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# Chicana Aesthetics: A View of Unconcealed Alterities and Affirmations of Chicana Identity through Laura Aguilar's Photographic Images

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## Abstract

*In this paper I will argue that Chicana feminist artist Laura Aguilar, Alma Lopez, Laura Molina, and Yreina D. Cervantez established a continuing counter-narrative of cultural hegemony and Western essentialized hegemonic identification. Through artistic expression they have developed an oppositional discourse that challenges racial stereotypes, discrimination, socio-economic inequalities, political representation, sexuality, femininity, and hegemonic discourse. I will present a complex critique of both art and culture through an inquiry of the production and evaluation of the Chicana feminist artist, their role as the artist, and their contributions to unfixing the traditional and marginalized feminine. I argue that third wave Chicana feminist artists have developed a unique representational arena of the feminine or unfeminine that continues to challenge Western hegemonic imagery and is engaged in a more complex Chicana feminist epistemological and theoretical aesthetic. I will take a semiotic approach to contextualize Chicana feminist artists Laura Aguilar, Alma Lopez, Laura Molina, and Yreina D. Cervantez. I argue aesthetic portrayals of the Chicana body; in addition I will analyze art works for a visual representation of oppositional discourse in Chicana feminist aesthetics, in which they reveal and reconstruct the female body, reclaim "space", and evoke reclamation identification by revealing new interpretations, and revealing perspectives of Chicana identity disrupting Western hegemonic discourse, thus putting Chicana Feminist Theory into practice.*

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In Laura Aguilar's black and white photographs particularly, *Still and Motion*, 1999, the viewer observes a beautiful and poetic perspective of large female bodies set against the backdrop of natural landscapes. Aguilar consciously moves away from societally normative images of Chicana female bodies and disassociates them from male-centered nostalgias or idealizations. Aguilar's photographs recreate critical "social spaces" for women's identities, expressions, and experiences. The theme of reclaiming and reconfiguring Chicana female bodies reflects the influences of feminist critiques by women of color that move beyond identifying sexist and heterosexist perspectives that project Chicana feminist aesthetics.

In the 1990s, Chicana feminist artists initiated efforts to reclaim public art space using critical social theories that challenged the oppression of women of color in the United States. Chicana feminist artists, particularly Laura Aguilar, Alma Lopez, Laura Molina, and Yreina D. Cervantez, reconstructed the female body, guided by their desires and amid persistent hegemonic male-centered interpretations of women. By challenging a male-dominant artistic expression, Chicana artists break from binary forms of signification that project geopolitical and socio-

ideological exclusions. Chicana women's bodies served as "social spaces" that enacted and refuted systems of oppression. Significantly, the interpretation of the female body as a "social space" in Chicana feminist art influenced the re-representations of "normative" and "disidentification" belief systems that may serve to empower Chicana women. Chicana feminist art encourages women of color to break away from the margins and develop conscious "social spaces [...] an imagined, ideal, more democratic nation" (Perez 2007, 150).

Chicana feminist artists center and then de-center negative ill-representations and the de-humanization of non-white women by engaging in social and theoretical critiques. Critical theorist Laura Perez describes these social spaces as "land or *terra* to the sexed, racialized, and gendered human body as the particular site where exclusions or conditional, normativizing inclusions, and conversely, practices of "disidentification" with social orders are played out" (151). Moreover, the continuation of Chicana feminist text, language, and art aids in re-representing false realities imposed by male-centered interpretations of Chicana identity and affirms new representations of Chicana identity within a male-dominated society. In *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, Alma M. Garcia writes of the "Chicana feminist search for the elusive 'room of their own' within the socio-historical and political", as a result invoking Chicana artist's portrayal of Chicana feminist theory filtered through aesthetic discourse (1). Chicana artists develop aesthetic and narrative critiques that engage in her-story calling for the decolonization of Chicanas.

