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## Spirit Glyphs:

### Reimagining Art and Artist in the Work of Chicana Tlaminime

**[Laura E. Pérez \(bio\)](#)**

Fruto del diálogo sostenido con su propio corazón, que ha ruminado, por así decir, el legado espiritual del mundo náhuatl, el artista comenzará a transformarse en un yoltéotl, “corazón endiosado,” o mejor, movilidad y dinamismo humano orientados por un especie de inspiración divina.

(“Fruit of the dialogue sustained with his/her own heart, that has ruminated, so to speak, the spiritual legacy of the Náhuatl world, the artist will begin to transform him/herself into a yoltéotl, “a deified heart,” or better, human mobility and dynamism oriented by a kind of a divine inspiration” [my translation].)

—Miguel León-Portilla, *Los antiguos mexicanos a través de sus crónicas y cantares*

But what, or who, can emerge intact from such traumatic crossings, in response to the passionate call of the originary language, figured by the drum? Only the black trickster....

—Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* [End Page 36]

The journey of this writing is as much a journey into the past as it is into the future, a resurrection of the ancient in order to construct the modern. It is a place where prophecy and past meet and speak to each other.

—Cherrie Moraga, *The Last Generation*

## Making Spirit Opposition

It seems that what individuals and groups perceive and represent as the spiritual—that having to do with the s/Spirit(s)—is a socially and politically significant field of differences and contention, as well as of resonances, crossings, and even hybridization.

<sup>1</sup> Culturally specific notions of the spiritual circulate unevenly and with different political meaning in the United States. Thus, though we might perhaps be able to generalize the notion of the spiritual sufficiently to speak cross-culturally within and outside of the United States, doing so within Eurodominated discourse runs the risk of collapsing cultural differences with respect to conception, experience, and representation of the same. The notion of the spiritual that I wish to discuss here as it is invoked and represented in contemporary Chicana writing and visual art derives its inspiration primarily, though not exclusively, from Mesoamerican, other American Indian, and African perceptions of belief, concept, and experience: that there is an essential spiritual nature, and thus an interconnectedness, of all beings, human and nonhuman. Interestingly, this view is also present in less dominant versions of Christianity (e.g., gnosticism) and Judaism (e.g., Kabbala), even as it is among the beliefs that are ascribed significant cultural difference in dominant Euroamerican thought and projected onto people such as U.S. Latina/os, African Americans, and Third World populations more generally, as well as onto the rural or “uneducated.”

Beliefs and practices consciously making reference to the s/Spirit as the common life force within and between all beings are largely marginalized from serious intellectual discourse as superstition, folk belief, or New Age delusion, when they are not relegated to the socially controlled spaces of the orientalist study of “primitive animism” or of [End Page 37] “respectable” religion within dominant culture. Even in invoking the spiritual as a field articulated through cultural differences, and in so doing attempting to displace dominant Christian notions of the spiritual while addressing the fear of politically regressive essentialisms, to speak about the s/Spirit and the spiritual in U.S. culture is risky business that raises anxieties of different sorts. <sup>2</sup> Yet the very discomfort

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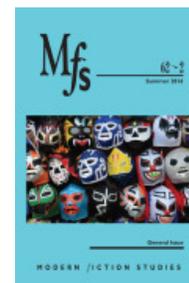
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that attends talk of the spiritual outside of authorized and institutionalized spaces (i.e., churches, certain disciplines, old and new Eurocentric ideological and theory orthodoxies) alerts us to a tender zone constituted by the (dis)encounters of culturally different and politically significant beliefs and practices.

To speak of the spiritual with respect to the cultural practices of politically disempowered communities, particularly the work of women, is perhaps even more fraught with dangers. Given this loaded landscape, the invocation of the spiritual in the work of contemporary Chicana writers and visual artists, as a part of an oppositional politics, is especially provocative and ambitious, for, as Ana Castillo writes,

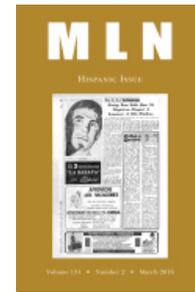
our long-range objective in understanding ourselves, integrating our fragmented identities, truly believing in the wisdom of our ancient knowledge is to bring the rest of humanity to the fold. That is, today, we grapple with our need to thoroughly understand who we are—gifted human beings—and to believe in our gifts, talents, our worthiness and beauty, while having to survive within the constructs of a world antithetical to our intuition and knowledge regarding life's meaning. Our vision must encompass sufficient confidence that dominant society will eventually give credence to our ways, if the world is to survive. Who in this world of the glorification of material wealth, whiteness, and phallic worship would consider *us* holders of knowledge that could transform this world into a place where the quality of life for all living things on this planet is the utmost priority; where we are all engaged in a life process that is meaningful from birth to death, where we accept death as organic to life, where death does not come to us in the form of one more violent and unjust act committed against our right to live?

(148–49) [End Page 38]

The linkages within imperialist and racist thinking between the spiritual, the female, and peoples of color are what make the conditions for talking about women, particularly women of color, and the spiritual especially difficult. For, as Marianna Torgovnick writes, “[b]it by bit, thread by thread, the West has woven a tapestry in which the primitive, the oceanic, and the feminine have been banished to the margins in order to protect—or so the logic went—the primacy of civilization, masculinity, and the autonomous self” (212). Regardless of intention, then, it might seem that connections made between the spiritual and women of color finally reproduce dominant narratives about these as the inferior opposites to the rational, Christian, Western European, and male.

The stakes involved in the struggle over these narratives are not small. With respect to the ascription of the magical to Indians in the Putumayo region of Colombia, Michael Taussig has commented: “This magical attraction of the Indian is not only a cunningly wrought colonial *objet d’art*; it is also a refurbished and revitalized one. It is not just primitivism but third-world modernism, a neocolonial reworking of primitivism” (*Shamanism* 172). Nonetheless, the necessity of addressing the politics of spirituality from the perspective of the “Indian” other of Eurocentric cultures, and/or of claiming one’s belittled spiritual world view, is crucial to many, particularly if it is a personally and socially empowering one, and especially if it is so for women.<sup>3</sup> From the point of view of many Chicana artists whose work is consciously structured through references to the spiritual, the struggle for the valorization of world views that dominant cultures imagine as non-Western, and thus other, is a decolonizing one not only for the colonized, but also for the colonizer, as the quote from Castillo suggests. Unlike the institutionalized religions that have colluded with patriarchy and class-exploitation, the spiritualities constructed in contemporary Chicana writing and art express egalitarian world views that are inseparable from questions of social justice, with respect to class, gender, sexuality, culture, “race,”<sup>4</sup> and environmental welfare.

