

Straddling *la otra frontera*

Inserting MiChicana/o Visual Culture into Chicana/o Art History

Dylan Miner

ABSTRACT: *Although there is a surplus of literature dealing with U.S.-Mexico border identities and cultures, this article begins to problematize and reposition Chicana/o art historical discourse by engaging with the U.S.-Canada border. By investigating the relationship between working-class histories and Chicana/o visual culture in Michigan, the article analyzes the function of MiChicana/o culture along la frontera norteña. Evoking a multiplicity of art historical and cultural studies approaches, the author addresses the work of George Vargas, Martín Moreno, Nora Chapa Mendoza, and the Xicano Development Center, among others, in hopes of recentring Chicana/o cultural studies.*

I was born in Detroit, and the borderlands I knew best during my youth straddled the United States and Canada. The political border dividing the two nations was marked by the Detroit River, easily crossed by tunnel or bridge to reach Windsor, Ontario, located immediately to the South.

—Dennis Valdés, “Region, Nation, and World-System”

In the summer of 1979, artists George Vargas and Martín Moreno were commissioned by the Hubbard Richard Agency to paint a mural in the heart of the Chicana/o community of Detroit. Created a decade into the Mexican American civil rights movement, this mural, *CitySpirit*, is one of the only surviving exterior murals in Michigan from the days of the *movimiento* (fig. 1). Nearly twenty years after *CitySpirit* was painted, another mural, *The Cornfield* (1997–98), went up across the street (fig. 2). Situated within one kilometer of *la frontera norteña* with Canada, these murals speak to a specific Chicana/o experience of the upper Midwest. It is this specific MiChicana/o (or Michigan Mexicana/o) experience, as described through the murals and other visual culture, that I use to revision the historiography of Chicana/o



Figure 1. George Vargas and Martín Moreno, *CitySpirit*, 1979. Restoration by Vito Jesús Valdéz and Kelly Callahan. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman and James Puntigam.



Figure 2. Vito Jesús Valdéz and James Puntigam, *The Cornfield*, 1997–98. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman and James Puntigam.

DYLAN MINER is an assistant professor in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University, where he is also faculty in Chicano/Latino studies, as well as American Indian studies. An artist, critic, and historian, his research bridges anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggles with the study of contemporary visual culture. Presently, he is completing a book project on the role of Aztlán within the art of the Chicana/o movement. He can be reached at dylanminer.com.

art. As I shall demonstrate, although the histories and experiences of ethnic Mexicans in the Midwest and the U.S. Southwest are similar, the Midwest community must be contextualized and understood distinctly to properly understand its importance. I therefore attempt to problematize naturalized assumptions about Chicana/o history and cultural studies in an attempt to recenter the discourse on Chicana/o art histories.

CitySpirit, the mural that I will later discuss in depth, is situated in close proximity to the base of the international Ambassador Bridge (fig. 3). The bridge crosses south to Windsor at the only location in the continental United States where U.S. territory is north of Canada. Anglo American popular culture speaks of *lo mexicano* as being “south of the border,” but since Southwest Detroit is north (and west) of the border, this problematic saying cannot be applied to the Chicana/o community of Detroit. The unique geography of this “borderlands” site plays a significant role in constructing meaning among members of the local Latina/o community. Although Michigan Chicana/os share experiences with their *compadres* throughout the country, local intricacies must be noted.

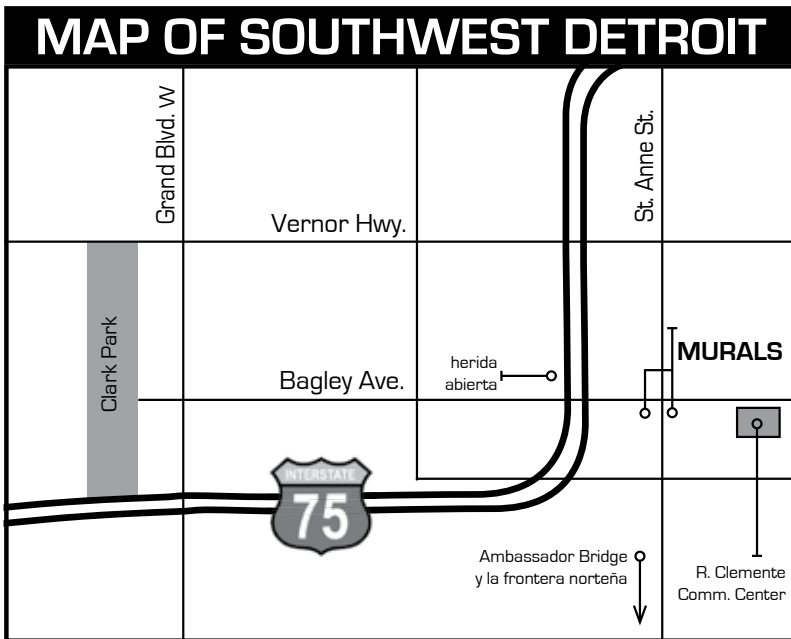


Figure 3. Map of Southwest Detroit.