Chicana feminism developed within 1960s and 1970s inspired social movements. Chicanas endured marginalization and cultural-gender oppression within the nationalist-promoted Chicano civil rights movement. Although representing diverse constituencies of women, Chicanas raised their voices and resisted as a collective feminist movement (Garcia 2000, 3). In the midst of Chicano nationalist cultural domination Chicanas focused on reinterpreting cultural identity, restructuring household spaces, reinventing contradictory roles and community structures filtered through male-centered narratives. Thus, Chicana feminism reflects women struggles conquering cultural gender oppression and affirming gender, ethnic, socio-economic, and political consciousness. The early Chicana feminist epoch crossed social boundaries that limited the experiences of Chicana women in society. For example, Chicanas left traditional women sense of duties; such as house hold duties, secretarial like positions, and pursued academia, professional careers, visual, and literary careers.

Chicana feminist artists working in the period of the 1990s drew upon multiple aesthetic representations of Chicana feminist ideology within the broader context of the feminist movement. Through role reversals or juxtapositions of thought, Chicanas devised a revolutionary take on symbols of a culture that exploited the feminine, driving Chicanas to political consciousness. Symbols of culture, like religious icons that rendered women's behavior and patriarchal images of femininity that rendered women's aesthetic beauty. Chicana artists challenged social injustice and discrimination imposed by male dominated stereotypes within the Chicano/Mexican population and an Anglo cultural imperialist society. Through poster art, murals, and performance art Chicana artists rendered their interpretation of Chicana bodies and aesthetics of beauty. Thus, Chicana identity became refined and defined within a Chicana feminist context.

Chicana artists portrayed the female body as a cultural and geopolitical landscape marked by multiple oppressions and sites of resistance. The female body demonstrates signs of constraint and liberation through "Cultural Refiguring", which Debra J. Blake defines as "imply[ing] agency [...] identify[ing] deficiencies and destructive images, ideas, symbols, and

practices directed toward women and disenfranchised peoples” and attempting to “replace denigratory concepts with constructive and affirmative understandings, representations, or actions that view women as complex, multifaceted human beings” (Blake 2008, 5). Through cultural reconfiguring, Chicana feminists challenged male dominant discourse and established a new contemporary feminist historical discourse.

Historically, Chicana feminist scholarly works investigated limited theoretical constructs, such as the biological, cultural, materialist, and the linguistic. These theoretical perspectives employed by Chicana feminists drove the antithesis of a male dominant historiography and cultural identification. Chicana feminist scholars including Rosaura Sanchez, Emma Perez, Carla Trujillo, Amalia Mesa-Bains, and Alma G. Garcia offered an intellectual platform for Chicana feminist artist's theoretical aesthetic, consequently reigniting a contemporary Chicana feminist art movement addressing issues that dealt with marginalization, gender roles, sexism, identity, feminism, lesbianism, religious icons, and institutionalized religions. In response to dominant ideologies, Chicana feminists proposed theoretical alternatives; such as decolonial consciousness, female imaginary, and reclamation identification. These concepts challenged male-centered epistemologies. Chicana feminists have identified the dominant centers ideological perspective of women and applied Chicana feminism.

In *The Development of Chicana Feminist Discourse, 1970-1980* Alma G. Garcia puts forward the insertion of Chicana feminist historiography within American history within the context of the 1960's Chicano Civil Rights Movement. The Chicano Movement engaged a struggle aimed at achieving social equality, political consciousness, and politics of identity within the dynamics of American society. Chicanas recognized the struggles for social equality and the fight against sexism, racism, and gender oppression, as a result Chicana feminists emerged within the Chicano Movement demanding recognition for their participation, re-examining women's roles in the home and questioning the social class structure within the dynamics of the movement (Garcia 2000, 219). According to Garcia, Chicana feminists felt an urgency to define feminist epistemology and a feminist movement. As a result, Chicana feminism constitutes “a social movement to improve the position of Chicanas in American society represented a struggle that was both nationalist and feminist” (220). Chicana aesthetics stems to constitute a social movement that advances Chicanas position in American society.

Aside from the development of a Chicana feminist discourse, the Chicana/o Movement opened spaces for Chicana women artists to use art as a foundational tool for expressing their feminist ideology in the 1960's and 1970's. As a counter measure to patriarchal images of women, Chicanas express their own interpretation of culture, identity, gender roles, and state of consciousness through media such as paintings, drawings, serigraphs, screen prints, graphic arts, murals, photography, performance theatre, and sculpture. Furthermore, these works depict imagery that expresses a new representation of Chicana affirmation of political awareness, social activism, religious iconography, self-empowerment, and cultural-gender identification. Some Chicana artists shared a common concern: they wanted to educate, transform, and revitalize traditional women's perspectives through their work (Mesa-Bains 2000, 131-133). The production of Chicana art of the 1960's and 1970's situated within a Chicana feminist theoretical discourse and decolonization.

