength is really drawn from the jaguars that surround her.

In addition, when placed in the historical context of the time period the print was made, the image clearly alludes to a solidarity with Mayans in Guatemala who were experiencing violence and genocide at the hands of their government with support from the U.S. military. This also demonstrates how Cervántez intentionally transcends borders in her art moving beyond the U.S. Southwest region. Nevertheless, even that historical moment had its roots in the broader context of the Guatemalan Civil War, which ran from 1960 to 1996. This was a war fought between a corrupt government that was allied with the U.S. and the country's rural poor who were primarily Indigenous Maya. Thus, the ultimate "victory" is still in the making at the time this print is made in 1983. In fact, the hope for victory amidst the violence of the early 1980s in Guatemala is astounding given the material conditions on the ground. Stephen

Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer note in *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* that the 1980s ushered in a new apex of violence in Guatemala. They write:

Terrified by the triumph of leftist guerrillas in nearby Nicaragua and the subsequent unification of Guatemalan insurgents into a single coalition called the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG), and encouraged by the Reagan administration to fight insurgents with every means at their disposal, military leaders launched a series of devastating military sweeps in large areas of the countryside deemed to be pro-guerrilla. An estimated one million people who lived in these areas fled their homes to escape military rampages, among them 150,000 who sought refuge across the northern border in Mexico. Many who did not move quickly enough were killed. (Schlesinger and Kinzer 2005:258)

Moreover, in 1982 (one year prior to this print) there was a large massacre of Mayan people in the Aldea Río Negro and 177 women and children were killed (Smith 2005:27). This violent attack against Mayan women and children was severe. "The young women were raped in front of their mothers, and the mothers were killed in front of their children. The younger children were then tied at the ankles and dashed against the rocks until their skulls were broken. This massacre, committed by the Guatemalan army, was funded by the U.S. government" (Smith 2005:27). 1982 also marks the year of Efraín Ríos Montt's "Plan Victoria 82" that was characterized by a scorched earth military campaign and it highlighted the violence noted above and through a psychological infrastructure of "social



Figure 1: Yreina Cervántez, *Victoria Ocelotl* (1983)

control, indoctrination and repression” (Doyle 2013).

The historical and political contexts of this print, therefore, are quite telling especially with regard to its title, *Victoria Ocelotl*, and resonate with the explicit image of a revolutionary Indigenous woman grounded by the symbol of the jaguar. Moreover, by reading the spatial narrative of this print, the Indigenous concept of duality underscores both the violence carried out by military forces as represented in the image of the helicopters, and the counter images of the Indigenous woman in the foreground who is covered by the two jaguars on her *huipil*. Overall, then, the images in this print suggest that military violence can be directly challenged when Indigenous

women exercise their own agency and find power and strength in their Indigenous identity and their sacred stances. The presence of the stalwart symbolism of the jaguar, along with the armed Mayan woman, clearly serve as an unyielding and supreme force of power and represent a determination to fight the violent repression of the state.

In the *Victoria Ocelotl* print, jaguars surround the Indigenous woman and seem to face-off with the helicopters that hover threateningly above the woman, and a spatial reading of the representation of these jaguars and their posturing suggests that they are as invested as the woman in the battle against a dictatorial government and its allies. The three jaguars at the top of the print that command the shadowy

night's sky spit fire at the helicopters that hover above. The jaguar images that run along the left border of the piece extend from the bottom of the print's frame to the top of the piece and into the night's sky to form another protective cover for the Indigenous woman. The Indigenous woman at the center of the print focuses her sights on these jaguar figures rather than the threatening helicopters above her because of the cover provided by the jaguars. And, as I note above, the two jaguars on her *huipil* seem to guard her as though she has summoned these animals as her spirit companions or counterparts (her *nagual*) in this fight against state violence represented by the black helicopters.

Most importantly, the jaguars on her *huipil* are in a defensive position and claw at what seems to be two resplendent quetzals—the national bird of the nation-state of Guatemala. This attack on the *quetzals* by the jaguars, as a result, symbolizes at least two dominant meanings: first, it is a symbol of the Indigenous resistance to state violence as the Quetzal is part of the coat of arms of the national flag of Guatemala; and, second, that such resistance is also an anti-capitalist/anti-imperialist resistance given that the quetzal is also the monetary unit of the nation-state of Guatemala. The anti-imperialist element is implied by the broader Cold War politics of the region and notes that Ríos Montt and his repressive regime have the blessing of the United States because they are fighting the “communists” in Central America. In this framing, the jaguar takes on greater political importance in the overall decolonizing aesthetics of the piece.