CitySpirit is important because it situates MiChicana/o art within a regional framework of the Chicana/o experience and, more important, because it functions as an utterance that creates “home” for Detroit Chicana/os along *la otra frontera*. For this reason, local cultural practices must be compared and contrasted with other Chicana/o and Mexican visual texts, especially Diego Rivera’s mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts. In this article I will also include a discussion of the visual production of Nora Chapa Mendoza and the Xicano Development Center (XDC) and explain how these diverse visual forms speak to an experience (un)like any other. With a history of agricultural and industrial labor, the Mexicana/o communities in Michigan and Detroit have suffered a level of oppression similar to, if not worse than, the oppression of other ethnic Mexican communities across the nation. Due to the particular class-based social position of Michigan Mexicana/os, these regional experiences relate to larger issues of labor activism and counterhegemonic resistance movements. One of my objectives is therefore to show that a MiChicana/o “home” is produced through the construction of a “universal” solidarity with other working-class and oppressed peoples in the region and throughout the world.

At present, knowledge of the cultural and artistic history of the MiChicana/o community prior to the *movimiento* is somewhat sparse. There exist small holdings of archival material housed primarily at Michigan State University and the University of Michigan. However, little is recorded of the specific visual artists working in the region during the early twentieth century. According to a biography by Yolanda Broyles-González (2003), famed Tejana musician Lydia Mendoza toured Michigan farmworker *campes* with her family as a child. Although only one example, Mendoza’s presence in the state demonstrates, at least superficially, that during the early to mid-twentieth century there did exist a cultural network that linked MiChicana/os with other Mexicana/os. This network was bolstered by the numerous cultural and civic institutions established in Detroit and other Chicana/o communities during the 1920s and 1930s (Miner 2005). These institutions will be discussed later in this article.

In terms of the visual or fine arts, little was documented or collected before the late 1960s. Material specifically addressing the art historical and visual legacy of the community needs to be fully uncovered and analyzed. I turn to art of the Chicana/o civil rights movement for multiple reasons. One is accessibility: since many activist artists are still practicing today, the *movimiento* era in Chicana/o cultural history is the ideal time

period for an initial investigation into the history of MiChicana/o visual culture, as the artists can be interviewed and can provide oral histories and archival material.

I have chosen to discuss the work of Nora Chapa Mendoza, George Vargas, Martín Moreno, and the XDC because these individuals and the organization were influential in producing and disseminating a uniquely MiChicana/o visual culture to a national audience. Vargas and Moreno were two of the most widely established muralists in Michigan from the movimiento. Additionally, since both artists have relocated to the Southwest, they have received recognition outside of the region yet remain indebted to their experiences in the Midwest. I include Mendoza because of her commitment to larger activist projects and her importance within MiChicana/o art history, while the XDC provides us with a framework within which to position a radical MiChicana/o political praxis. Each of the individuals and organizations examined in this article thus plays an irreplaceable role within the larger narrative of Chicana/o art history, although most are nearly absent from broad Chicana/o art histories. My arguments are grounded in art historical formal analysis in hopes of fully inserting MiChicana/o visual culture into both Chicano studies and art history discourses.

Following the approach explicated by Chicana feminist Chela Sandoval, I will evoke a multiplicity of tactics from a variety of methodological standpoints. Sandoval calls this hybrid positionality “differential consciousness.” For her, this oppositionality enables intellectuals (as well as artists and activists) to draw from disparate ideological frameworks of past movements and paradigms without being fully locked into a monolithic, doctrinaire field. According to Sandoval, this “tactical subjectivity” has the “capacity to recenter” without succumbing to partisan fragmentation (1991, 14). For this reason, I believe that an informed application of multiple approaches will best address the complicated cultural practices in Michigan. Trained as a social historian of art, I obviously bring this disciplinary approach to my study of MiChicana/o visual culture. As a labor activist and anarchist, mentored by Marxists, poststructuralists, and semioticians, I concurrently apply these seemingly contradictory approaches to MiChicana/o culture. As Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci so adeptly wrote from prison: “Worldviews are rarely consistent; they typically involve a contradictory amalgam of ideas” (1971, 333). Such is the case with the work addressed here.

Through the application of ostensibly paradoxical paradigms, I will recenter the discourse on Chicana/o visual culture by problematizing the

Southwest-centrism and by critically analyzing prominent MiChicana/o artworks. My application of differential consciousness can be viewed in my engagement with visual culture created in alliance with multiple political projects. It is for this reason that my analysis attends to both the seemingly conciliatory narratives of George Vargas, Martín Moreno, and Nora Chapa Mendoza and to the overtly radical aesthetics of the XDC. By way of both reformist and revolutionary political approaches, MiChicana/os have staked their claim along *la otra frontera*.