Thus, if imperialist and neocolonial states trivialize the spiritual in politically consequential maneuvers even as they exploit and manipulate belief in the spirit world in performances that Taussig has elsewhere called “the magic of the state,”<sup>5</sup> the “spirit work” of Chicana writers and artists suggests that the trivialization and privatization of spiritual belief that is socially empowering to the exploited is, perhaps, [End Page 39] the most powerful sleight of hand of all. A politics of spirituality that views human and nonhuman as an interrelated web of sacred life force is inimical to ideologies of essential difference that justify subjugation, exploitation, and abuse of “racially” different peoples and other animate and inanimate life forms. Following Avery Gordon’s recent observations about the political and social significance of the ghostly



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traces that remain of people, events, and things, we might speak of the ghostly status of egalitarian forms of spirituality in U.S. culture, whose traces ultimately call for our engagement and transformation.<sup>6</sup>

Conjuring and reimagining traditions of spiritual belief upon whose cultural differences discourses of civilization and modernization have justified subjugation and devaluation are conscious acts of healing the cultural *susto*, that is, the “frightening” of spirit from one’s body-mind in the colonial and neocolonial ordeals, that results in the “in-between” state of *nepantla*, the postconquest condition of cultural fragmentation and social indeterminacy.<sup>7</sup> Put in perhaps more familiar terms, such identification works toward the reintegration of the psyche fragmented by the internalization of loathing of the native self, which Franz Fanon described so vitally for a decolonizing practice in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Braving differing degrees of cultural discontinuity with Amerindian traditions, and opposing a history of gendered vilification and attempted destruction of the “pagan” Indian, African, and Asian philosophical and spiritual world views, many contemporary Chicana writers and artists seek to remember, reimagine, and redeploy ideas and practices culled from these as critiques of and alternatives to male-dominated, Christian, Eurocentric, capitalist, and imperialist cultures. Citing the work of Paula Gunn Allen and Gloria Anzaldúa, Norma Alarcón writes:

For many writers the point is not so much to recover a lost “utopia” nor the “true” essence of our being, although, of course, there are those who long for the “lost origins,” as well as those who feel a profound spiritual kinship with the “lost”—a spirituality whose resistant political implications must not be underestimated, but refocused for feminist change. The most relevant point in the present is to understand how a pivotal indigenous portion of the *mestiza* past may represent a collective female experience as well as “the [End Page 40] mark of the Beast” within us—the maligned and abused indigenous woman. By invoking the “dark Beast” within and without, which many have forced us to deny, the cultural and psychic dismemberment that is linked to imperialist and sexist practices is brought into focus.

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From this perspective, Chicana writers and artists such as Ester Hernández, Santa Barraza, Yreina D. Cervántez, Patricia González, Celia Rodríguez, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Patti Valdez, Frances Salomé España, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Rosa Martha Villarreal, and Kathleen Alcalá engage in what is in fact *curandera* (healer) work: reclaiming and reformulating spiritual world views that are empowering to them as women, and that in that same gesture reimagine what the social role of art and the artist might be.<sup>8</sup> In this spirit work, Chicana writers and artists interrupt the reproduction of gendered, raced, and sexed politics of spirituality and of art. From a perspective of concern for social, global, and environmental justice, this kind of writing and art rejects politically disempowering European and Euroamerican narratives of the socially useless (i.e., economically unproductive), and thus marginal role of the writer/artist (see Bürger), and the commodification of art as signifier of cultural capital (see Bourdieu).

In numerous ways that include the invocation and reworking of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican notions of art and artmaking represented in glyphs, codices, and the figures of the *tlacuilo* (glyphmaker) and the *tlamatini* (sage, decoder of the glyphs), the Chicana artists and writers mentioned above are “spirit tongues” of a metadiscourse of art whose social role is more broadly conceived and engaged than that of hegemonic cultures. These writers and artists structure their work like the painter-scribes of Mesoamerica, particularly those of the immediate aftermath of the Spanish invasion, in that the glyphs they trace, like those painted by the Nahua *tlacuilo*, are signs that always point beyond the sign system itself to that which cannot be figured by it. Chicana work inscribing culturally different and politically oppositional views of art and spirituality points beyond Eurodominated languages and worldviews to the necessity of a more complex hermeneutics, one that is cross-cultural, interdisciplinary, and beyond sexist and heterosexist myopias. Thus, many Chicana artists and writers reenvision culturally [End Page 41] potent symbols of gendered, raced, and sexed spirituality, such as the Virgin Mary/*Virgen de Guadalupe* or demonized female Nahua deities such as Coatlicue, into “pre-” or postgendered, powerful and empowering images. They give voice to alternative spiritualities through works referencing beliefs culled from various and diasporic Third World cultures circulating in the United States, and/or through

creating very personal expressions of spirituality and sanctity, in writing, painting, altar and *caja* installations, performance, video, and other forms.

What is particularly relevant and unique to the “spirit glyphs” of the Chicanas named, and others like them today—particularly given the accelerated and transnational human and nonhuman ravaging by a seemingly omnipotent machine of insatiable greed—is their mapping of pathways beyond the alienation and disempowerment of nepantlism, indeed *back*, though not to some mythical Eden, sign of a hierarchical, jealous, punitive, and male God, but rather to some essential sense of personal wholeness, communal interdependence, purpose, and meaningfulness in the social, global, and cosmic web(s). The conscious identification with politically marginalized and differently spiritual knowledges that bicultural Chicana/os hold alongside many, many other peoples is hardly nostalgic or reproductive of detrimental racialist essentialisms as progressives fear: it is part of a broader attempt to decisively interrupt the dream of capitalist and imperialist civilizations and see *más allá*, beyond the present structurings of personal, communal, global, and cosmic relations that benefit crucially from our exile from the field of spiritual discourse.

### ‘Membering the Spirit

The politics of the spiritual for some Chicana/os is linked to a politics of memory, as has repeatedly been theorized by artists and thinkers of communities resisting the melting pot’s selective dissolution of cultural difference. But unless this be understood as a politically paralyzing nostalgia, and in the face of the cultural discontinuities that characterize much of Chicana/o culture, this is a tactic of remembering that has been understood in the work of the women mentioned above, as a reimagining and thus, as a reformulating of beliefs and practices. It is perhaps more precisely a politics of the will to remember: to maintain in one’s consciousness, to recall, and to reintegrate a spiritual [End Page 42] worldview about the interconnectedness of life, even if it is fragmented, circulating, as its pieces have, through colonial and neocolonial relations. Amalia Mesa-Bains, art critic and scholar, perhaps best known for her altar-installations, considers that,

It is through memory that we construct the bridge between the past and the present, the old and the new. The spiritual memory reflected in the works of contemporary Latino artists is a memory of absence constructed from losses endured in the destructive project of colonialism and its aftermath. This redemptive memory claims a broken reality that is made whole in the retelling. In this context, contemporary art is more than a mirror of history and belief, it is a construction of ideology. Art becomes a social imagination through which essential worldviews and identities are constructed, reproduced, and even redefined. Memory becomes the instrument of redefinition in a politicizing spirituality.

(9)

The hybrid spiritualities claimed and practiced in the work of the Chicanas named earlier are, paradoxically, decolonizing cultural appropriations, in part, because the traditions or contemporary practices from American Indian, U.S. Latino, Latin American, and African diasporic cultures from which they draw in their writing and art are politically oppositional to (neo)colonizing cultural and religious systems, but also because some of these traditions have not been altogether interrupted in the memory or practices of Chicana/o culture itself.<sup>9</sup> Cross-cultural borrowing and refashioning of this kind, a kind of “minority”/Third World postnational cultural environment from which culturally kindred *forms* are recycled<sup>10</sup> from (neo)colonizations’ “waste,” attempts to give expression to what is perceived at heart to be a common worldview. That worldview focuses upon the spiritual nature of all being, and thus its interconnectedness. It is a view ultimately at odds with the reigning capitalist culture of extreme exploitation of the planet and human beings, hierarchically ordered according to degrees of difference with respect to the dominant.

For Gloria Anzaldúa, in her culturally acupunctural<sup>11</sup> *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a “new *mestiza*” spirituality is inclusive and affirming of her multiple positionings as a feminist Chicana lesbian writer. The spiritual worldview, like the aesthetic of the book, “seems an assemblage, [End Page 43] a montage, a beaded work with several *letimotifs* and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance” (66) of diverse American Indian, African, and African diaspora beliefs and practices, recoded

patriarchal Christian and Aztec symbols (e.g., *Virgen de Guadalupe* and *Coatlicue*), and culturally relevant translations of archetypal psychology (expressed in her formulation of “the Coatlicue state”). Similarly, in the face of traditional, patriarchal Catholicism, Ana Castillo speaks of the right to craft spiritual practices from any traditions that make us “feel better, that is, stronger willed and self-confident” (147), including elements from that same belief system. While, in his essay in *Ceremony of Memory*, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto observes:

Creative reorganization of traditional religious systems from Indigenous and African religions continue in a dynamic process throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Within the United States, artists accentuating spiritual domains re-examine, reinterpret and redefine ancestral religious forms with multiple impulses; as counterparts to socio-political commentary, as symbolic and iconographic systems united to autobiographical exploration or as primal icons that illuminate and foreground social conditions. Contemporary artists reworking spiritual canons augment their power and beauty. New forms of spirituality reverberate with the presence and potency of an ancient living ethos expanded with modern signification.

