Gloria Anzaldúa

Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) is best known for her contributions to Chicano/Chicana and Queer Theory. After growing up in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, Anzaldúa went on to earn her MA in English and Education from the University of Texas at Austin. At various points in her life, Anzaldúa taught special education in public schools, as well as feminist studies, Chicano studies, and creative writing at various colleges including San Francisco State University, the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Florida Atlantic University. Her first major publication, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza *(1987), introduced scholars to Anzaldúa's term mestizaje, a state of being beyond binary conception. Anzaldúa also co-edited the influential anthology* This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color *(1981). Her awards include the Lambda Lesbian Small Book Press Award (1991), the Sappho Award of Distinction (1992), the National Endowment for the Arts Fiction Award (1991), and the American Studies Association Lifetime Achievement Award (Bode-Pearson Prize—2001).*

At the time of her death, Anzaldúa was working on completing her dissertation for her doctorate in literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her degree was awarded posthumously in 2005.

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Chicana Artists: Exploring Nepantla, el Lugar De la Frontera

I stop before the dismembered body of *la diosa de la luna*, Coyolxauhqui, daughter of Coatlicue. The warrior goddess' eyes are closed, she has bells on her cheeks, and her head is in the form of a snail design. She was decapitated by her brother, Huitzilopochtle, the Left-Handed

Hummingbird. Her bones jut from their sockets. I stare at the huge round stone of *la diosa*. She seems to be pushing at the restraining orb of the moon. Though I sense a latent whirlwind of energy, I also sense a timeless stillness—one patiently waiting to explode into activity.

La Diosa de la Luna.

Here before my eyes, on the opening day of the "Aztec: The World Of Moctezuma" exhibition at the Denver Museum of Natural History, is the culture of *nuestros antepasados indígenas*. I ask myself, What does it mean to me *esta jotita*, this queer Chicana, this *mexicatejana* to enter a museum and look at indigenous objects that were once used by my ancestors? Will I find my historical Indian identity here at this museum among the ancient artifacts and their *mestisaje lineage*?

As I pull out a pad to take notes on the clay, stone, jade, bone, feather, straw, and cloth artifacts, I am disconcerted with the knowledge that I am passively consuming and appropriating an indigenous culture. I arrive at the serpentine base of a reconstructed 16-foot

temple where the Aztecs flung down human sacrifices, leaving bloodied steps. Around me I hear the censorious, culturally ignorant words of the Whites who, while horrified by the bloodthirsty Aztecs, gape in victorious wonder and voraciously consume the exoticized images. Though I too am a gaping consumer, I feel that these artworks are part of my legacy—my appropriation differs from the misappropriation by "outsiders."

I am again struck by how much Chicana artists and writers feel the impact of ancient Mexican art forms, foods, and customs. *Sus símbolos y metáforas todavía viven en la gente chicana/mexicana.* This sense of connection and community compels Chicana writers/artists to delve into, sift through, and rework native imagery. We consistently reflect back these images in revitalized and modernized versions in theater, film, performance art, painting, dance, sculpture, and literature. *La negación sistemática de la cultura mexicana-chicana en los Estados Unidos impide su desarrollo haciéndolo este un acto de colonización.* As a people who have been stripped of our history, language, identity and pride, we attempt again and again to find what we have lost by imaginatively digging into our cultural roots and making art out of our findings.

I recall Yolanda López' *Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe* (1978) which depicts a Chicana/*mexicana* woman emerging and running from the oval halo of rays that looks to me like thorns, with the mantle of the traditional *virgen* in one hand and a serpent in the other. She wears running shoes, has short hair, and her legs are bare and look powerful—a very dykey-looking woman. *Portrait* represents the cultural rebirth of the Chicana struggling to free herself of repressive gender roles.[1]

I remember visiting Chicana *tejana* artist Santa Barraza in her Austin studio in the mid 1970s and talking about the merger and appropriation of cultural symbols and techniques by artists in search of their spiritual and cultural roots. As I walked around her studio, I was amazed at the vivid *Virgen de Guadalupe* iconography on her walls and on the drawings strewn on tables and shelves.