Mendoza, the XDC, and MiChicanismo

In terms of iconography within Chicana/o art, Aztlán is one of the most habitually evoked themes. However, painter Nora Chapa Mendoza rarely positions the concept of Aztlán within her visual language as an overt theme that is visually manifest. On the contrary, for Mendoza, Aztlán serves as an aboriginal unifying device that connects her work with other Native and Latina/o artists throughout the Americas. Curator Ursula R. Murray describes Mendoza for a 2000 exhibition of Michigan Latina/o artists as “soft-spoken yet articulate,” adding:

[She is] passionate about the conditions confronting the poor of North, Central and South America, our migrant workers, those disenfranchised by industrialization and capitalist interests, our undereducated children, and our hungry land-working “campesinos.” (Murray 2000, 12)

This passion, or rather compassion, that Murray documents is manifest in an enunciation of a distinct vision of Aztlán that does not alienate non-Chicana/os but rather constructs a complex network of social alliances that strive for social justice. This may in fact be the hallmark of MiChicana/o culture; it is “nationalist,” yet at the same time it is somehow receptive to mainstream ideas, ideologies, and aesthetics.

Although she does not specifically represent Aztlán in her work, this is not to say that Mendoza is disinterested in the role that Aztlán plays for Chicana/os, especially those in Michigan. Quite the opposite is true, as Mendoza is involved in Latina/o and indigenous spiritual practices and cultural struggles in both the United States and Mexico. Since the 1980s, Mendoza has actively practiced indigenous Mesoamerican spiritual lifeways. She does not participate in a condescending manner, but rather displays an earnest solidarity with anticolonial indigenous struggles throughout the continent. In many respects, Mendoza proposes a dialectic Aztlán that

embraces working-class struggles and the diasporic realities of transnational migration but is locked within an alternative *indigenismo*. Mass movements of people, therefore, become a common trope for Aztlán within her body of work.

As a self-taught artist, Mendoza received training similar to that of the first generation of Chicana/o artists in the Southwest. An analysis of the history of Chicana/o art demonstrates that the majority of these artists, even those trained within the university system, maintained a working-class solidarity and were often viewed as operating outside of or in opposition to the art market. However, if we discuss Mendoza's work solely in relation to her being self-taught, it is possible, and this frequently happens with Chicana/o and Latina/o art, that we would presuppose her status as a "vernacular" or "outsider" artist and would then be forced to operate in a reductive manner.¹ I believe it is instructive to position her work within the framework of a regional history and observe the manner in which she articulates specific narratives related to it. In other words, Mendoza's works are individual utterances that are specifically oriented toward a MiChicana/o audience. For this reason, the work of Mendoza often receives inaccurate readings by those who assume a generalized Latina/o or "Hispanic" context.

Mendoza mediates between the lived realities of the working-class Michigan Chicana/o community and the fine art market of metropolitan Detroit. Her trajectory as a practicing artist is one of "middle-class" economic mobility, but it is a mobility tied to an oppositional consciousness. Born in a one-room, dirt-floored *chante* in South Texas, Mendoza was only four when her mother died of tuberculosis (Arellano 2000). After spending time in South Texas as a migrant worker, she ended up in Detroit when her husband moved to the city to work. It was not until later in life, when she was in her forties and divorced, that she began her career as a visual artist. When Mendoza began making artwork is of importance to our discussion here, yet only in relation to *where* she began making it.

During her period of initial art making, Mendoza was living in the Great Lakes region. She was not making artwork as a response to the localized lived reality of South Texas, as were Santa Barraza and Carmen Lomas Garza; rather, Mendoza's art making emerged out of her experiences as a *Chicana living in Michigan*.² Grounding my arguments in an oppositional consciousness, I see it as paramount not to privilege one field over another but rather to investigate bodies from different positions. This complex positionality frequently turns to notions of place and space, as well as land, to properly situate Chicana/o bodies. Henri Lefebvre argues that "space is

permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations but also producing and produced by social relations” (1991, 286). The work of Mendoza posits Aztlán (which is a particular Chicana/o chronotope) as a unique social space permeated by conflicting social relations. How this mutually constitutive process operates in Michigan is of great importance. In her work and that of other artists discussed in this article, the social relations of class mediate how MiChicana/os identify and construct their culture. Additionally, migration and cultural change are at the forefront of MiChicanidad.

For this reason, three factors remain essential to the interpretation of Mendoza’s oeuvre: migration, labor, and the articulation of MiChicanidad. Yet these three individual factors, as part of a complex social identity, cannot be disentangled from other factors within her artwork. Like many Chicana/o artists, Mendoza works in a broadly defined narrative style, yet she does so as a critique of existing master and meta-narratives, even those being articulated from within the Chicana/o community. In the early 1990s, Mendoza worked on a series titled “Migrant Workers.” Works from this series were published as greeting cards to raise funds for the United Farm Workers and as illustrations for the book *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917–1970* (Valdés 1991). From this series we are able to discern the regionally specific strands within her work. An initial engagement with *Employment Agency* (fig. 4) reveals the narrative of four people, presumably *mexicano*, standing near text that reads “se necesitan betabeleros para Michigan” (beet pickers needed for Michigan). This is followed by a list of six Michigan cities where beet fields and processing plants were located. The denotation or noncoded iconic message of the narrative is obvious: it is a simple telling of the working-class traditions of the *campo*, of the manner by which Mexican workers were exploited by Anglo American employment agencies, and of the integral role that *mexicano* workers played in the development of Michigan agriculture. However, this reading, as well as associated readings, is unfortunately reductive and unable to deal with the critical manner by which Mendoza acts as an intermediary between existing Chicano histories and their revisioning. Here the coded iconic message within her work utters, to those able to understand its language, a narrative not usually apparent in contemporary Chicana/o or art historical discourses.