(12)

Whether remembered through surviving traditional practices or reimagined and fused together from chosen traditions, invoking the spiritual in Chicana writing and art is a politically significant, socially transformative, and psychically healing practice. In considering the work of women such as Kathleen Alcalá, Gloria Anzaldúa, Santa Barraza, Ana Castillo, Yreina D. Cervántez, Sandra Cisneros, Frances Salomé España, Diane Gamboa, Ester Hernández, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Celia Rodríguez, Patricia Rodríguez, Patssi Valdez, and Rosa Martha Villarreal, to name a few among a much larger group of writers and artists, we are pushed even further beyond the increasingly familiar, if still relevant, observations about the survival, resistance, opposition, and transformative powers of the socially abject other. For what also calls for reckoning in the work of these and other Chicana *tlaminime*, [End Page 44] as they are redefining this word, is the very question of the spiritual, understood as the sacred and interconnected nature of self and world, and the empowering effects of that belief/knowledge. In their work, the reality of a politically significant, socially and materially embodied s/Spirit is consciously re-membered within it, which we are called to witness and act upon, alongside other historically specific and related issues of “race,” gender, sexuality, and class.

### Spirit Tongues: Glyphs, Codices, and *Tlaminime*

Chicana/o art practices in general are historically rooted in the 1960s reclamation of the spiritual within the Chicana/o Movement, as evidenced in nation-forming practices such as the manifesto, “*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*,” poetry like that of Alurista, the spiritual *mitos* of Teatro Campesino, writings such as Rudolfo Anaya’s novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, and countless pre-Columbian-themed murals and other visual art. The birth of Chicana/o consciousness through the reclamation and reimagining of the colonially despised Indian self and beliefs is well known in Chicana/o art and scholarship.<sup>12</sup> The work of Miguel León-Portilla, whose important body of scholarship recuperating the literary and philosophical brilliance of the pre-Columbian Nahuatl peoples can be read as part of the Mexican postrevolutionary project of rehabilitating the Indian legacy of a mestizo national identity in construction has been particularly significant in Chicana/o attempts to integrate the indigenous.<sup>13</sup> His studies of the philosophy and artistic traditions of the Nahuatl peoples, and his translations of pre- and postconquest codices recording Nahuatl belief and practices, greatly influenced Chicana/os in books such as his *Aztec Thought and Culture* (1956, Spanish; 1963, English translation) and *Los antiguos mexicanos a través de sus crónicas y cantares* (1961).<sup>14</sup> Distinguishing between the new tradition of the imperialist Aztecs who burned codices of conquered peoples, rewrote histories, and appropriated cultures and the older, Toltec tradition which they had displaced, and to which they were related, León-Portilla writes:

Alejados de la visión místico-guerrera de Tlacaé, fueron estos tlaminime nahuatl quienes elaboraron una concepción hondamente poética acerca del mundo, del hombre y [End Page 45] de la divinidad. . . . Valiéndose de una metáfora, de las muchas que posee la rica lengua náhuatl, afirmaron en incontables ocasiones que tal vez la única manera posible de decir palabras verdaderas en la tierra era por el camino de la poesía y el arte que son “flor y canto”. . . . La poesía y el arte en general, “flores y cantos”, son para los tlaminime, expresión oculta y velada que con las alas del símbolo y la metáfora puede llevar al hombre a

balbucir, proyectándolo más allá de sí mismo, lo que en forma misteriosa, lo acerca tal vez a su raíz. Parecen afirmar que la verdadera poesía implica un modo peculiar del conocimiento, fruto de auténtica experiencia interior, o si se prefiere, resultado de una intuición.

**(Los antiguos 124–26)**

(Removed from the mystico-warrior vision of Tlacaél, it was these Nahua *tlamatinime* who elaborated a deeply poetic conception of the world, [hu]man, and divinity. . . . Relying upon one of the many metaphors that the rich Náhuatl language possesses, they affirmed on innumerable occasions that perhaps the only possible way to speak truthful words on earth was through the path of poetry and art, which are “flower and song.” . . . Poetry and art, in general, “flowers and songs,” are for the *tlamatinime*, occult and veiled expressions that with the wings of symbol and metaphor can lead a [hu]man to stutter, projecting him/her beyond the self, which in mysterious form, brings him/her closer perhaps to his/her root. They appear to affirm that true poetry implies a peculiar mode of knowledge, fruit of an authentic interior experience, or if one prefers, the result of an intuition. [My translation])

Walter Mignolo has recently pointed to the significant cultural misperceptions that are present in postconquest translations of historically and culturally specific pre-Columbian material practices into the equally specific, European sixteenth-century concepts “*libro*” and “book.” In his view,

the Spanish and the Mexica had not only different material ways of encoding and transmitting knowledge but also—as is natural—different concepts of the activities of reading and [End Page 46] writing. The Mexicas put the accent on the act of observing and telling out loud the stories of what they were looking at (movements of the sky or the black and the red ink). The Spanish stressed reading the word rather than reading the world, and made the letter the anchor of knowledge and understanding. Contemplating and recounting what was on the painting (*amoxtili*) was not enough, from the point of view of the Spanish concept of reading, writing, and the book, to ensure correct and reliable knowledge.

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With respect to the distinction between the *tlacuilo* (“*escritores*”/ “scribes”) and *tlamatinime* (“*sabios*”/ “wise men”), also sometimes erased in translation, he writes:

Was the *tlamatinime* also a *tlacuilo*? Apparently not. Those who had the wisdom of the word were those who could “look” at the sky or at the painted books and interpret them, to tell stories based on their discerning of the signs. The oral narrative of the wise men seems to have had a social function as well as a rank superior to the *tlacuilo*, who was placed by Sahagún among those who were skilled craftsmen.

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While the crucial question of cultural differences Mignolo is mindful of does not seem to have been lost on writers like Anzaldúa and Moraga or artists like those in the antiquincentary *The Chicano Codices Show: Encountering Art of the Americas* (1992), interestingly, they have appropriated these concepts in ways that suggest the return of what may have been lost in Eurocentric translations. More often than not, they conflate *tlacuilo* and *tlamatinime* in their reimagining of both the writer and artist as glyph-makers; that is, as makers of signs that signify beyond themselves, to significations that are spiritually and politically interdependent and simultaneous, and that hold ancient, alternative knowledges with respect to dominant forms. Chicana artists’ collapse of glyph-makers and their sagely readers, the *tlamatinime*, operates through their perception of both through the metaphor of the divinely attuned artist as a “Toltec,” wise beyond technical mastery, to a deep sense of the sacred purpose of her or his material practices, and therefore able to move those who behold the work along in the life-long process of “making face, making soul.” <sup>15</sup> The Toltec or artist is in this way engaged in teaching and healing, in the sense of mediating greater [End Page 47] spiritual growth and well-being of the beholder. <sup>16</sup> Thus, the question raised by Chicana/o writing and art is the reverse of that posed by Mignolo: was the *tlacuilo* perhaps not also a *tlamatinime*? And a corollary: within the spiritual world view of Nahuatl culture that crucially informed “art” practices, did not the social role of the artist exceed that of merely glyph-maker? León-Portilla’s translations suggest that guiding the work of conscientious *tlacuilo* and *tlamatinime* was concern for the ultimate meaning of their life’s work. In this perception, the worthy *tlacuilo*, the “good” glyph-maker, must by necessity also be a spiritually guided sage. Conversely, the codices suggest that the *tlamatinime* was also a *tlacuilo*, schooled in the painting of glyphs, like other select members of society. <sup>17</sup>