Significantly, it has been well documented that jaguars were certainly understood as animals of power and might in Mesoamerican belief (Benson 1998; Pérez 2007). Elizabeth Benson details the significance of the jaguar in Mesoamerica in her essay, “The Lord, The Ruler: Jaguar Symbolism in the Americas” (1998). She notes: the jaguar hunts both in daytime and nighttime; it is also adept at hunting in the water, which is a rare tolerance for cats, and it hunts along the land base. Benson also outlines how jaguars may have represented different localized ideas for various Mesoamerican cultures: often being understood as a protector for Olmecs while perceived as a destructive force for Aztecs. Nevertheless, it remains true across the Americas that this animal commands authority and respect. Also, in the Mesoamerican worldview, the jaguar could traverse multiple worlds—most prominently, the earthly world and the spirit world (Benson 1998:64-67) and it served as a spirit companion to communicate with ancestors who were associated with the night (Benson 1998:70). In fact, the jaguar, for many Mesoamerican cultures, was the first human being and, as a result, those who descend from Mesoamerica could all be classified as children of the jaguar (Benson 1998:70).

Thus, the representation in *Victoria Ocelotl* of an Indigenous woman resisting the forces of repression at night could be read as a multivalent representation of various protections afforded to her that the living/material world could not provide in the day. As Laura Pérez has argued, the jaguar images in Cervántez's work “understand the human person as a spiritual being, in fundamental relation and identity with a natural environment imbued

with spiritual energy and consciousness” (2007:85). Therefore, I suggest there is not a great divide or dichotomous view of the jaguar and the Indigenous woman in this print; instead, the multiple jaguar figures of the print represent her spiritual self in balance and positioned to protect her people and culture from violent military action. Because of this, Cervántez may also employ these jaguar figures to ultimately represent a source of life against the death and destruction of neocolonial and military oppression.

In reconsidering these political and Indigenous elements of this print, the decolonial aesthetics of Cervántez’s work becomes self-evident. Yet, it is still important to note, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue, the act of decolonization cannot simply be turned into a metaphor. As they and other Indigenous scholars poignantly declare: decolonization requires the repatriation of both land and life (Tuck and Yang 2012:21). To frame art within a decolonial sphere, therefore, also means asserting the radical potential of cultural productions to incite and call for this very type of repatriation of land and life for Indigenous people. In particular, such a decolonial aesthetic also challenges a Eurocentric formation of aesthetics that might privilege and determine “beauty” for and by the elite or one that simply mimics their tastes and values. And, as Anzaldúa poetically describes this decolonial formation, she writes: “...my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life” (2007:88). In this same vein, then, a decolonial aesthetic finds beauty in revolt, resurgence, and as TDI+ has stated, in re-existence. Most importantly, this print serves a utili-

tarian purpose: a call to revolution.

Victoria Ocelotl underscores this decolonial artistic re-existence as the artist defies a dichotomous past/present trope that is often used against Indigenous peoples to render them invisible in the present/future and see them *only* as peoples of/in the past. For example, in my reading of this print, the spirit and promise of the jaguars’ representations, along with the backdrop and protection of the ancestral night sky, are all embodiments of twentieth century decolonial artistic resistance rooted in the past/tradition but articulated in the present to make a case for a more positive future. In this way, the Indigenous representations in this piece are integral parts of modernity rather than displaced by an understanding of modernity that relegates all things Indigenous to a “pre-modern” past as part of a neocolonial erasure. This decolonizing framework and aesthetic, furthermore, places Indigenous identity, beliefs, and practices as significantly rooted/*arraigado* in this same past/present/future, yet maintains a malleability as Indigenous peoples in the Americas continue to work for a decolonial present in which their lifeways are maintained, again, without them being relegated to a romanticized past that effectively erases them from the present and future.