La gente chicana tiene tres madres. All three are mediators: *Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada (Malinche)*, the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *la Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two. Guadalupe has been used by the Church to mete

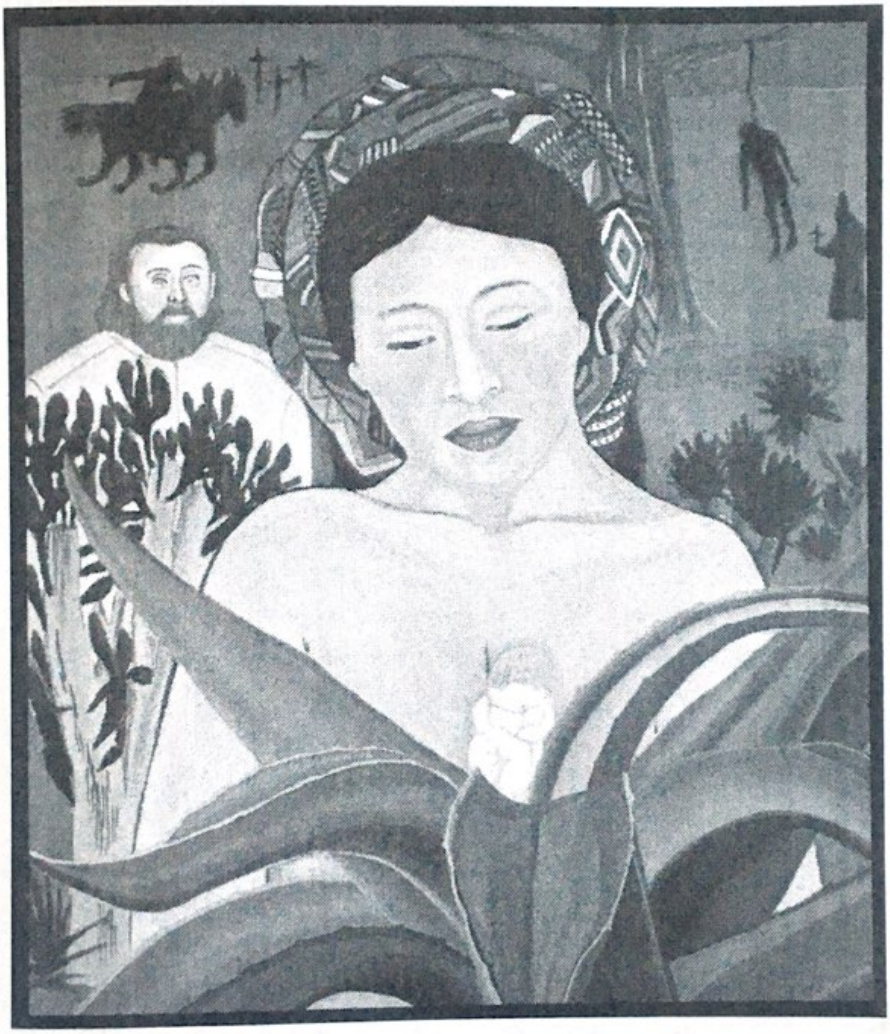
out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and Mexicanos and Chicanos. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted—*Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the virgin/puta dichotomy. The three *madres* are cultural figures that Chicana writers and artists "reread" in our works.

Now, 16 years later, Barraza is focusing on interpretations of Pre-Columbian codices as a reclamation of cultural and historical mestiza identity. Her "codices" are edged with *Milagros* and *ex votos*.[2] Using the folk-art format, Barraza is now painting tin testimonials known as *retablos*. These are traditional popular miracle paintings on metal, a medium introduced to colonial Mexico by the Spaniards. One of her devotional *retablos* is of *la Malinche*, made with *maguey*. (The *maguey* cactus is Barraza's symbol of rebirth.) Like that of many Chicana artists, her work, she says, explores indigenous Mexican "symbols and myths in a historical and contemporary context as a mechanism of resistance to oppression and assimilation."[3]

I wonder about the genesis of *el arte de la frontera*. Border art remembers its roots—sacred and folk art are often still one and the same. I recall the *nichos* (Niches or recessed areas) and *retablos* that I had recently seen in several galleries and museums. The *retablos* are placed inside open boxes made of wood, tin, or cardboard. The *cajitas* contain three dimensional figures such as *la virgin*, photos of ancestors, candles, and sprigs of herbs tied together. They are actually tiny installations. I make mine out of cigar boxes or vegetable crates that I find discarded on the street before garbage pickups. The *retablos* range from the strictly traditional to modern, more abstract forms. Santa Barraza, Yolanda López, Marcia Gómez, Carmen Loams Garza and other Chicana artists connect their art to everyday life, instilling both with political, sacred and aesthetic values. *Haciendo tortillas* become a sacred ritual in literary, visual, and performance arts.[4]