When writers and artists refer to themselves as *tlamatini* and to their work as glyphs or codices of our own times, like Anzaldúa in *Borderlands*, the artists in *The Chicano Codices* show, and Moraga in “Codex Xeri,” they are reimagining art and artist along broader social parameters, for in themselves glyphs, codices, and the words “*tlacuilo*” and “*tlamatini*” are signs that point beyond modern, Eurocentric cultural conceptions of art and artist. They point to different systems of reading visual signs, that is, to different ways of knowing, and even more, to the insufficiency of one system of signs (visual, oral, performative) to convey meaning and “truths” fully. Old and new glyphs point to necessary semiotic counterparts. They call for broader cultural readings, like those constituted in the *tlamatini*’s performance of decipherment, that take into account the space and occasion, as well as the knowledge specifically coded in the pictographs or ideograms. <sup>18</sup> Glyphs rooted in Mesoamerican worldviews are signs meant to point beyond themselves to that which is outside of verbal and visual language, including to the realm of the spiritual. Art and writing by the Chicana women mentioned attempts to access the codices on some or all of these registers, as signs of alternative spiritual and material knowledges and practices.

New scholarship, like the collection in which Mignolo’s article appears, criticizes Eurocentric histories of writing that culminate in alphabetical systems, and has begun to consider the difference of Native American writing systems more positively, and to consider its implications for modern Western ways of knowing. In the estimation of Gordon Brotherston, for example, “*tlacuilloli*, that which is produced [End Page 48] with a brush-pen by the painter-scribe. . . . integrat[es] into one holistic statement what for us are the separate concepts of letter, picture, and arithmetic, [Mesoamerican iconic script] positively flouts received Western notions of writing” (50). Even more suggestively, philosopher and magician David Abram observes: “the glyphs which constitute the bulk of these ancient scripts [Chinese and Mesoamerican] continually remind the reading body of its inherence in a more-than-human field of meanings. As signatures not only of the human form but of other animals, trees, sun, moon, and landforms, they continually refer our senses beyond the strictly human sphere” (6).

Most precortesian *amoxtili* (painted, screenfold “books”) were destroyed during the Spanish Conquest in a devastation that has been compared to the burning of the library in Alexandria. <sup>19</sup> Most of the codices that are held in the West were written postconquest. Schooled in both their traditional Nahuatl culture and the Renaissance culture of written and visual representation in which the missionaries wished them to record their traditional knowledges (see Gruzinski), newly Hispanized “scribes” wrote/painted amidst the devastation and transformation of their cultures and their identities, indeed of their art and social function, in the postconquest state of *nepantla*. However, if the processes of colonialism in Mesoamerica involved the cultural and psychic alienation of the native self through the Catholic Church’s “deployment of the penitential system, with its sacramental confession, and most importantly, its imposition of self-forming tactics of introspection,” as Klor de Alva argues in “Contar vidas [Telling Lives]” (74), then the rebirth, so to speak, of the Chicana *tlamatini*, the keepers and imaginers of the kinds of native knowledges persecuted by the institutions of exploitative power, maps pathways beyond nepantlism, through “confessions” that like that of their Nahua ancestors, may also be read as testimonies of the failure of European governments and religions to fully displace native culture and belief systems and reconstitute their subjectivity through colonization.

### Beyond the *Susto* of *Nepantla*: Culture Cures

Chicana writing and art hybridizes the different cultural meanings and functions of preconquest “books,” or *amoxtili* (as imagined and understood through scholars like León-Portilla), postconquest codices, [End Page 49] and contemporary books and art work. As in the stylistically hybrid works of the first-generation, postconquest codices described by Serge Gruzinski, in Chicana writing and art we see the complex reworkings of the technologies and belief systems of the imposed dominating culture and the parallel inscription of alternative knowledges and practices. <sup>20</sup> What follows are sightings of the different ways in which *la cultura cura* (culture cures) in contemporary “spirit glyphs” of Chicana writing and visual art practices.

In Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, image and written or spoken word are inseparably linked, as image and spoken word are in the functioning of the Mesoamerican glyph (pictograph/ideogram). In a chapter titled "*Tilli, Tlapalli / The Path of the Red and Black Ink*," she writes that "[t]o write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice for the images," and that when writing, "it feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart—a Náhuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act" (73). "The stress of living with cultural ambiguity" also allows her, as a "mestiza writer," to be a "*nahual*, an agent of transformation, able to modify and shape primordial energy and therefore able to change herself and others into turkey, coyote, tree, or human" (74). From Anzaldúa's cultural perspective, writing is an image-making practice, that as such can indeed shape and transform what we imagine, are able to perceive, and are able to give material embodiment. Understood, therefore, is the great responsibility and sacredness of the very real and consequential "transformative power" wielded by the image-makers, which literally "makes face, makes soul" in a reading process understood to be part of a larger performance. Following Robert Plant Armstrong's study of the cultural difference and "power of affecting presence" of African masks and statues, Anzaldúa speaks of her work as "invoked art," a being imbued with spiritual presence and power, unlike art that concerns itself primarily with aesthetic and technical virtuosity:

My "stories" are acts encapsulated in time, "enacted" every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and "dead" objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think [sic] of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a "who" or a "what" and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations [End Page 50] of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be "fed," *la tengo que bañar y vestir*.

When invoked in rite, the object/event is "present"; that is, "enacted," it is both a physical thing and the power that infuses it. It is metaphysical in that it "spins its energies between gods and humans" and its task is to move the gods. This type of work dedicates itself to managing the universe and its energies. . . . Invoked art is communal and speaks of everyday life. It is dedicated to the validation of humans; that is, it makes people hopeful, happy, secure, and it can have negative effects as well, which propel one towards a search for validation.

(67)

Anzaldúa understands the image-making process not only through the sacred and shamanic aspects of the *tlaminime/tlacuilo*'s path of writing and wisdom that the red and black inks signify, but also through James Hillman's archetypal psychology in *Re-Visioning Psychology*, from whom she also selectively draws in conceptualizing identity as multiple, and in reimagining the role of art and artist. In an interesting resonance with Mesoamerican thought, for example, Hillman writes: "Because our psychic stuff is images, image-making is a *via regia*, a royal road to soul-making. The making of soul-stuff calls for dreaming, fantasizing, imagining. . . . [T]o be in touch with soul means to live in sensuous connection with fantasy. To be in soul is to experience the fantasy in all realities and the basic reality of fantasy" (23). Like Hillman's, Anzaldúa's interest in the image is both as sign of the language of the soul and as mediator of the growth of the soul or soul-making.