In 1990, the year this image was painted, literary critic Ramón Saldivar published *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*, in which one illustration shows a Texas office that recruited *betabeleros* for work in



Figure 4. Nora Chapa Mendoza, *Employment Agency*, 1990.

Michigan. The caption reads: “Migrant farmworkers and hiring agents gathering at an informal employment agency advertising work in Michigan for ‘beet pickers’ in Corpus Christi” (99). Although Saldívar is adept at merging Marxist criticism with Chicana/o literary texts, the inclusion of this particular image in *Chicano Narrative* appears arbitrary, as there is little talk of Michigan in the book.³

As an artist who revises dominant Chicana/o narrativized histories, Mendoza uses this photographic reproduction as the source material for the painting *Employment Agency*. However, instead of using the photograph for its basic illustrative nature, as Saldívar apparently does, Mendoza procures the image for its site-specificity and instigates a rearticulation of a particularized MiChicana/o (art) history. Of the cities that appear on the sign—Alma, Croswell, Caro, Lansing, Sebewing, and Saginaw—the writing of George Vargas places two of them, Saginaw and Lansing, as centers of Chicano art production in the state (1988, 253). I myself was born in Alma and raised in Caro, and I attended numerous *bailes mexicanos* in Sebewing and Saginaw. I have witnessed the fact that to this day each of these cities maintains a vibrant Latina/o community, all established and developed in response to the economic needs of the area. By being particularized, *Employment Agency* begins formulating a more inclusive Chicana/o visual narrative, one that includes otherwise marginalized

Chicana/o iconography. If, as Rafael Pérez-Torres maintains, “land lies at the heart of the Chicano movement” (2006, 115), Mendoza speaks of a place not commonly included in mainstream Chicana/o discourse. Although this place is not easily recognizable as Aztlán, works such as those that she created for Roberto Rodriguez and Patrisia Gonzales’s Aztlanahuac Project demonstrate her rectification of a Southwest-centric Aztlán by inserting Michigan into a dialogue with other popular narratives. In other words, by living in a place without a critical mass of Chicana/o bodies, Mendoza and other MiChicana/o artists produce work that is multilayered and transcends easily discernible readings.

Employment Agency, like most contemporary art (as well as Aztlán as a concept), functions as a palimpsest, with Mendoza reinscribing localized meaning onto a preexisting photograph temporarily circulating within the Chicana/o community. For example, while within Saldívar’s *Chicano Narrative* the linguistic signifiers of the cities in the photo (Alma, Crosswell, Caro, Lansing, Sebewing, and Saginaw) simply serve as tropes for the role of migrant labor within Chicana/o history and literature, Mendoza *redirects* these signifiers and embeds within the painting certain regional histories and identities. While certain elements in the original photograph, such as the dirt “sidewalks,” clearly appear to show a location other than Michigan, Mendoza has excluded these elements from her work, visually and textually placing it within the geographic specificity of Michigan.

Employment Agency begins to articulate the role that class identity and MiChicanidad play within the MiChicana/o community. A more recent work, *Los Repatriados* (fig. 5), although definitely within the same vein as *Employment Agency*, speaks directly to the role that migration plays within the history and culture of the region. On a noncoded level, as the title attests, this image retells the narrative of the forced repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans from Michigan, as well as other locations in the United States, during the 1920s and 1930s. This image identifies the truckloads of Mexicana/os being driven back to Mexico because of Depression-era joblessness in the United States. Here we see the actual process of migration, which within this image is read as the deportation of Mexicans and their forcible exclusion from the perceived opportunities of industrial Detroit. The coded iconic message is paramount to the work’s proper reception. While knowing the general history of the deportation activities within the region is important to the interpretation of this work, knowing community history becomes even more relevant to decoding the work from an insider’s perspective.



Figure 5. Nora Chapa Mendoza, *Los Repatriados*, 2001.

Beginning in 2001, a group of Detroit Chicana/os, including Mendoza, began conducting oral histories in the city's Latina/o community in an attempt to deconstruct, reconstruct, and document its problematic history. While many Mexicana/o families have been living in the city for generations, many of their ancestors and relatives were forcibly deported as part of the so-called repatriation activities. According to Paul Taylor, an economist who studied Mexican labor during the Great Depression era, a disproportionate number of the repatriates came from the Midwest (1933–34). This is highlighted in the work of the Los Repatriados Committee and Fronteras Norteñas.⁴

The community's response to this alienating practice of repatriation was overwhelming. Although numbers have never been analyzed, oral histories tell of numerous community members returning immediately to Michigan after their deportation to Mexico. So what Mendoza is doing with *Los Repatriados* is coded beneath the obvious image of *repatriación*: here we are simultaneously viewing *the deportation and the subsequent return* to Michigan of Mexicana/o laborers. It is this specific regional articulation that is aimed at revisioning current discourses in Chicana/o cultural studies.