Much like their predecessors, Chicana artists of the 1990's sought agency for critical feminist epistemology. They were concerned with the role of the artists, challenging male-centered patriarchal hegemony, and their contributions to unfixing the feminine. Chicana artists of the 1990's looked to their own bodies and others, in order to address issues that second wave

Chicana feminists dealt with in regards to gender oppression, socio-economic inequities, political consciousness, and the continuation of Chicana feminist discourse through visual aesthetics. Chicana scholarly works contributed to the theoretical aesthetics in Chicana feminist art. For example, 1990's Chicana artists applied the feminist concepts and approaches by Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldua, Emma Perez, Rosaura Sanchez, and Carla Trujillo, including "The Female Imaginary", "Counter-sites", and the deconstruction of male centered institutionalized religions. These practices comprised the primary avenue for the re-representation of third wave Chicana feminism in the United States.

Contemporary Chicana feminist artwork offers a more complex illustration of Chicana feminist discourse filtered through striking artistic subject matter. These contemporary works enlisted the female body as a counter-site for Chicana women's struggles and counter narratives to female identities and challenged multiple forms of social inequities, traditional gendered values, and institutionalized religiosities are portrayed. Yreina D. Cervantez, Alma Lopez, and Laura Molina exhibit an antithesis to essentialist portrayals of the female body that minimize and inhibit women's agency and empowerment. These artists use the female body as a form of social protest to identify Chicana women's sources of oppression and to assert an active Chicana identity that is dynamic and complex.

They choose visually striking images of the female body, in order to reclaim, reinterpret, revision, and dismantle gendered, sexualized, classed, and racialized stereotypes. Cervantez, Lopez, and Molina have inserted themselves into a male dominant arena, such as body modifications in the form of tattoos, indigenous spiritualities, male dominant social constructs, and religious icons particularly La Virgen de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe) and represent these social constructs in their female imaginary. These areas have been the realities of a male dominant interpretation and a male centered social construct for decades. Chicana feminist art has established counter narratives that challenge male hegemonic interpretations of the feminine.

Chicana artists' discourse continued to advocate for social equality of women. Artists such as Alma Lopez, Laura Molina, and Yreina D. Cervantez expressed their experiences through art challenging social norms, traditional icons and traditional values that limited their roles and in the process raised cultural awareness, and new Chicana identity (Mesa-Bains 2000, 140). The most important female icon represented in Chicana art is the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. The *Virgen de Guadalupe* is an image that has served as a template for women's social behavior and feminine interpretations. Since the miraculous appearance to Juan Diego in 1531, La Virgen has served as the female template for social behavioral representation. From the 1960's to the present Chicana scholars and artists have challenged the passive and submissive male interpretation of femininity. The traditional image the *Virgen de Guadalupe* has been transformed into an image that rejects the role of a proper, submissive, and passive woman by Chicana artist of the 1960's and 1970's. Similarly in a textual perspective Gloria Anzaldua expressively rejects the traditional *Virgen* icon and stresses that Chicanas must work towards "unlearning the *puta/virgen* dichotomy", which is based on male-centered heterosexual norms (Anzaldua 1990).

Chicana feminist artists have reinterpreted and redefined the *Virgen de Guadalupe* image in a progressive manner to signify resistance to colonization and exploitation. The original image of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* transcends a passive and submissive woman. In contrast Alma Lopez depicts the *Virgen*, re-interpreting the religious icon as a strong woman, hardworking, and as an assertive woman (Mesa-Bains 2000, 136-137). The works produced reflected Chicana struggles against identity, racism, and sexism; moreover, these works sought to counter the

invisibility of the Chicana women in the mainstream discourse of the Women's movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the Chicano Movement.