Her truly important book may itself be thought of as a glyph pointing beyond the cultural and psychological location of *nepantla* by seeing that "in between" space *al revés*, in reverse: as powerful, indeed, as emblematic of the nature of being and meaning. Her perception of the greater meaning of the resonances in different kinds of experiences of marginalization (e.g., geographical, cultural, psychological, spiritual, and sexual borderlands) is a politically significant re-envisioning of interrelated cultural discourses of history, location, and identity that produce hierarchical orderings of difference. As the title of the book suggests, the borderlands are not invoked as yet another valuable, but [End Page 51] peripheral, resource in the center's production of meaning. Rather, "borderlands" becomes a sign of the centrality of the marginalized, the mutable, and the unarticulated in the construction of fuller, and not merely partial and self-reflecting, knowledges and identities. Thus, through the glyph of the borderlands, Anzaldúa points away from too literal an identification with the signs of individual and collective identities, toward ways of knowing that allow for the complexity of that which exceeds language and which, crucially, allows us to re-envision other versions of self and reality. To this end, she also returns to the center of our vision the importance of marginalized ways of knowing through our spirits. "*La facultad*," for example, and

other forms of “inner knowledge,” affirm the “divine within” (50), as well as the “supernatural” (49) or “the spirit world” (38), and represent alternative forms of perception (“seeing” 39, 42, 45) and “other mode[s] of consciousness” (37), and thus, other epistemologies and paths of knowledge (37, 42) than the rational as it is understood and privileged in Euroamerican and European dominant cultures. <sup>21</sup>

The widely circulating *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* by Sandra Cisneros, offers another interesting refiguration of the glyph. The story “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” itself functions as an ex-voto, the visual and written sign left by the faithful as material testimony of the miraculous, that is, of the presence and intervention of spiritual power. <sup>22</sup> The story is thus made up of the different testimonies of faith in the spiritual, as represented by various saints, including the mestiza *Virgen de Guadalupe*, long since redefined by Chicanas through the Mesoamerican goddess Tonantzin, an aspect of Coatlicue. <sup>23</sup> One such testimony is crafted by Chayo, disaffected from Catholicism, and particularly from its oppression of women through the image and discourse of “Mary the mild.” She writes a letter to the Virgin of Guadalupe, bearing witness to the huge *milagrito* (little miracle) of a newfound and empowering faith:

I don't know how it all fell in place. How I finally understood who you are. . . . When I could see you in all your facets, all at once the Buddha, the Tao, the true Messiah, Yahweh, Allah, the Heart of the Sky, the Heart of the Earth, the Lord of the Near and Far, the Spirit, the Light, the Universe, I could love you, and, finally, learn to love me.

(128) [End Page 52]

The recuperation of a spirituality empowering to women not being one of the usually celebrated miracles in Latin American and U.S. Latina/o communities where *mestizo*-identity sways towards the Eurocentric, Chayo cannot choose from the common stock of human-body part and animal medallions referring to the afflicted and now healed self or property, but must create her own image or *milagrito* to accompany her letter of gratitude. Thus, in an eloquent and feminist glyph, Chayo offers her braid of hair, symbol of her body's gendering and racialization, in a sacrifice that understandably leaves her “heart buoyant” (125).

“Codex Xeri,” published originally in *The Chicano Codices: Encountering Art of the Americas* and then in *The Last Generation: Prose & Poetry*, offers another important re-articulation of pre-Columbian notions of art and artmaking. Cherríe Moraga specifically identifies herself and these two writings with the last generation of conquest-era *tlaminime* that not only witnessed the subjugation of their world, but more positively, that succeeded in transmitting their world views through the codices they left, as her work exemplifies. In the Introduction to *The Last Generation*, Moraga figures her writing as prayer, codex, prophecy, “a resurrection of the ancient in order to construct the modern,” as picture book, as “queer mixture of glyphs,” and as writing that responds to the political urgency of the times. For her, the prophetic, seeing with the mystical third eye (137), is the politically significant heart of writing and art making, particularly in the present times where selfishness, violence, and greed could make this the planet's last generation. Thus, she writes:

As a Latina artist I can choose to contribute to the development of a docile generation of would-be Republican “Hispanics” loyal to the United States, or to the creation of a force of “disloyal” americanos who subscribe to a multicultural, multilingual, radical re-structuring of América. Revolution is not only won by numbers, but by visionaries, and if artists aren't visionaries, then we have no business doing what we do.

(56)

Like Anzaldúa, her invocation of the *tlaminime*, glyphs, and codices, is not a nostalgic inscription of cultural difference meant as a sign of resistance to cultural imperialism, but rather through these, Moraga [End Page 53] attempts to “disenchant” and re-empower artists through the recognition of the political power of their vision as it is externalized in their work. In “Codex Xeri,” which closes both the exhibition catalog and her own book, she states:

The Chicano scribe remembers, not out of nostalgia but out of hope. She remembers in order to envision. She looks backward in order to look forward to a world founded not on greed, but on respect for the sovereignty of

nature. . . .

As it was for the tlamatinime centuries ago, the scribe's task is to interpret the signs of the time, read the writing on barrio walls, decode the hieroglyphs of street violence, unravel the skewed message of brown-on-brown crime and sister-rape. The Chicano codex is *our* book of revelation. It is the philosopher's stone, serpentine and regenerative. It prescribes our fate and releases us from it. It understands the relationship between darkness and dawn. "*Mira que te has de morir. Mira que no sabes cuándo.*"

(190–91) <sup>24</sup>

"Codex Makers" are therefore also *tlamatinime*, whose tasks are to remember, envision, and inscribe their readings of the meaning of the cultural signs of their day in illuminating and transformative ways.

In Frances Salomé España's videos, *El Espejo/The Mirror* (1987), *Anima* (1989), and *The Confessions Trilogy* (1997), which includes *Spitfire*, *Vivir*, and *Nepantla*, a space imbued with spirit is created, or perhaps facilitated, if we follow Andrei Tarkovsky's comparison of his filmic craft to that of "sculpting in time," where the being within the material is allowed to emerge and it is the artist's job to cut away the excess as much as it is to envision the final work's form within the marble (qtd. in **Tucker 260**). España's video art might be said to record such sightings of spirit. <sup>25</sup> If the colonial and neocolonial photographic/filmic eye historically "steals" or occludes the spirit of American Indian and Third World subjects in visual narratives that render them objects in a European discourse of otherness, España's video work operates through the opposite principal. From an experimental poetics, España's film language returns spirit to the tribe, <sup>26</sup> allowing us to perceive spiritual presence and power, and within this culturally transformative framework, illuminates Latina womanhood in its complexity, integrity, and beauty. [End Page 54]



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**Figure 1a.**

Images from Frances Salomé España's *Nepantla*, from *The Confessions Trilogy*. (1997, video).



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**Figure 1b.**

Images from Frances Salomé España's *Nepantla*, from *The Confessions Trilogy*. (1997, video).

of women, particular gestures, and culturally resonant symbols are slowly, purposefully returned to over and over again, thus constructing meaning in rich, glyph-like fashion as oblique and multiply layered. España's *Trilogy*, like the other two video works mentioned above, allows us to look again, to look more carefully, and perhaps as well to perceive more intuitively, with a greater range of intelligences at work than those sanctioned in dominant cultures. The last piece of the trilogy, *Nepantla*, for example, might be more accurately described as a third *acercamiento*, as another and a different approach to the imagemaking of Latinas in relation to *Spitfire* and *Vivir* rather than their resolution. As in the first two videos of the trilogy, in *Nepantla*, a "live" woman and a historically received image of Latina femaleness shadow each other, their identity articulated and disarticulated in a resonant gesture. Here, viewed in slow motion, a Los Angeles-style, punkish Latina dances, chain-clad arms flailing in an image reminiscent of an *ánima en pena*, a shackled female soul amidst the flames of purgatory (**figure 1a**). The contemporary Latina, however, moves with pleasure on her face as she looks into the camera. In a white, fifties-style party dress, black high-heeled platform sandals, dark makeup, leather belts and chains, she appears a kind of urban angel, at once powerful and vulnerable. Another scene shows her moving away from a white wall upon which hangs a black girdle (**figure 1b**). Through repetition in slow motion and freezing at different moments, that same movement begins to look and read differently. It begins to appear that she is stuck, for "every time" she steps away, she is sucked back into a space where that black girdle is in full view again and increasingly visible (to some readers) as a symbol of bodily and social constrictions. While clearly not concerned with constructing linear narratives or new paradigmatic images of Latina women, España's grounded angel suggests alternative narratives to the culturally loaded and gendered image of a penitent soul represented as female. Perhaps the angelic is subjected to the purgatory of *nepantla* because of a flesh coded sinful in traditionally Christian, male-dominated, Eurocentric cultures.