It is important to note that Mendoza produced artwork for *Cantos al Sexto Sol*, a book published in conjunction with the Aztlanahuac Project (García-Camarillo et al. 2002), and she also appears in Roberto Rodriguez and Patricia Gonzales's documentary film *Amoxltli San Ce Tojuan*. Both of these projects by well-known public intellectuals position Chicana/o history

within a framework of continental indigeneity. Similarly, Mendoza engages Aztlán, but she does so from her position as a former migrant worker living outside of the U.S. Southwest—"Aztlán Ocupado"—as Armando Navarro attests (2005). Like other sacred sites hallowed by aboriginal peoples, Aztlán (as a creation/migration narrative) functions as an axis mundi for Mendoza, but one with its focus on process and journeys as opposed to a particular site within real space. If the indigenous Mexica considered Aztlán and Tenochtitlan to be alternate versions of the same concept, Mendoza envisions Aztlán as the actual movement between these two places. Because she lives and works in Michigan, Mendoza's connection to place is very much about the migrations, journeys, and movements between sites. This is commonly seen in MiChicana/o culture.

I believe that by analyzing both *Employment Agency* and *Repatriados*, we begin to understand how the MiChicana/o community views its localized (working-class) histories in the region. Mendoza is positioning her work within a certain art world paradigm. The cultural projects of the XDC, on the other hand, develop similar themes yet simply are not interested in operating within the parameters of fine art. Their visual and performative work is important for a variety of reasons, but I will focus here on their articulation of Aztlán in opposition to the essentialist discourses that have been posited by numerous scholars of Chicana/o history and literature.⁵ While the concept of Aztlán is multivalent, depending on its spatial, temporal, and political deployment, the XDC and its crossover membership in the Movimiento Estudiantil Xicana/o de Aztlán (MEXA, or more often, MEChA) at Michigan State University have been evoking an anarcho-syndicalist conceptual framework within which power may be contested. The XDC was a direct-action community organizing collective that was active during the mid-1990s. They conducted many successful organizing efforts in Lansing, Detroit, and the surrounding areas.⁶ By using recent theoretical refigurations such as those produced by Cherríe Moraga or Rafael Pérez-Torres, the XDC applies Aztlán to speak of an interstitial space where power is uprooted and "true" liberation enacted. For members of the XDC, as for Mendoza, Aztlán is a process as opposed to a physical site.

Michigan State University hosted the MEChA national conference in 1997. Although many of the discussions and sessions were problematic in terms of their individual stances on the "Chicana/o nation," the conference as a whole attempted to address the failures of nationalism and the manner in which it could be reengaged without falling into the essentializing problematics of constructing nationhood. The first page of the conference

program quotes from Emiliano Zapata's anarchist Plan de Ayala and displays the computer-generated graphic of a flag of the so-called nation of Aztlán (fig. 6). The flag, a solid black field with white text (or possibly red in a color reproduction), begins to position the nonterritorial Aztlán in alliance with an anarchist agenda, one very much aligned with the working-class identity of MiChicana/os. The text within the image simply reads AZTLAN, but the first letter of the text appears surrounded by a circle, symbolically standing in for the nonhierarchical structure that Aztlán must engage and enact if it is to serve, as Rafael Pérez-Torres argues, "to name that space of liberation so fondly yearned for" (2001, 235).

In fact, in 2004 MiChicana/o activists and XDC members Nora Salas and Ernesto Todd Mireles began to lay the groundwork for a broadly defined *anarcho-nationalism*. This hybrid "nationalism" expands upon the radical labor activities of anarcho-syndicalism by extending the concept of collective self-governance in the workplace to the "national" level. This attempt to reinscribe Aztlán with a radical working-class identity, as well as a rearticulation of socialist praxis through a Chicana/o framework,

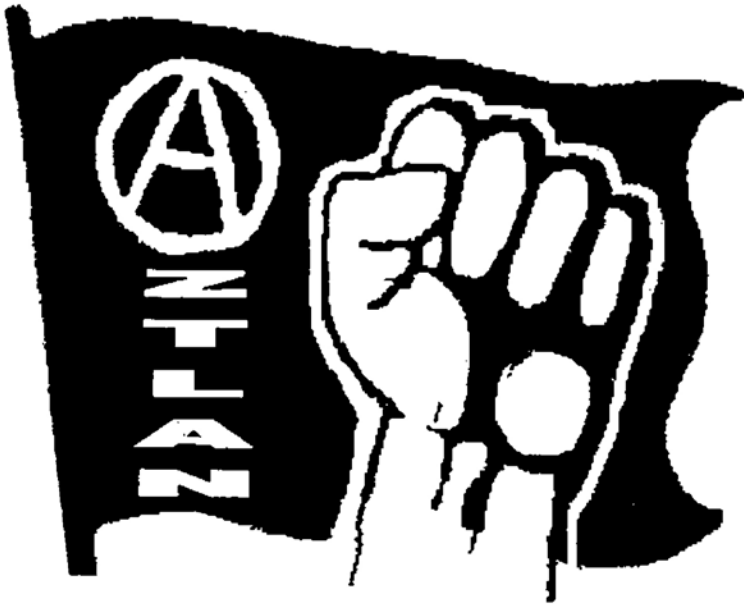


Figure 6. Ernesto Todd Mireles, graphic reproduced in the program for the 1997 MEXA national conference, "Nationalism: What It Is, What It Isn't."

is tied to a MiChicana/o class consciousness that did not simply end with the collapse of el movimiento but continues in the contemporary cultural practices of the Michigan Chicana/o community.