Mujer de Mucha Enagua, Pa Ti Chicana

Mujer de Mucha Enagua, Pa’ Ti Chicana (“Woman with a lot of Petticoat, For You Chicana”) from 1999 (Figure 2) is another significant art piece by Yreina Cervántez. The three main figures in this print are a young Zapatista mother with her children (far left), the 17th

century Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (far right)—with Sor Juana wearing an image around her neck of contemporary Mexican poet Rosario Castellano from Chiapas. This image clearly centers the importance of revolutionary women in intellectual and political efforts in México, especially as these efforts are grounded in Indigenous cultures. For example, in explaining the significance of this print, Cervántez states that the title is a common phrase in México that is used to describe women who have a great deal of “strength, courage, and integrity” and/or used to describe women who were *activistas* (Medina 2005:x). Cervántez also noted that these three women are part of “a powerful trinity, who all address the tenacious struggle of indigenous peoples of Mexico and the Americas” (Medina 2005:xi). The subtext of Cervántez’s statement is an artistic rejection of the archaic trinity imposed on *Mexicanas/Chicanas*: La Malinche, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and La Llorona. As a result, a complex history of Indigeneity in México and the Americas is densely woven together in this print in order to re-cast and congeal the political interests of feminist and Indigenous struggles in the Americas.

For example, the Zapatista mother in the print wears an apron with an inscribed message on it from the Popul Vuh, the most sacred book of the Maya. The message operates as a literal reminder to all, but especially to these *activistas* that they must “conjure up the faces and words” of the ancestors (Medina 2005:xi) that give them the aforementioned “strength, courage and integrity” necessary to fight for Indigenous peoples and their rights. Moreover, the text from the Popul Vuh also provides a religious/sacred framing

for what otherwise might be characterized as secular intellectual and political organizing on the part of these women. Specifically, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz speaks in Nahuatl, a language she learned fluently. And, her use of Nahuatl in the print summons the assistance and the blessing of Tonantzin: Mother Earth. The use of Nahuatl in the print also suggests that even speaking Nahuatl was “a subversive act, considering the prejudices of colonial New Spain against the Mother Tongue and the religious traditions associated with it” (Medina 2005:xi). Additionally, Cervántez uses earth tones in this print most likely as a reference to Mother Earth/Tonantzin, and the entire print is set against a jaguar pelt background. Finally, on the far right there are six distinct Mayan hand mudras, while the center bottom shows both Mayan and Nahua glyphs, and the hand between the two women showcases a tattooed spiral symbol that represents the Indigenous symbol of eternal timelessness. Right above this spiral, on the palm of the hand, is the Mayan phrase, “mixik balamil,” which means “navel of the universe” (Medina 2005:xi).

Given these elemental and contextual details, the print incites a re-existence or repatriation of Indigenous life that defines decolonial aesthetics. It utilizes a multivalent history including revolutionary action for liberation, poetry, and Indigenous spiritual traditions to centralize Indigenous justice as a continued concern of our contemporary moment. The print’s spatial narrative suggests that women are the primary keepers and transmitters of Indigenous cultures and that it will also be women who persist in



Figure 2: Yreina Cervántez, *Mujer de Mucha Enagua, Pa' Ti Chicana* (1999)

efforts to sustain the cultural and spiritual heart of their communities. Just as Tonantzin is represented by the double heart between the Zapatista's and Sor Juana's feet, the print undoubtedly suggests that *mujeres de mucha enagua*/ "women with a lot of petticoat," will continue to be the bloodlines that carry on the literal and metaphorical life of decolonial action and aesthetics.

The women in this print, as a result, represent resistance to the genocidal attempts of "settler colonialism [as] a genocidal policy" (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014:6). Also, because these women were insistent on Indigenous peoples' rights, they stand for a repatriation of the land, their right to give life to the next generation of revolutionaries (literally and metaphorically), and

maintain the culture as historical narrators, language preservers, and spiritual leaders. Note, for example, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz disavowed a strict Spanish colonial rule as a *mestiza* but also as an insurgent intellectual who challenged the principle ideological mode through which settler colonialism was carried out in colonial México: the Catholic Church. And, Sor Juana's methodologies were equally important; it is well known that Sor Juana re-appropriated and re-purposed the Catholic Church's resources and used them to challenge the Church and the State on intellectual, poetic, and political grounds. Similarly, the Zapatista woman's presence in this print underscores the present political aim of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de*