New representations of female body are filtered through Alma Lopez' digital print "Our Lady of Controversy"; the symbolic depiction of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is still present, but Lopez has juxtaposed *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, for example: the angel that carries the Virgen in the original image is symbolic for new beginnings. In contrast, Lopez has replaced the male angel with a nude female representative of women who can carry themselves and define their own new beginnings. Secondly, the Mexican Goddess Cuatlicue, the "Mother Goddess of the Earth who gives birth to all celestial things", and "Goddess of Life, Death and Rebirth", is set in the silhouette of the blue-green cloak. Herein Lopez expresses the realization of Chicanas taking ownership of their bodies, and the realization of self consciousness.

Lastly, the female figure representative of the Guadalupe is nude, covered by a bikini of flowers. Here, Lopez expresses an active and assertive depiction of the female body. For example, she replaces the physical arguably passive-submissive body of *La Virgen* with an image of a Chicana *contrapposto* with her shin up, hands on her hips, and her eyes looking forward arriving at self-empowerment, advocating for decolonization of the female body, and an end to women's subordination. Thus, she invokes Emma Perez "female imaginary", a feminist concept "framing our decolonized spaces" and places women, their bodies, and their sexualities at the center of their experiences (91).

In her piece "Lupe and La Sirena in Love", Lopez once again uses the female body as a critical site for contesting a subordinated female identity. One can see a woman getting a tattoo of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* and *La Sirena* (the mermaid is an image from the Mexican card game "*Loteria*"). Lopez again illustrates "the female imaginary". The model's body is modified to display a reinterpreted religious image that shows a female-centered intimacy—two female images embracing, expressing female bodies loving other female bodies. This piece transposes idealized female images and presents a transformative take on reclaiming *La Virgen* as a tattooed image on the female body.

The mere size and placement of the tattoo on her back is derivative of Chicano male tattoos found in popular culture. This image challenges societal norms of a passively-constructed female body or "femininity", replacing, redefining, and interrupting previous male-centered spectrums and altering the feminine. Lopez has recreated the feminine-affirming feminist identity, creating a constructive and proactive counter site on the female body. Lopez has reclaimed a male interpretation of *La Virgen*, and has deconstructed *La Virgen's* image and reconstructs her creating an assertive voice for Chicanas. Alma Lopez has moved beyond the earlier images of *La Virgen* by using more striking images of the female body that dismantles traditional depictions of the feminine. Lopez' contemporary perspective on a traditional religious icon expresses a liberated, confident, strong, lesbian and feminist conscious Chicana. I argue that art also provides Chicana feminist artists with another outlet to assert feminist critiques.

Another artist setting out to reinterpret Chicana feminist identity is Laura Molina. The cover of Laura Molina's comic book *Cihualyaomiquiz the Jaguar* is an illustration depicting the female body as a cartoon and illustrating active movement through the image and accompanying text. In this manner, Molina has entered an arena in which cartoons that have been male-dominated and male-centered. By creating her own female-centered comic, Molina has reclaimed a male-centered genre, for example, the female figure is a Jaguar in a offensive and defensive action position with texts stating "I Resist, Right Wing Fascists, Corporate crooks Look out, and I won't be tamed", in which she is expressing the socio-political consciousness

empowering Chicana's of the period. Molina depicts herself as a jaguar and by doing so she appropriates the Jaguar and redirects its connotation and by stating "out of the heart of Aztlan into a new age comes a woman warrior dedicated to the struggle for social justice, human rights, and mother earth." This depiction of the female body, Molina has empowered Chicanas to fight and resist the forces of gender, race, and class oppression. Through this piece she links women's empowerment, or a liberated female body, to the image of a female warrior, which underscores a more active contestation and agency for women.

Chicana Feminism addressed issues affecting women of color in the United States, particularly economic marginalization and racial and gender discrimination in Anglo society. In Molina's, piece *One Little Indian vs The Corporate Trolls*, captures issues involving racial, gender, sexist, and class discrimination through depictions of the mutilated female body. The woman in the piece is surrounded by images of U.S. corporate and media giants. Molina states "I feel the need to assert my identity in the most militant way possible because otherwise, as an American, I am invisible. In a culture where nothing happens until it happens on TV, I don't exist. As an educated, native-born, English-speaking, fifth generation Mexican-American and a feminist, there is almost no reflection of me in the movies or television, which is almost as bad as being stereotyped" (LauraMolina.com). This statement speaks to Molina's nationalist characteristics and her politics of identity. In the middle ground Molina has placed a fence with barbed wire between the female figure, and the background. The fence represents the disconnection (or absence of Mexican-Americans in mass media) between the popular Disney Company and the mutilated female body. The woman is restrained and labeled. She has barbed wire wrapped around her neck, chest and wrist, and her name tag is pinned to the palm of her hand causing blood to fall from the wounds.