These politically dissident radicalisms seen in the work of Mendoza and the XDC have opened spaces for future non-essentializing Chicana/o cultural and social production. Through their radical political and cultural activities, these individuals in Michigan have been able to create a feeling of home in spite of certain economic, linguistic, and cultural exclusions. After all, Aztlán is in us all; we just need to claim it. These MiChicana/o cultural workers have staked their claim, yet somehow their work is often disregarded in national forums.

Placing MiChicana/o Art in Context

The existence of a Chicana/o artistic canon is still very much in question.⁷ Although certain artists have achieved mainstream recognition, a Chicana/o art history has yet to be fully written. The recording and documentation of Chicana/o murals, for instance, has received virtually no attention outside of California and the Southwest. In recent years, California Chicana/o murals have been addressed by art historians Holly Barnet-Sánchez and Eva Cockcroft, among others, while archival documentation by Judith Baca and her *comadres* at the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) has created a clearinghouse of public art. Apart from these developments, the documentation of murals by Chicana/o artists has received little consideration. As Rita González points out, “few monograph publications and scholarly articles detail the work of individual artists” (2003b, 3). The fate of Great Lakes and Midwestern Chicana/o murals is particularly serious, with little to no attention paid to the individual artists. In fact, there is virtually no art historical analysis of Midwestern murals and muralists, the only exception being the scant research on the Latina/o murals of Chicago. Much of this research was conducted twenty years ago.

In 1987, Chicago’s newly established Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum (now the National Museum of Mexican Art) hosted an exhibition titled *The Barrio Murals / Murales del Barrio*. As curator René Arceo Frutos writes in the catalog, the exhibition sought to highlight “the contributions that Mexican muralists have made to the Chicago mural scene” (1987, 2). This exhibition, occurring at the zenith of the community mural movement, documented the history of Latina/o murals in Chicago. Regrettably, similar exhibitions underscoring the importance of muralism within the

regional histories of the Chicana/o community have not yet come to fruition. This is representative of the failures of art historical scholarship and the institutions that fund them. Tracy Grimm of the University of Notre Dame's Institute for Latino Studies maintains that "relatively few institutions have initiated archival projects to find and preserve" Latina/o visual art and associated ephemera (2005, 2). In turn, MiChicana/o art history is very much in peril of vanishing without immediate changes in documentation and exhibition. Founded in 2001, Artes Unidas, a statewide coalition of artists supported by the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs, could possibly serve as the impetus for that change. But where exactly does MiChicana/o visual culture fit within the larger discourses on Chicana/o and Latina/o art history?

Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, known simply by the acronym CARA, was the first blockbuster exhibition of Chicana/o art to be hosted by mainstream institutions. Traveling to ten cities across the United States from 1990 to 1993, it served as the stimulus for further exhibitions, criticism, and documentation (see Griswold del Castillo, McKenna, and Yarbrow-Bejarano 1991). But even CARA was not without deficiencies. The exhibition displayed fifty-four murals in photographs and slides; of these, only seven came from the Midwest (loosely defined as Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, and Kansas), and four of those were from Chicago. Of the three remaining Midwest murals, two were painted in Michigan. While the Michigan murals thus made up less than 4 percent of all those in the exhibition, their inclusion nonetheless points to the existence of a productive Chicana/o mural movement in the state.

Although there was a dearth of Midwestern art exhibited in CARA, this does not necessarily point to a failure by project coordinators Holly Barnet-Sánchez and Marcos Sánchez-Tranquilino; rather, it reflects the unforeseen circumstances of selecting art by way of a "curatorial collective." In other words, the absence of a Midwestern narrative in the development of a Chicana/o art canon demonstrates the problems with the bureaucratic structure of the exhibition and art history in general. As Alicia Gaspar de Alba points out, the "academic voices . . . traditionally filtered by the curator of an exhibit, in a show that resisted the curatorial approach had to be filtered through the visions of the different organizers" (1998, 108). While the collectivity of the CARA selection process is commendable, even decisions made by consensus may marginalize certain communities, as was the case with the Midwest.