Liberación Nacional, EZLN): to stop oppressive military and corporate interventions in Chiapas, México from the 1990s forward. In fact, the EZLN remains dedicated to land reform and focusing on indigeneity as central components in its war against the state and corporations especially those represented by policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

In addition, many scholars working within the field of Native Feminisms have documented the violent colonial attempt to exterminate women in order to completely dissolve Indigenous cultures in congruence with the importance of Indigenous women to the maintenance of their cultures (Smith 2005; Anzaldúa 2007; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014). Many Indigenous women constituted themselves as revolutionaries to ensure their peoples' survival and disrupt genocidal practices and policies. Gloria Anzaldúa acknowledges such genocidal forces in *Borderlands* as she notes how Chicanas have been made to "believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer" (2007:44). Nonetheless, though the odds have been stacked against Indigenous women, Anzaldúa also recognizes how Indigenous women survive and transcend the limits set by Spaniard and Anglo colonizers. She writes:

The spirit of the fire spurs her to fight for her own skin and a piece of ground to stand on, a ground from which to view the world—a perspective, a homeground where she can plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample *mestiza* heart. She waits till the waters are not so turbulent and the mountains not so slippery with sleet...*Aquí en la*

soledad prospera su rebeldía (Anzaldúa 2007:45).

Overall, then, the women portrayed in this print highlight various Indigenous histories and identities as living, intergenerational, and resurgent. These histories and identities are also rooted in thriving cultures from the Chiapaneca to the Chicana. While these women in the print represent different historical moments in México, as Cervántez channels and represents them and their struggles, taken together, they all operate as profound *activistas/mujeres de mucha enagua* committed to Indigenous existence/re-existence by resisting the genocidal politics and practices of elimination in dominant Mexican and American cultures.

Laura Molina's Comic, *The Jaguar*

In Laura Molina's self-produced zine/comic titled *Cihualyaomiquiz, The Jaguar*, the narrative revolves around a superheroine that fights injustice when she transforms into a powerful jaguar woman (Figure 3). The main character, Linda Rivera, is a law scholar who can transform into a jaguar woman to fight the systemic realities of racism and sexism. As Laura Pérez reports, readers are told that the Nahuatl name of the comic means "woman ready to die in battle" and the villains in the story are racist police officers and neo-Nazi skinheads (2007:238). The bottom of the print reads "a woman warrior dedicated to the struggle for social justice, human rights, and mother earth." Other captions on the print exclaim, "Corporate Crooks, Look Out!," "I resist!," and "I Won't Be Tamed!"

Significantly, the strength of Molina's plot is found in her attempt to



Figure 3: Laura Molina, *Cihualyaomiquiz, The Jaguar* (2003)

undo a racist and sexist present by connecting the empowered superheroine to her Indigenous animal spirit (*nagual*). Pérez underscores this notion by arguing that Molina “draws from a Mesoamerican cultural past and present identification with the Indigenous in constructing her fearsome heroine,” and adds, “this in itself is a tactic in the larger ongoing struggle against a racism that, like a evil comic book nemesis, keeps rearing its ugly head in ever-new twists of the same old plot” (2007:241). Therefore, in representing the heroine as a jaguar, Laura Molina suggests that the fight against racism is carried out in the earthly/material realm, but this battle is also fought in the spiritual realm. This connection is underscored, as I note above, by the Mesoamerican

belief in the jaguar’s ability to move beyond and between the physical and spiritual worlds and by Molina’s recognition of the Jaguar’s Indigenous roots through its name. As a result, Molina’s representation of the Jaguar superheroine figure makes her a greater force with which to be reckoned.

Moreover, this print also embodies a form of visual sovereignty as it depicts a woman warrior who is ready to fight for her people, their land, and their human and civil rights. The print and its representations suggest moving beyond the mere survival of Indigenous peoples by indicating how oppressed peoples can thrive through rebellious art and even humor. The visual and textual narratives also disrupt any logic that relies on the U.S. legal system to render

justice or to be a guarantor of sovereignty for Indigenous peoples. Instead, the plot contends the justice system is a corrupt branch of the settler state and needs to be “Indigenized” in order to arrive at fairness and equality. Furthermore, The Jaguar/Warrior Woman is expressly charged with taking care of mother earth in this print and, as a result, I contend the print/text underscores not only a visual sovereignty, but a political sovereignty tied to the land. As such, this image takes a political position requiring a critical land ethic be implemented in order for this formidable warrior to rest.