Laura Molina lives by the moniker, "The Angriest Women in the World" and states "By becoming the stereotype I also break it, because as the artist I have control of the image and what it conveys to the viewer I will use my activism and creativity to end injustice, intolerance and patriarchy at both a social and interpersonal level. I demand the right to Self-Autonomy and my identity is intrinsically defined by my view and my experience and I will not allow others to define it externally" (LauraMolina.com). Molina life experiences if filter into her work and statements showing self-evident that she is redefining and reconfiguring Chicana identifications. Laura Molina continues to express Chicana struggles through her work and demonstrates the use of a growing Chicana feminist discourse. Similarly, Rosaura Sanchez' counter-discourse states that "this challenge of dominant discourses has led feminist historians to call for a new conceptual framework that is woman-oriented and rejects masculine categories in determining what is of social significance" (1). Molina has developed an aesthetic counter-discourse that rejects masculine categories and projects Chicana feminist attributes.

Yreina D. Cervantez' repertoire engages complex parameters of feminist epistemology in rendering the female body in her work. Cervantez self portraits approach culturally hybrid identities involving what Laura E. Perez explains in Chicana art *The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities* as "the perspective of a mainstream that by definition is normalizing, tattoo on the already devalued bodies of women, people of color [...] marks as culturally and socially marginal" (Perez 2007, 82). Cervantez deconstructs misrepresented cultural and social marginalized aspects of her identity Chicana and female.

In the watercolor *Big Baby Balam* one can see Cervantez' tattooed self-portrait, in which she has painted the surface of her face with indigenous glyphs. In the work the female body serves as the surface for text expressing social meaning similarly to indigenous glyph incised on

walls. Cervantez has appropriated the animalistic characteristics of the jaguar by stylizing her mouth wide and flared, to reflect ancient Olmec stylized sculptures. In addition, her hand shares images of indigenous markings, and the two-tone brown and reddish-orange blouse is intricately designed with circular yellow spots and floral like patterns, representing the skin of the jaguar. Cervantez presents a new feminine, in which she represents herself as both animal and human capturing the un-socialized and socialized natural self. Cervantez addresses the de-humanization of women, gender-cultural stereotypes, and bridges social identity, culture, and the self-realization of female empowerment.

Yreina D. Cervantez shares a post-structuralist view in addressing identity, in which a hybrid identity is rooted in understanding traditional, indigenous views and contemporary, feminist ideology. Cervantez' aesthetic imagination models the struggle for Chicana re-representation and represents urgency for socio-political space contributing to Chicana feminist discourse in the form of visual cultural symbolism, hybridity, rebellion, and most importantly female empowerment. Chicana feminist artists articulate a collection of voices of struggle as a result of Chicana women's experiences. Chicana artists re-imagine the female body not as an idealized image of femininity but as a contested counter-site between women's subjugation and empowerment.

The female body becomes a text for social critique that advocates for Chicana women's empowerment. The Chicana art movement fought to end sexism, racism, cultural oppression, and poverty within Chicano/Mexican barrios. Chicana artist's Laura Aguilar, Alma Lopez, Laura Molina, and Yreina D. Cervantez have restructured and redefined the feminine through social critique transforming culturally traditional submissive images of women into strong, empowering, independent, and conscious identities. These Chicana feminist artists of the 1990 have produced striking artworks that play an instrumental role in the growth of political consciousness and social activism, establishing a strong presence within a male-dominant society. Laura Aguilar, Alma Lopez, Laura Molina, and Yreina D. Cervantez affirm self-representation, empowerment, controlling their own bodies, and resisting cultural gender oppression. This movement is framed within feminist and lesbian epistemologies enabling Chicana's the freedom of expression and develop Chicana historiography. Thus, these contributions legitimized Chicana artists' contributions to the post-Chicana/o Movement and society within the dynamics of a socio-historical context.

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