As a result, the scholarship on Chicana/o visual and artistic production continues to neglect the existing cultural practices in areas outside the Southwest. Although regional absences and biases within Chicana/o art historical and curatorial work were pointed out early in the development of a Chicana/o canon (which is still not fully formed), they have not been significantly addressed within the literature. As early as 1976, the journal *Aztlán* recognized the absence of academic material engaging historical and sociological concerns affecting Latina/os in the Midwest. In the summer of that year, *Aztlán* published a special issue devoted to the Midwest. It was in this issue that Gilberto (Gilbert) Cárdenas published “Los Desarraigados,” which examined the sociological impetus for Mexican migrations to the region. Since then, a multiplicity of counterhegemonic historical studies have been undertaken on the region. In fact, the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies gave labor historian Dennis Valdés the 2002 NACCS Scholar award for his achievements in the field. Valdés, professor of history and Chicano/Latino studies at Michigan State University, is particularly interested in working-class Mexicana/o histories in the Midwest. Yet even with the continued development and recognition of regionally specific Chicana/o histories, cultural studies and art historical scholarship in the area is still sparse. The most significant recent development in the field is the newly established Midwest Latino Arts Documentary Heritage Initiative at the University of Notre Dame’s Institute for Latino Studies.⁸

In 1982, Pat Mathey-White addressed the body of literature on the Northwest in *Bibliography of Chicano/Latino Art and Culture in the Pacific West*. Three years later, art historian Shifra M. Goldman and literary critic Tomás Ybarra-Frausto recognized the demographic need to study the Midwest and the Northwest in their annotated bibliography *Arte Chicano* (1985). These works notwithstanding, non-Southwestern Chicana/o art history remains entirely peripheral.

Nonetheless, much work is being done in Michigan to combat these deficiencies. As cultural workers, both George Vargas and Martín Moreno, the *CitySpirit* artists, have in one way or another worked to demarginalize research on regional Latina/o art histories. As a graduate student at the University of Michigan, Vargas wrote his PhD dissertation on the history of Latina/o artists in Michigan (1988) and published an occasional paper for the Julian Samora Research Institute addressing Michigan-based Cuban American muralist Carlos López (1999). Vargas has since been hired at Texas A&M University–Kingsville, a hotbed of Chicana/o visual art. His scholarship no longer deals specifically with issues in MiChicana/o visual

production, although his experiences in Michigan influence his art historical scholarship on Chicana/o art.

Moreno grew up in the Sunnyside barrio of Adrian, Michigan. He spent his childhood working in the tomato fields and his early adulthood in the chemical and manufacturing industries (G. Vargas 1988, 313–15). He was one of the key figures in the community mural movement in Michigan. In 1978 he painted *Vibration of a New Awakening* in Adrian and in 1980 the *Latino Experience in Michigan*, an interior mural at Eastern Michigan University. Like Vargas, Moreno left Michigan at least in part because of the lack of exposure for Latina/o artists in the state. He currently lives in Arizona, where he has gained recognition making art and working with Chicana/o youth.

George Vargas served on the Raza Art and Media Collective editorial committee alongside noted MiChicana/o artists and intellectuals Ana Cardona, Jesse Gonzales, S. Zaneta Kosiba Vargas, and Zaragosa Vargas. Although outside the scope of this article, the Raza Art and Media Collective, with its equitable gender relationship and its focus on the importance of visual art for Michigan Latina/os, merits an expanded study. Quoting George Vargas, Chicana anthropologist Karen Mary Davalos notes that the “rejection of a ‘strict Chicano or Latino/Raza aesthetic’ allowed Midwestern groups to support the Chicano nationalist project of self-determination . . . while remaining inclusive of artists whose identities were not Chicano” (2001, 78). In Chicago, MARCh (Movimiento Artístico Chicano) and art historian Victor Sorell have done an adequate job of documenting movimiento art-making practice in that city. The National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, El Museo Latino in Omaha, and the University of Notre Dame’s Galería América are important institutions in terms of documenting and exhibiting Latina/o arts in the Midwest. Likewise, there are dozens of community-run spaces that need further investigation.

While CARA presented artworks by Chicana/o artists across the United States, the fact that there were few Chicana/o art historians dealing with the Midwest established a lacuna in the representation of Midwestern Chicana/o cultural practices. While there were (and are) few historians of Latina/o art, Midwest Chicana/o art historians were and are even more scarce. This void, which remains today, needs to be assessed and the histories of Midwestern Mexicana/o artistic production must be documented, as Tracy Grimm (2005) and Rita González (2003a, 2003b), respectively, outline. With the lack of historical and theoretical texts that engage with

Chicana/o studies in the Midwest, this vacancy extends itself harshly into art history and cultural studies.

Nevertheless, regional and local Latina/o histories cannot be completely removed from national and international narratives. In 1968, the same year that Antonio Bernal painted the Del Rey mural (the first recognized “Chicano mural” in California), Mario Castillo and youths from Chicago’s Mexican barrio of Pilsen created a mural titled *Metafísica: The Wall for Peace* on the exterior wall of the Halsted Urban Progress Center. According to the *Barrio Murals* catalog, this was Chicago’s first public mural since the WPA and the impetus for the Chicana/o mural movement in Chicago and throughout the country (Arceo Frutos 1987, 1). Over the course of the next decade, community mural movements emerged around the globe. *Muralismo*, and its hybrid use of indigenous histories, became a marker of Chicana/o identity and a signifier of community sovereignty. Wherever one could find *colonias* and barrios there were most likely murals retelling local histories from a community perspective. Murals and other forms of Chicana/o artistic production, including *CitySpirit*, became a popular site of resistance and a location for the rearticulation of local “Hispanic” identities. Through highly adaptable visual forms, Chicana/o communities were able to position themselves and their histories on their own terms. Public art allowed them to create a visible “home” within the public sphere of an otherwise oppressive location.