Of course, land ethics are central to many claims about what constitutes sovereignty across the Americas—especially with regard to Indigenous peoples and their land in the Americas. For most, the land is a central component to a repatriated life. And, sovereignty cannot be granted to the people until it is also granted to the land. This indicates an approach to living *with* the land rather than *over* the land, an approach that can be theorized as a Native feminist land ethic (Navarro, 2014). In this print, the thunderous call to destroy racism and sexism while simultaneously protecting the earth is, similarly, part of a Native feminist land ethic that calls for living with the land/Mother Earth rather than practicing a destructive dominion over her. Molina’s representational narrative, then, highlights the reality that racism, sexism and classism are intimately linked to a destruction of the land especially as the land is gendered female and then transformed into various commodities for exploitation in a capitalist market system. This Native feminist land ethic is best exemplified in this print by the Jaguar Woman’s call for

“Corporate Crooks” to “Look Out!” Clearly, Molina’s Jaguar Woman understands how the matrix of settler state abuse is characterized by interlocking systems of racist, sexist, and classist domination that affect both human beings and the land. In Molina’s print, as a result, humans and land are positioned as equal relatives who must live in balance—an incredibly important Indigenous belief. Luckily, then, the Jaguar Woman can be seen as utilizing her superheroine powers to fight for justice as framed through feminist, Indigenous worldviews rather than one that is beholden to the very settler state that ironically carries out oppression against Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas. Consequently, while The Jaguar is imbued with magical qualities to undo systemic abuse and violence, the zine’s visual narrative hinges around the anthropomorphous Jaguar Woman who has the capacity to recall ancestral ways of life in the throes of various oppressive techniques and logics of modernity. Finally, then, in this print, I understand the jaguar as a simultaneous embodiment of: human/animal, past/present, protector/destroyer, and earth/sky; not as simple binary oppositions of these elements. Overall, The Jaguar Woman then represents the complex self-determination, agency, and self-respect necessary to deploy sovereignty in our contemporary political moment.

Dando Gracias

Finally, Leo Limón’s *Dando Gracias* (Figure 4) is a print that visualizes Indigenous sovereignty as part of Chicana/o politics and art in the early 1980s. Limón was a member of the early Chicano arts movement with *Los Four* and the Mechicano Arts Center in East

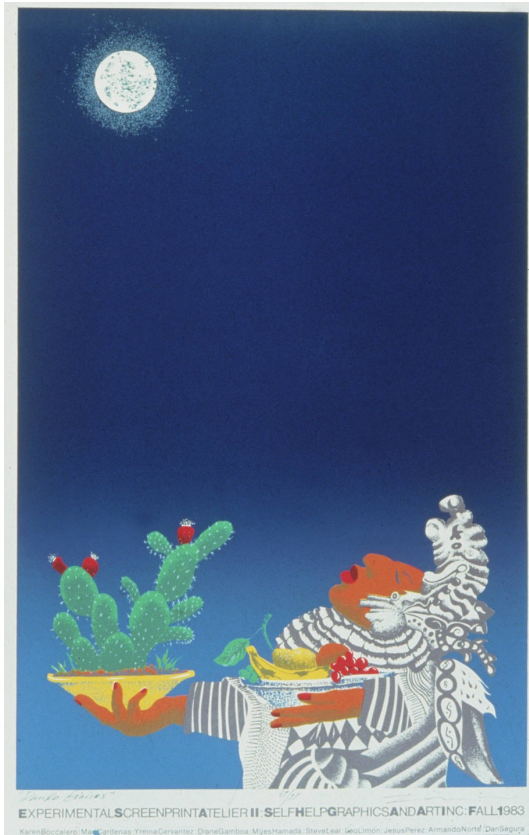


Figure 4: Leo Limón, *Dando Gracias* (1983)

Los Angeles. In 1980, he joined Self Help Graphics, where he established their Atelier printmaking program. *Dando Gracias* was the first print he produced in that program and it portrays Limón's vision of an Indigenous Chicana/o cultural and spiritual legacy—especially with regard to his incorporation of a positive representation of an Indigenous woman. For example, the bottom of the print shows a Mesoamerican woman figure as she gives thanks to *la luna* (the moon) with an offering of three fruits and a flowering cactus. Obviously, the viewer recognizes this woman's indigeneity because of her bronze skin color and the regalia she wears. However, the *nopal* (cactus) she offers in thanks is also an

important element because it is a symbol of indigeneity throughout México and in Chicana/o communities of the Southwestern U.S.