Border art, in critiquing old, traditional, and erroneous representations of the Mexico-United States border, attempts to represent the "real world" *de la gente* going about their daily lives. But it renders that world and its people in more than mere surface slices of life. If one looks beyond the tangible, one sees a connection to the spirit world, to the underworld, and to other realities. In the "old world," art was/

is functional and sacred as well as aesthetic. When folk and fine art separated, the *metate* (a flat porous volcanic stone with rolling pin used to make corn tortillas) and the *huipil* (a Guatemalan blouse) were put in museums by Western curators of art.[5]



Santa Barazza, La Malinche, 1991 oils and enamels on metal, 8"x9" size.

I come to a glass where the skeleton of a jaguar with a stone in its open mouth nestles on cloth. The stone represents the heart. My thoughts trace the jaguar's spiritual and religious symbolism from its Olmec origins to present-day jaguar masks worn by people who no longer know that the jaguar was connected to rain, who no longer

remember that Tlaloc and the jaguar and the serpent and rain are tightly intertwined.[6] Through the centuries a culture touches and influences another, passing on its metaphors and its gods before it dies. (Metaphors *are* gods.) The new culture adopts, modifies, and enriches these images, and it, in turn, passes them on changed. The process is repeated until the original meanings of images are pushed into the unconscious. What surfaces are images more significant to the prevailing culture and era. The artist on some level, however, still connects to that unconscious reservoir of meaning, connects to that *nepantla* state of transition between time periods, and the border between cultures.

Camas Para Sueños (Beds for Dreaming) by Carmen Lomas Garza.

Nepantla is the Nahuatl word for an in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or gender position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity. The Mexican immigrant at the moment of crossing the barbed-wire fence into the hostile "paradise" of *el norte*, the United States, is caught in a state of *nepantla*. Others who find themselves in this bewildering transitional space may be those people caught in the midst of denying their projected/assumed heterosexual identity and coming out, presenting and voicing their lesbian, gay, bi-, or transsexual selves. Crossing class lines—especially from working class to middle classness and privilege—can be just as disorienting. The marginalized, starving Chicana artist who suddenly finds her work exhibited in mainstream museums, or being sold for thousands of dollars in prestigious galleries, as well as the once-neglected writer whose work is on every professor's syllabus for a time inhabit *nepantla*. For women artists, *nepantla* is a constant state; dislocation is the norm. Chicana artists are engaged in "reading" that *nepantla*, that border.

I think of the borderlands as Jorge Luis Borges' *Aleph*, the one spot on earth which contains all other places within it. All people in it, whether natives or immigrants, colored or white, queer or heterosexual, from his side of the border or *del otro lado*, are *personas del lugar*, local people—all of whom relate to the border and to *nepantla* in different ways.

The border is a historical and metaphorical site, *un sitio ocupado*, an occupied borderland where individual artists and collaborating groups transform space, and the two home territories, Mexico and the United States, become one. Border art deals with shifting identities, border crossings, and hybridism. But there are other borders besides the actual Mexico/US *frontera*. Chilean-born artist Juan Davila's *Wuthering Heights* (1990) oil painting depicts Juanito Leguna, a half-caste, mixed breed transvestite. Juanito's body is a simulacrum parading as the phallic mother with hairy chest and hanging tits.[7] Another Latino artist, Rafael Barajas (who signs his work as "El Fisgón"), has a mixed-media piece entitled *Pero eso si . . . soy muy macho* (1989). It shows a Mexican male wearing the proverbial sombrero taking a siesta against the traditional cactus, tequila bottle on the ground, gunbelt hanging from a nopal branch. But the leg sticking out from beneath the sarape-like mantle

is wearing a high-heeled shoe, pantyhose, and a garter belt. It suggests another kind of border crossing—gender-bending.[8]

According to anthropologist Edward Hall, early in life we become oriented to space in a way that is tied to survival and sanity. When we become disoriented from that sense of space we fall in danger of becoming psychotic.[9] I question this—to be disoriented in space is the "normal" way of being for us mestizas living in the borderlands. It is the sane way of coping with the accelerated pace of this complex, interdependent, and multicultural planet. To be disoriented in space is to be *en nepantla*, to experience bouts of disassociation of identity, identity breakdowns and buildups. The border is in a constant *nepantla* state, and it is an analog of the planet.