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Figure 2.  
 Yreina D. Cervántez, *Nepantla* (lithograph, 22" × 17").



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Figure 3.

Yreina D. Cervántez, *Mi Napanla* (lithograph, 22" × 17").



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**Figure 4.**  
Yreina D. Cervántez, *Beyond Napanla* (lithograph, 22" × 17").

Yreina Cervántez's *Napanla* (1995) lithograph triptych (**figures 2–4**), like España's, destabilizes racist and sexist histories of representation [**End Page 55**] that inform the field of visual arts in which she works. She too reinscribes alternative and healing visions of reality that can further the making of face and soul for both minority- and dominant-culture viewers. The first piece introduces nepantlism as the ongoing struggle between two cultural legacies, as revealed in their different ways of seeing: that of an ostensibly universal, European scientific perspective that measures difference in descending order against the standard of European man, and that of American Indian world views, represented by several objects symbolic of the spiritual nature of all being, such as a feather, sage, and the Nahua glyph *ollin*, signifying harmoniously balanced differences. The image of a humanoid skeleton on all fours, repeated throughout the lithograph, brings to mind racialist narratives about the unequal evolutionary development of humans and cultures. The pretensions to objectivity of such culturally biased views and their generalization are revealed in the reproduction of a lithograph from *The Annals of San Francisco* (1855), presumably illustrating the “civilized and employed” Indian, the “Partly civilized Indian,” and “A Wild Indian,” as the caption states. Directly beneath that image, the reproduction of a newspaper clipping reports on California Governor Pete Wilson's anti-immigration politics, accompanied by a photograph of protestors demonstrating against Proposition 187. Floating somewhere between these two images is a passage from León-Portilla's *Endangered Cultures*, which reads:

*Conceptual Framework And Case Identification*

The violent attacks against the indigenous religion and traditions, the death of the gods, and the difficulty in accepting the new teachings as true had already affected the people deeply and had brought about, as a consequence, the appearance of nepantlism. The concept of nepantlism, “to remain in the middle,” one of the greatest dangers of culture contact ruled by the desire to impose change, retains its full significance, applicable to any meaningful understanding of similar situations.

Further text from *Endangered Cultures* appears beneath a photograph of student protestors at UCLA, in the lower left hand of the lithograph, as does the Nahua glyph, *ollin*, symbol of balanced dualities: [**End Page 60**]

In an attempt to escape nepantlism, even while amid the dangers that continue to threaten its onset, the Chicanos' response and their aim are to define their identity as a base from which to orient their actions and their interactions, and thus to make their demands heard.

A large portion of the lithograph is occupied by a drawing of the artist's upper body, her face looking directly out at the viewer, and holding up and perhaps out, a sprig of sage, an herb used in many healing ways, including purification ceremonies. Beneath her is the drawing of a feather. Above her, a drawing of a clay mask from about 1000

B.C. unearthed in Tlatlilco, Mexico, one of the oldest records of the perspective (León-Portilla, *La filosofía* fig. 17) of the balanced duality of life and death. Above this image, and rather dwarfed by it, is a perspective schema of the type developed during the Renaissance by artists as an attempt to rationalize the artistic point of view. <sup>27</sup>

Various images representing the artist appear as a composite self-portrait in the second lithograph, *Mi Nepantla*. The most prominent of these is from a computerized photograph of the artist in which her eyes are closed, as if in meditation. On her cheeks she bears glyphs associated with Coyolxauqui, the warrior daughter of Coatlicue, dismembered by her brother, Tezcatlipoca, and re-membered in the figure of the moon. At the level of her brain is a ghostly image from *Nepantla*, here in blue ink, of the skeleton of the less-than-human figure, that, from a racist perspective and her internalization of it, must also represent her. Within the humanoid's view is the word "DECOLONIZATION" against a red field. Alongside the photographic image of the artist's face is the typeset word "Perspective," and, as a kind of mirror image of this, handwritten in Spanish, and underlined in red, "*no es mi perspectiva.*" Incorporating written texts as in the other two pieces, this lithograph contains two poems, "*Como Unión*" (Like Union/ I Eat Union) and its culturally different translation, "Come Union," by Los Angeles poet Gloria Enedina Álvarez, as well as a portion from Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* on the new mestiza's tolerance for ambiguity and transformation of contradiction.

Another cultural text whose reproduction signifies contradiction in the self-portrait is an engraving by one of the "fathers" of the rationalization of perspective, Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), in which a seated [End Page 61] European male scientifically draws the reclining figure of a seminude woman through a "window" grid. Cervántez comments ironically on the Eurocentric and male perspective recorded in the lithograph by juxtaposing a photograph of herself with the female nude's head. The word "Nepantla" is handwritten in red, directly beneath the figure of the woman. Below this is another perspective schema occupied by the Nahuatl glyph for the physically and spiritually dead: a bound, veiled *bulto* (bundle). At the lower right border of the lithograph, and pacing out and away from it, is the image of Cervántez's own *nagualito*, or animal/spirit helper, the jaguar. Other images also appear here, among these, the drawing of the artist from the first piece that is repeated with some variations in the other two lithographs, of her looking out at the viewer, sage in hand.

In *Beyond Nepantla*, the image that dominates our view is a circle made by the spiral of the feathered serpent, the glyph of Quetzalcoatl, symbol of both wisdom and the arts, and the unity of the spiritual and the materialized. <sup>28</sup> The symbol of the circle brings to mind Paula Gunn Allen's observations regarding the difference between Christian European and American Indian perspectives in *The Sacred Hoop*:

Another difference between these two ways of perceiving reality lies in the tendency of the American Indian to view space as spherical and time as cyclical, whereas the non-Indian tends to view space as linear and time as sequential. The circular concept requires all "points" that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function, while the linear model assumes that some "points" are more significant than others. In the one, significance is a necessary factor of being in itself, whereas in the other, significance is a function of placement on an absolute scale that is fixed in time and space.

(59)

Other objects representing different Indian cultures also mark this last piece, including an *ollin* glyph and the image in reverse of the artist holding the healing herb. The three "kinds" of Indians referred to in *Nepantla* reappear, ordered according to degrees of Europeanization, but now contextualized from Indian cultural perspectives represented both by the images described and others that dominate the lithograph.

While the effects of colonial histories and continued neocolonial [End Page 62] practices are as difficult to erase as the inscriptions upon stone made in the lithographic process, Cervántez's work suggests that perhaps what they represent or narrate may be transformed in viewing them from the nonhierarchical, circular perspectives of American Indian and other cultures. Indeed, perception and meaning are constructed in the *Nepantla* series in multiple layers and through the signifying systems of different cultures, in a process that, like that of *Borderlands*, argues for the value of expanding

our perspectives, particularly with respect to cultural difference. Finally, perhaps, Cervántez's work operates as an offering, hybridizing or broadening dominant cultural and visual politics under the glyph of balanced dualities.

### *Más Allá: Cosmic Cruising*



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**Figure 5.**  
*Mis Madres/My Mothers*. © 1986 Ester Hernandez.

The path beyond both nepantlism and Eurocentrism in Cervántez's *Nepantla* series thus appears to be in the re-viewing of humanist cultural awareness from a broader perspective of the sacred interconnectedness of all being, here embodied in Amerindian cultures, a re-viewing that describes many world views, including contemporary nondominant European views and historically earlier ones. Beyond historically specific cultural differences, Ester Hernandez also works to restore at the center a perspective of larger consciousness. *Mis Madres* (1986) and *Cosmic Cruise/Paseo Cósmico* (1990) represent American Indian and Latina women at the center of the cosmos. In *Mis Madres* (**figure 5**), an American Indian or mestiza Elder holds up the planet in her left hand. She glows, made up of the very stuff of the stars and the cosmos around her. The size and silhouette of her figure convey a sense of sacredness about her that is reinforced by her celestial pigmentation. Hernández's silkscreen inscribes into the cultural consciousness of the beholder the existence and, indeed, the centrality and sacredness of the American Indian, the female, and the Elder.