Dando Gracias centralizes Limón's commitment to the depiction of Indigenous spiritual elements and the geopolitics of sovereignty in his prints. Again, if sovereignty is defined as the ability for Indigenous peoples and cultures to flourish, this print beautifully underscores this position. Roberto Cintli Rodríguez has argued, for example, that there were multiple forms of conquest implemented against Indigenous peoples in the Americas. One form of conquest called *la otra conquista* (the other conquest), Cintli notes, was a specific effort to

strategically fashion a spiritual genocide. He writes, the “primary objective was the destruction of the maíz-based beliefs and cultures of Indigenous peoples, ushering in a radical shift in the axis mundi or center of the universe from maíz to the Christian cross” (Cintli 2014:7). As a result, Limón’s *Dando Gracias* shows a resurgence of Indigenous peoples in the Americas posturing toward their sacred Indigenous beliefs in twentieth century Chicana/o art against this attempted spiritual genocide. Moreover, this print represents a spiritual legacy that was never fully supplanted by settler colonialism. In effect, the print evidences the failure or at the very least the limitations of *la otra conquista*. Of course, this position does not ignore the destruction and violence of the attempted spiritual colonization of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, but it suggests Indigenous spiritualities are not extinct and colonialism can never fully render them as such.

In fact, the *nopal* seems to be the greatest gift offered to the moon as this symbol has multivalent significance for Indigenous peoples and Chicanas/os in México and the U.S. The *nopal* has incredible import to the state in México as a symbol of its Indigenous origins and mythohistorical predestination—it even shows up on the nation’s flag. But it also has a broader Indigenous history in the Americas. The *nopal* is a native plant to the Americas and emerges in hundreds of varieties; it continues to be a staple food for Indigenous peoples across the continent (Yetman 2011:133). The plant also provided medicinal qualities that were known to Indigenous medicine keepers for a number of ailments during the Mesoamerican period, still used for health reasons today. In the present, for

the most part, the *nopal* is revered for its ability to alleviate high blood pressure and help with diabetes as a high fiber food (Yetman 2011:133). Moreover, many established ceremonial uses of the *nopal* make it an excellent choice of an offering and this seems to be the most relevant tradition relayed in Limón’s print. In fact, the cactus variety known as *peyote* has been used in many Indigenous cultures in the Americas for visioning ceremonies, and many other varieties of the *nopal* remain symbols of protection because the piercing spines on these plants make them self-sufficient (even *las tunas* can harbor many micro spines) (Yetman 2011:132). These plants are also symbols of survival since they grow in desert conditions and require very little water, making them an appropriate representation of a people who survive equally harsh conditions. Thus, I suggest the gift of the *nopal* with the beautiful red *tunas* offers a symbolic assertion of self-sufficiency and protection granted to the people by the ancestors, who are represented by the night and *la luna* (as they are in the Cervántez piece above).

Yet, while the ancestors are carefully represented in the night sky and the moon in this print, equally important is the Indigenous worldview of time that works against the settler state’s dichotomous view of time (past/present) depicted in this graphic. For example, the Indigenous woman who makes the offering is not relegated to a past where her humanity and gifts are only relevant in the pre-Columbian era. Instead, she reads as consistently mixing the past and present as she maintains traditional offerings that are still seen as sacred today to *la luna*, who may also be interpreted as Coyolxauhqui. This offering to *la luna*/