This is why the border is a persistent metaphor in *el arte de la frontera*, an art that deals with such themes as identity, border crossings, and hybrid imagery. The Mexico-United States border is a site where many different cultures "touch" each other and the permeable, flexible, and ambiguous shifting grounds lend themselves to hybrid images. The border is the locus of resistance, of rupture, of implosion and explosion, and of putting together the fragments and creating a new assemblage. Border artists *cambian el punto de referencia*. By disrupting the neat separations between cultures, they create a culture mix, *una mestizada* in their artworks. Each artist locates herself in this border "*lugar*" and tears apart then rebuilds the "place" itself. "Imagenes de la Frontera" was the title of the Centro Cultural Tijuana's June 1992 exhibition.[10] Malaquís Montoya's Frontera Series and Irene Pèrez' Dos Mundos monoprint are examples of the border artist creating a counter-art.

The *nepantla* state is the natural habitat of women artists, most specifically for the mestiza border artists who partake of the traditions of two or more worlds and who may be binational. They thus create a new artistic space—a border mestizo culture. Beware of *el romance del mestizaje*, I hear myself saying silently. *Puede ser una ficción*. But I and other writers/artists of *la frontera* have invested ourselves in it. *Mestizaje*, not Chicanismo, is the reality of our lives. *Mestizaje* is at the heart of our art. We bleed in *mestizaje*, we eat and sweat and cry in *mestizaje*. But the Chicana is inside the mestiza.

There are many obstacles and dangers in crossing into *nepantla*. Popular culture and the dominant art institutions threaten border artists

from the outside with appropriation. "Outsiders" jump on the border artists' bandwagon and work their territory. The present unparalleled economic depression in the arts gutted by government funding cutbacks threatens *los artistas de la frontera*. Sponsoring corporations that judge projects by "family values" criteria force multicultural artists to hang tough and brave out financial and professional instability.

I walk into the Aztec Museum shop and see feathers, paper flowers, and ceramic statues of fertility goddesses selling for ten times what they sell for in Mexico. Border art is becoming trendy in these neocolonial times that encourage art tourism and pop-culture rip-offs. Of course, there is nothing new about colonizing, commercializing, and consuming the art of ethnic people (and of queer writers and artists) except that now it is being misappropriated by pop culture. Diversity is being sold on TV, billboards, fashion runways, department-store windows, and, yes, airport corridors and "regional" stores where you can take home a jar of Tex-Mex *picante* sauce along with Navaho artist R. C. Gorman's "Saguaro" or Robert Arnold's "Chili Dog," and drink a margarita at Rosie's Cantina.

I touch the armadillo pendant hanging from my neck and think, *frontera* artists have to grow protective shells. We enter the silence, go inward, attend to feelings and to that inner *cenote*, the creative reservoir where earth, female, and water energies merge. We surrender to the rhythm and the grace of our artworks. Through our artworks we cross the border into other subjective levels of awareness, shift into different and new terrains of *mestizaje*. Some of us have a highly developed *facultad* and many intuit what lies ahead. Yet the political climate does not allow us to withdraw completely. In fact, border artists are engaged artists. Most of us are politically active in our communities. If disconnected from *la gente*, border artists would wither in isolation. The community feeds our spirits and the responses from our "readers" inspire us to continue struggling with our art and aesthetic interventions that subvert cultural genocide. Border art challenges and subverts the imperialism of the United States, and combats assimilation by either the United States or Mexico, yet it acknowledges its affinities to both cultures.[11]

"Chicana" artist, "border" artist. These are adjectives labeling identities. Labeling creates expectations. White poets don't write "white"

in front of their names nor are they referred to as white by others. Is "border" artist just another label that strips legitimacy from the artist, signaling that she is inferior to the adjectiveless artist, a label designating that she is only capable of handling ethnic, folk, and regional subjects and art forms? Yet the dominant culture consumes, swallows whole the ethnic artist, sucks out her vitality, and then spits out the hollow husk along with its labels (such as Hispanic). The dominant culture shapes the ethnic artist's identity if she does not scream loud enough and fight long enough to name herself. Until we live in a society where all people are more or less equal, we need these labels to resist the pressure to assimilate.