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**Figure 6.**  
*Cosmic Cruise/Paseo Cósmico*. © 1990 Ester Hernandez.

the artist's mother as the first woman to drive in her agricultural labor camp, and then reinscribes the symbol of this narrative against the cosmos, symbol of time and space realities different from dominant notions of these with respect to our planet. The historically specific memory of the significance of the Chicana female-driven [End Page 63] and occupied Model-T in *Cosmic Cruise*, like all of the works referred to thus far in this essay, might perhaps be read simultaneously as a glyph of the greater spiritual significance of our movements through culturally multiple notions of time-space.

The truly healing work of Chicana *tlaminime*, such as those I have named earlier in the essay, or briefly discussed in this last section, indeed redefines the social role of art and artist in more complex, more ambitious, and more politically and spiritually significant ways than are culturally dominant in the United States and other parts of the [End Page 64] world. They create culturally hybrid art practices that I have signified through the glyph and codex that are neither about nostalgia nor mere resistance to cultural imperialism, but rather about transforming a familiar present whose reality is destructive to individual, community, and planet. The visionary and prophetic quality of their work is politically and historically significant, as is their returning to our field of vision a politically oppositional spiritual consciousness of the interconnection and meaningfulness of all being.

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#### Laura E. Pérez

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#### Acknowledgment

I would like to express my gratitude to Susana Loza and Anna Fenner for their research assistance, and to John Strohmeier, Frances Salomé España, Yreina D. Cervántez, José D. Saldívar, Jorge Klor de Alva, Norma Alarcón, Irene Lara, and the UCHRI Transnational Globalization and Gender Group for support and dialogue.

#### Footnotes

**1.** For communications theorist H. L. Goodall, Jr.,

Spirit, it seems, is best read as a sign that means to be taken as deeper clue. . . . To move toward the unifying awareness of Spirit in our ordinary, everyday texts; social texts; and communal texts is to grant voice to the creative powers of imagination and interpretation, from which emerges a fuller body for experiential knowing capable of sustaining not only a rhetoric for the ordinary, the ritualized, and the rational, but one ready to embrace a poetics of the extraordinary, the intuited, the felt, and the lived. From this unifying awareness comes the possibility for genuine holistic dialogue, a dialogue capable of learning from the body of experience without denying to Others what has not been bodily experienced for oneself, a dialogue in which the full measure of truth is found only in the quality of our lives.

(213)

**2.** For, as Janice Hocker Rushing puts it: "Spirit was thus revealed by Nietzsche to have died, by Marx as a pretense to maintain political domination by the ruling classes, by Freud as an illusory and neurotic hedge against the finality of death, by feminists as an excuse for male domination, and by poststructuralists as the illusory transcendental signifier" (qtd. in [Goodall 212](#)).

**3.** In Paula Gunn Allen's view,

We as feminists must be aware of our history on this continent. We need to recognize that the same forces that devastated the gynarchies of Britain and the Continent also devastated the ancient African civilizations, and we must know that those same materialistic, antispiritual forces are presently engaged in wiping out the same gynarchical values, along with the peoples who adhere to them, in Latin America. I am convinced that those wars were and continue to be about the imposition of patriarchal civilization over the holistic, pacifist, and spirit-based gynarchies they supplant. To that end the wars of imperial conquest have not been solely or even mostly waged over the land and its resources, but they have been fought within the bodies, minds, and hearts of the people of the earth for dominion over them. I think this is the reason traditionalists say we must remember our origins, our cultures, our histories, our mothers and grandmothers, for without that memory, which implies continuance rather than nostalgia, we are doomed to engulfment by a paradigm that is fundamentally inimical to the vitality, autonomy, and self-empowerment essential for satisfying, high-quality life.

(214)

**4.** As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states,

Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of “the white race” or “the black race,” “the Jewish race” or “the Aryan race,” we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors. Nevertheless, our conversations are replete with usages of race which have their sources in the dubious pseudoscience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. . . . The sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term “race” has both described and *inscribed* differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, fidelity, and so forth. The relation between “racial character” and these sorts of characteristics has been inscribed through tropes of race, lending the sanction of God, biology, or the natural order to even presumably unbiased descriptions of cultural tendencies and differences.

**(“Editor’s Introduction” 4–5)**

**5.** See Taussig, *The Magic of the State*.

**6.** “The ghost always registers the actual ‘degraded present’ in which we are inextricably entangled *and* the longing for the arrival of a future, entangled certainly, but ripe in the plenitude of nonsacrificial freedoms and exuberant unforeseen pleasures. . . . [b]ecause ultimately haunting is about how to transform a shadow of a life into an undiminished life” (**Gordon 207–08**).

**7.** “The words of a Náhuatl Indian from the middle of the sixteenth century refer to the risks, so closely related to cultural identity, that can present themselves in attempts at inducing acculturation. A Dominican friar, Diego Durán, had reprimanded a native for his behavior, pointing out that it was also in discord with the ancient indigenous customs and morals. The wise old native responded: ‘Father, don’t be afraid, for we are still “*nepantla*” [sic]—in other words, ‘in the middle,’ or as he later added, ‘we are neutral’” (**León-Portilla, *Endangered Cultures* 10**).

**8.** “Perhaps the most prominent contemporary archetypal heroine in Chicana literature is the *curandera/partera* (healer/midwife) who is also the *bruja* (witch). As do most complex symbols, the *curandera/bruja* encodes both positive and negative attributes. . . . The *curandera* possesses intuitive and cognitive skills, and her connection to and interrelation with the natural world is particularly relevant. She emerges as a powerful figure throughout Chicano writing” (**Rebolledo 83**). Also interesting to bear in mind with respect to *curanderismo* are the conclusions of a study of Mexican American “folk” healing practices: “Indeed, the study of *curanderismo* questions specific techniques, philosophies, and goals of contemporary dynamic psychotherapy, which may have developed more for their compatibility with the ethos and value system of our own [sic] culture than for any well-founded scientific reason” (**Kiev 179**). Kiev later states, “Finally, there is no evidence that dynamic psychotherapy is of more value than such forms of treatment as *curanderismo*” (183).

**9.** “Like the ancients, I worship the rain god and the maize goddess, but unlike my father I have recovered their names” (**Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 90**).

**10.** With respect to the discursive power of what she calls “third-degree kitsch” in postmodern art that incorporates religious imagery, Celeste Olalquiaga notes that

Besides imploding the boundaries of art and reality, the third degree carries out an active transformation of kitsch. Taking religious imagery both for its kitsch value and its signifying and iconic strength, it absorbs the icon in full and recycles it into new meanings. These meanings are related to personal spiritual experiences, recalling users’ relationships to first-degree [kitsch] imagery, except that the first-degree images are part of a given cultural heritage and as such they are readily available and their usage is automatic. Third-degree kitsch, on the other hand, appropriates this tradition from “outside,” searching for an imagery that will be adequate to its expressive needs. . . . Instead of appropriation annihilating what it absorbs, the absorbed invades the appropriating system and begins to constitute and transform it. . . . Rather than of active or passive cultures, one can now speak of mutual appropriation.

(52–54)

**11.** From Richard feather Anderson’s “Geomancy”:

Until recent times every structure was situated with regard for the patterns of biomagnetic energy within the earth’s body. Geomancers were employed to maintain the most beneficial flow of ch’i within the veins of the earth’s body, variously known as dragon paths or energy ley-lines. It was taboo in earth-centered cultures to sever these vital channels, for the same reason that it is suicidal to cut our own arteries. Where the flow of earth ch’i has stagnated, “earth acupuncture” procedures can be used to stimulate the ch’i. Some earth mysteries researchers believe that the megalithic standing stones of Europe may have functioned as acupuncture needles for the planet.