Coyolxauhqui is important because it maintains a feminist sensibility regarding Indigenous Chicana/o identity and politics. Namely, a Nahuatl narrative suggests the moon is the head of Coyolxauhqui, thrown into the sky after she was killed by Huitzilopochtli. Her head becomes the moon so her mother could continue to see her daughter's face. Therefore, this offering is a way to remember intra-communal violence given the Nahuatl myth related to the death of Coyolxauhqui and her brothers at the hands of Huitzilopochtli who was said to be defending his mother. Nonetheless, it is also a form of reconciliation and re-casting of the how female deities remain guiding lights for Indigenous peoples, but especially women. This can be further noted by how the shift away from the lunar calendar and Coyolxauhqui, and toward the solar calendar, was a patriarchal move since the lunar calendar helped position women's moon time (Luna and Galeana 2016). Importantly, as evidenced here then, much of Chicana/o art "engage[s] Chicanos' Mexican past not as a form of historical determinism but as a way of thinking actively about the present... historical thinking is a form of cognitive mapping" (Noriega and Rivas 2011:90). Thus, the art-based cognitive mapping, as Noriega and Rivas suggest, is a mode to narrate history from the margins (2011:73). *Dando Gracias* represents a disruption of time as dictated by linear constructs in the framework of "modernity," challenges a patriarchal settler state by reinforcing feminist Indigenous relationships between Indigenous women and deities like Coyolxauhqui, and presents Indigenous life as ever-present and continually vibrant.

Conclusion

All the Chicana/o prints examined in this essay highlight a historical and persistent rootedness in Indigenous knowledge and spiritual belief systems. These artists, as contemporary cultural workers, posit a thriving Indigenous identity and practice for Chicanas/os through their art rather than a nostalgic longing for a bygone past as an overt political act against the settler state. In this light, the Indigenous Chicana/o elements of these graphic prints are "cultural markers that survived the ravages of colonization and [connect] the contemporary Chicana/o community to the great prequest indigenous civilizations and cultures in the Americas" (Latorre, 2008:4). These contemporary prints, however, do not simply suggest Chicanas/os are descendants of Indigenous peoples, but that they *are* Indigenous peoples.

A plethora of Indigenous scholarship has emerged to emphasize this important reality especially because, in many cases, a *mestiza/o* identity has been used against Chicanas/os to effect erasures of their indigeneity (Castellanos, Gutiérrez Nájera and Aldama 2012). This has arguably been a tactic by the state to ensure Indigenous peoples do not form political alliances and re-constitute ourselves with greater enumeration. In essence, this is a settler logic of forgetting that has led to greater control over "smaller numbers" of "modern Indians" that require recognition from the state for their legitimacy (especially in the United States). Thus, to establish a methodology of (re)membering, where Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os are not solely bound to the "cosmic race" descriptor, aids in the processual work of decolonizing *mestizaje* where the

mestiza/o can at once be *lo indígena y lo mestizo*. This is an important distinction because México and the United States have historically used the racial categorization of *mestizaje* to swallow up an Indigenous identity in favor of Spanish/white racial ancestry (Gutiérrez Nájera, Castellanos and Aldama 2012:6). My analysis of these graphic prints, then, offers a critical counternarrative to visual representations of indigeneity as part of meaningful ways to decolonize regressive understandings of *mestizaje*. Thus, while this art is produced by Chicanas/os in the twentieth century, it strategically employs Indigenous elements to expose the colonial entanglements of a regressive *mestizaje* by narrating “mixed” racial identities through an Indigenous lens rather than a Eurocentric one. Through this lens, these artists contribute to the plurality of decolonizing methodologies and rely on decolonial aesthetics as described above. Nonetheless, because decolonization is a process, it is also necessary to deploy persistent multimodal practices of decolonization to arrive at a complete repatriation of Indigenous lands and lives. Consequently, in this context, art has the potential to decolonize knowledge and aesthetics while offering a narrative of re-existence and the political necessity of Chicana/o indigeneity.

Overall, then, I also contend these prints operate as an affective form of healing from settler state violence because, as Indigenous scholar Dian Million argues, Indigenous peoples “seek to present our histories as affective, *felt*, intuited as well as thought” (2013:57). In the case of art, these particular prints materialize this “felt” history as a mode of resistance and

resurgence that articulates indigeneity as a decolonial aesthetic and, in so doing, make art a persistent site for demanding self-determination. Productively, then, these prints intervene in the assumed and expected silence of Indigenous peoples by creatively expressing our realities and representing our lives. Still, while some prints may initially read as more politically active than others, I suggest the prints examined here all engage in a productive disobedience to settler logics that can, at a minimum, act to “liberate our senses” (Transnational Decolonial Institute 2013) but that also work toward the liberation of Indigenous lifeways and land.

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