Artistic ideas that have been incubating and developing at their own speed have come into their season—now is the time of border art. Border *arte* is an art that supersedes the pictorial. It depicts both the soul *del artista* and the soul *del pueblo*. It deals with who tells the stories and what stories and histories are told. I call this form of visual narrative *autohistoria*. This form goes beyond the traditional self-portrait or autobiography; in telling the writer/artist's personal story, it also includes the artist's cultural history. The *retablos* I make are not just representations of myself, they are representations of Chicana culture. *El arte de la frontera* is community and academically based—many Chicana artists have M.A.s and Ph.D.s and hold precarious teaching positions on the fringes of universities. They are overworked, overlooked, passed over for tenure, and denied the support they deserve. To make, exhibit, and sell their artwork, and to survive, *los artistas* have had to band together collectively.[12]

I cross the exhibit room. Codices hang on the walls. I stare at the hieroglyphics. The ways of a people, their history and culture put on paper beaten from maguey leaves. Faint traces of red, blue, and black ink left by their artists, writers, and scholars. The past is hanging behind glass. We, the viewers in the present, walk around the glassboxed past. I wonder who I used to be, I wonder who I am. The border artist constantly reinvents herself. Through art she is able to reread, reinterpret, re-envision and reconstruct her culture's present as well as its past. This capacity to construct meaning and culture privileges the artist. As cultural icons for the ethnic communities, she is highly visible.

But there are drawbacks to having artistic and cultural power—the relentless pressure to produce being put in the position of representing her entire *pueblo* and carrying all the ethnic culture's baggage on her *espalda* while trying to survive in a gringo world. Power and the seeking of greater power may create a self-centered ego or a fake public image, one the artist thinks will make her acceptable to her audience. It may encourage self-serving hustling—all artists have to sell themselves in order to get grants, get published, secure exhibit spaces, and get good reviews. But for some, the hustling outdoes the art-making.

The Chicana border writer/artist has finally come to market. The problem now is how to resist corporate culture while asking for and securing its patronage; how to get the dollars without resorting to "mainstreaming" the work. Is the border artist complicit in the appropriation of her art by the dominant art dealers? And if so, does this constitute a self-imposed imperialism? The artist, in making *plata* from the sale of her sculpture, "makes it." Money means power. The access to privilege that comes with the bucks and the recognition can turn the artist on her ear in a *nepantla* spin.

Finally, I find myself before the reconstructed statue of the newly unearthed *el dios murciélago*, the bat god with his big ears, fangs, and protruding tongue representing the vampire bat associated with night, blood sacrifice and death. I make an instantaneous association of the bat man with the stage of border artists—the dark cave of creativity where they hang upside down, turning the self upside down in order to see from another point of view, one that brings a new state of understanding. Or it may mean transposing the former self onto a new one—the death of the old self and the old ways breaking down former notions of who you are. Night fear, *susto*, when every button is pushed. The border person constantly moves through that birth canal, *nepantla*. If you stay too long in *nepantla* you are in danger of being blocked, resulting in a breech birth or being stillborn.

I wonder what meaning this bat figure will have for other Chicanas, what artistic symbol they will make of it and what political struggle it will represent. Perhaps the *murciélago* questions the viewer's unconscious collective and personal identity and its ties to her ancestors, *los muertos*. In border art there is always the specter of death in the background.