(198)

**12.** See Klor de Alva, “California Chicano”; Ybarra-Fausto, “Alurista’s Poetics”; and Anaya.

**13.** My thanks to Norma Alarcón for reminding me of the significance of the political climate in which León-Portilla’s scholarship arose.

**14.** See Klor de Alva, "California Chicano." The scholar's translations in *Aztec Thought and Culture* were also quoted in an important anthology, *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature* edited by Valdez and Steiner, in the section "The Toltec (The Artist): He Makes Things Live" (347–53).

**15.** See **León-Portilla, *Los antiguos 146–54***. This is a concept that Anzaldúa appropriates and redefines in the anthology she edited, *Making Face, Making Soul*. "'Making faces' is my metaphor for constructing one's identity. '[U]sted es el modeador [sic] de su carne tanto como el de su alma.' You are the shaper of your flesh as well as of your soul. According to the ancient *nahuas*, one was put on earth to create one's 'face' (body) and 'heart' (soul). To them, the soul was a speaker of words and the body a doer of deeds" (xvi). It is interesting to compare these understandings with that of Roger Lipsey in *An Art of Our Own*:

Oneself as one might be. The reminder of what one has forgotten is a call to action. The spiritual in art offers a transient experience of intensity, of a larger world and larger self. One begins to care again, reawakened to old longings, to remorse, perhaps to new thoughts and feelings, almost always to a clarified sense of direction. This blend of hope and remorse is a sign that one has encountered the spiritual in art. . . . The spiritual in art makes its contribution to the pilgrim's halting progress. It is a resource for those who look beyond, understand that there is work to do, and undertake it.

(16)

**16.** On the Toltec/ artist see **León-Portilla, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality 208***; on the *tlaminime*, see **León-Portilla, *Los antiguos 62, 123–25***; and ***Native Mesoamerican Spirituality 200***.

**17.** As Joyce Markus points out,

The *calmecac* (literally, "row of houses") was a set of priestly residences associated with the temples of Tenochtitlán. Children of nobles were brought here by their parents to receive an education in the priesthood. Chronicles differ on whether children entered the *calmecac* at age four or fifteen. Apparently, some promising commoner children could be enrolled by parents who wanted them to enter the priesthood, but they appear to have been a very small minority. In the Florentine Codex, Sahagún makes clear the association of the *calmecac* with the education of well-born members of the society.

The *calmecac* curriculum apparently included astrology, star lore, divination and the calendars, hieroglyphic writing, and "life's history" (*nemiliz tlacuilolli*); it is here that future scribes (not to mention priests and diviners) were started on their career trajectory. All nobles, including future rulers, received their education in one of the six or more *calmecac* located in Tenochtitlán. Following some years of education there, all those entering administration, law, or other important governmental positions would share a working knowledge of those subjects, including the use and role of the hieroglyphic writing.

(50–51)

**18.** As Paula Gunn Allen states,

The formal structure of a ceremony is as holistic as the universe it purports to reflect and respond to, for the ceremony contains other forms such as incantation, song (dance), and prayer, and it is itself the central mode of literary expression from which all allied songs and stories derive. The Lakota view all the ceremonies as related to one another in various explicit and implicit ways, as though each were one face of a multifaceted prism. This interlocking of the basic forms has led to much confusion among non-Indian collectors and commentators, and this complexity makes all simplistic treatments of American Indian literature more confusing than helpful. Indeed, the non-Indian tendency to separate things from one another—be they literary forms, species, or persons—causes a great deal of unnecessary difficulty with and misinterpretation of American Indian life and culture. It is reasonable, from an Indian point of view, that all literary forms should be interrelated, given the basic idea of unity and relatedness of all the phenomena of life. Separation of parts into this or that category is not agreeable to American Indians, and the attempt to separate essentially unified phenomena results in distortion.

(62)

**19.** "Thanks to Christian incendiarism and the ravages of time, the once copious libraries of these books are now represented by no more than thirty or so texts" (**Brotherston 50**).

**20.** Gruzinski writes,

[T]he effort to unite two cultures (often turning the conquerors' culture to the advantage of the conquered) is probably easiest to detect in the realm of images and pictographs. The creation of a twin system of expression—pictographic and alphabetical—was not merely a sign of compromise or collaboration. It also represented discovery of new formal strategies for preserving two living traditions side by side. At the same time that they mastered Latin and massively adopted writing, painter-writers were preserving and enriching their pictographic heritage.

(158–60)

**21.** For discussions of the spiritual concerns of *Borderlands*, see **Ramírez (185–87)** and Cáliz-Montoro.

**22.** Julio Ramos's observations on the ex-voto are useful here:

El género del exvoto se inscribe en una economía de la reciprocidad, del intercambio de dones, y como tal trabaja fundamentalmente la mediación, la articulación entre distintos niveles de órdenes discontinuos. . . . Como si de algún modo la temática del viaje y de sus interrupciones condensara las condiciones mismas de producción del género y su insistente reflexión sobre el límite—límite entre la vida y la muerte del sujeto accidentado—así como sobre la discontinuidad y la mediación entre tiempos y espacios diferenciados. Se trata entonces, en varios sentidos, de una forma que a lo largo de su historia (que por cierto antecede la colonización de América) registra lúcidamente el devenir de distintas concepciones de la estabilidad y el desequilibrio, de la causalidad y la contingencia, del accidente y la ley, del desastre y de la intervención de las mismas prácticas pictórico-narrativas como modos de contener y reparar la catástrofe.

(7–8)

**23.** See, for example, “From Coatlicue to La Llorona: Literary Myths and Archetypes” in **Rebolledo 49–81**.

**24.** “See that you shall die. See that you don't know when.” Quoted from Amalia Mesa-Bains's art piece *Codex Amalia. Venus Envy*, reproduced in **The Chicano Codices (15)**.

**25.** On España's work, see Fregoso, Noriega, and Huaco-Nuzum. My discussion of España's video art draws upon an earlier version of this portion of the essay.

**26.** This is a reading of mine that España found useful in describing her work in “Nepantla'd Out”:

As a woman, and particularly as a Chicano artist, the challenge to articulate perception has hardly ever fallen easily upon me. Making fire is making fire. I seek new parameters within film and electronic media because those that do exist have posed severe creative limitations, borne of a different mood and world view. Trial and disgust in the editing room over industry codes and film capital standards forced me to give it up and speak in my own tongue. The challenge to reposition, begin transition, return spirit to the tribe embraced additional dimensions: adapting film language so that it more accurately articulates my vision—experimenting with approach until the artist's tools interpret form and style in ways more applicable to my own experience, in ways more relevant to me.

(177)

**27.** I borrow the term “perspective schema” from **Elkins (9)**, who cautions,

Perspective proper, including its many methods and sometimes eccentric disciples, is thought to be a single thing, discovered in one form by Brunelleschi and elaborated upon by later workers. Behind this notion is the idea that perspective began in one place, Florence, and more or less at one time (1413–1435). This sense of a unified origin is one of several unities that play parts in the modern concept of perspective. I suggest not that it is mistaken or that perspective has miscellaneous or exotic origins but rather that this unified origin was not perceived as such in the Renaissance and that Renaissance artists and writers saw many techniques where we see a single discovery.

(8)

Thus, he continues, “An interesting sign of the presence in our scholarship of an informal definition of ‘meaningless’ perspective unrelated to the passage of time is a particular kind of perspective picture that I will call a *perspective schema*” (9).

**28.** My thanks to the artist for discussing her series with me and clarifying many of the images, as well as for sharing relevant readings with me.

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