Often *las calaveras* (skeletons and skulls) take a prominent position—and not just on *el día de los muertos* (November 2). *De la tierra nacemos*, from earth we are born, *a la tierra regresaremos*, to earth we shall return, *a dar lo que ella nos dió*, to give back to her what she has given. Yes, I say to myself, the earth eats the dead, *la tierra se come los muertos.*

I walk out of the Aztec exhibit hall. It is September 28, *mi cumpleaños.* I seek out the table with the computer, key in my birth-date and there on the screen is my Aztec birth year and ritual day name: 8 Rabbit, 12 Skull. In that culture I would have been named Matlactli Omome Mizuitzli. I stick my chart under the rotating rubber stamps, press down, pull it out and stare at the imprint of the rabbit (symbol of fear and of running scared) pictograph and then of the skull (night, blood sacrifice, and death). Very appropriate symbols in my life, I mutter. It's so *raza. ¿y què?*

I ask myself, What direction will *el arte fronterizo* take in the future? The multi-subjectivity and split-subjectivity of the border artist creating various counter arts will continue, but with a parallel movement where a polarized us/them, insiders/outsiders culture clash is not the main struggle, where a refusal to be split will be a given. We are both *nos* (us) and *otras* (others)—*nos/otras.*

My mind reviews image after image. Something about who and what I am and the "200 artifacts" I have just seen does not feel right. I pull out my "birth chart." Yes, cultural roots are important *but I was not born at Tenochitlán in the ancient past nor in an Aztec village in modern times. I was born and live in that in-between space,* nepantla, *the borderlands.* Hay muchas razas *running in my veins,* mescladas dentro de mi, otras culturas *that my body lives in and out of.* Mi cuerpo vive dentro y fuera de otras culturas *and a white man who constantly whispers inside my skull. For me, being Chicana is not enough. It is only one of my multiple identities. Along with other* border gente, *it is at this site and time,* en este tiempo y lugar *where and when I create my identity* con mi arte.

1993

1. I thank Dianna Williamson and Clarisa Rojas, my literary assistants, for their invaluable and incisive critical comments, and Deidre McFadyen.
2. See Amalia Mesa-bains, El Mundo Femenino: "Chicana Artists of the
3. Movement—A Commentary on Development and Production," in Richard Griswold Del Castillo, Teresa McKenna, and Yvonne Yarbo Bejarano (eds) *CARA, Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation*
4. (Los Angeles: Wight Gallery, University of California, 1991).
5. See Luz María and Ellen J. Stekert's untitled art catalog essay in Santa Barraza, March 8-April 11, 1992, La Raza/Galería osada, Sacramento, CA.
6. Quoted in Jennifer Heath's "Women Artists of Color Share World of Struggle," *Sunday Camera*, March 8, 1992, p. 9C.
7. See Carmen Lomas Garza's children's bilingual book, *Family Pictures/ Cuadros de familia* (San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1990), in particular "Camas para sonar/Beds for Dreaming."
8. The Maya huipiles are large rectangular blouses which describe the Maya cosmos. They portray the world as a diamond. The four sides of the diamond represent the boundaries of space and time; the smaller diamonds at each corner, the cardinal points. The weaver maps the heavens and underworld.
9. Roberta H. Markman and Peter T. Markman (eds), *Masks of the Spirit: Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
10. See Guy Brett, *Transcontinental: An Investigation of Reality* (London: Verso, 1990).
11. See ex profeso, recuento de afinidades colectiva plastic contemporánea: imágenes: gay-lésbicas-éroticas put together by Circulo Cutural Gay in Mexico City and exhibited at Museuo Universitario del Chope during Gay Cultural Week, June 14-3, 1989.
12. The exact quote is: "We have an internalization of fixed space learned early in life. One's orientation in space is tied to survival and sanity. To be disoriented in space is to be psychotic." See Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, "The Sounds of Silence," in James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy (eds), *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987).
13. The exhibition was part of Festival Internacional de la Raza '92. The artworks were produced in the Silkscreen Studios of Self Help Graphics, Los Angeles, and in the studios of Strike Editions in Austin, Texas. Self Help Graphics and the Galería Sin Fronteras, Austin, Texas organized the exhibitions.
14. Among the alternative galleries and art centers that combat assimilation are the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Mexic-Arte

Museum and Sin Fronteras Gallery in Austin, Texas, and the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco.

15. For a discussion of Chicano posters, almanacs, calendars, and cartoons that join "images and texts to depict community issues as well as historical and cultural themes," and that metaphorically link Chicano struggles for self-determination with the Mexican Revolution, and establish "a cultural and visual continuum across borders," see Tomás Ybarra-Fausto's "Gráfica/Urban Iconography" in *Chicano Expressions: A New View in American Art*, April 14-July 31, 1986 (New York: INTAR Latin American Gallery, 1986), pp.21-4.