Like countless murals painted as part of the community mural movement, many *movimiento* murals in Michigan expressed solidarity with working-class and oppressed peoples of the world. Internationalist solidarity was a recurring theme that connected *MiChicana/o* murals to other community-based art-making practices, as well as to global anticolonial struggle. We need only turn to Martín Moreno’s *Vibrations of a New Awakening* to see expressions of cross-cultural solidarity with other working and oppressed peoples. In this nonextant exterior mural in Adrian, racially ambiguous laborers march in protest through the rows of a factory farm toward the hideous architecture of an industrial factory. As posited in *Vibrations*, the “awakening” of humanity occurs through the “universality” embedded in all working-class and oppressed peoples of the world. In other words, our struggle to awaken and to be accepted as equals is a universal struggle to become fully human.

This expression of *solidaridad* was also present in Chicana/o poster production. In the essay “Not Just Another Social Movement,” George Lipsitz states that the

internationalism, class consciousness, and solidarity with struggles for social justice among other aggrieved groups manifest in these posters reveal that the movement was an effort to convince people to draw their identity from their politics rather than drawing their politics from their identity. (2001, 73)

As Lipsitz asserts, *MiChicana/os* were forming their identities based on political praxis and not solely on identity and racial politics. Although indigenous Mexican themes occupy an important space within the myriad expressions of *Chicana/o* visual culture around the state, as Davalos (2001, 78) makes apparent, they in no way function in a framework of orthodox nationalist exclusion. After all, we must keep in mind that *MiChicanismo* is connected, as Valdés succinctly argues, to a radical articulation of class struggle.

Finding the Barrio

While studies dealing with Southwestern ethnic Mexican histories have often focused on race and ethnicity as the impetus for subjugation, research dealing with Midwestern *Chicana/os* has often treated class as the primary basis for Mexican inequality. In his study of Mexican communities in urban and rural centers of the Midwest, Dennis Valdés emphasizes four reasons for a continued *Chicana/o* working-class consciousness:

First, the experience of conquest and systematic subordination in the Southwest was not replicated in the Midwest. Second, the sharpest race-based historical division in the region has been between Black and White, rather than Mexican and Anglo. Third, because of the smaller and more scattered Mexican population, there were fewer opportunities for a tradition of mutual and systematic hostility based on racial features or competing identities to develop. Fourth, Mexican migration to the region remained overwhelmingly a function of employer demands for unskilled labor. (2000, 19)

As Valdés argues, the northern movement of Mexicans responded to the seasonal industrial and agricultural needs for manual labor. This continued demand for labor positioned (and continues to position) Midwestern *Mexicana/os* in a certain working-class location within the region. While recent oral histories tell oppositional narratives of specific racial and linguistic oppression, Valdés's point is clear: the established discourses on race and class in *Chicana/o* studies are ineffective when applied to the specificity of Midwestern histories.⁹

It is through the cultural and artistic domains that I expand upon Valdés's claim of a regional, localized history, one that is tied to a world-systems theory of connected economic and cultural practices. As Rita González makes apparent, Chicana/os are all but absent from conventional art history textbooks. She concludes that there exists "a significant lack of literature on active and successful Latino artists" (2003b, 2). To make the matter worse, MiChicana/o artists are doubly absent from texts on Latina/o art.

To properly connect the regional history of Michigan Latina/os with those of the U.S. Southwest, we need to begin with the earliest migrations into the Midwest region. Initial *migrantes* came predominantly from Texas, mainly from in and around San Antonio, as well as from northern and north-central Mexico. Zaragosa Vargas writes that the "Detroit Mexican community took form during and after World War I when Mexican immigrant workers, mostly those who had worked on Midwest railroads and in steel mills and foundries, settled in the city" (1984, 1). This pattern of settlement created huge colonias and barrios across Michigan in industrial cities like Saginaw, Flint, Pontiac, and Lansing, among others.¹⁰

From the very earliest stages of migration, the Mexican American community in Michigan was subjugated by and subjected to the seasonal and economic peculiarities of the local labor market. While economies in the Southwest also had seasonal demands for workers, the cyclical nature of agricultural and industrial production in the Midwest was different, making the region's employers reliant on *trabajadores del campo* in the summer and on manual industrial laborers in the winter. Because the need for industrial labor was keyed to the harvesting and mining of raw materials, class and ethnic identities developed differently in the Midwest than in the Southwest.

According to Norman Humphrey, a sociologist working with Detroit's Mexican community during the 1930s, all Mexicana/os were perceived as working-class, regardless of their prior class affiliation in Mexico or the Southwest. He writes that even skilled professionals "tended to become common laborers" once they moved north, "as a consequence of the specialized character of American production" (Humphrey 1943). Unlike the severe phenotypical and "racial" oppression that Mexicans faced in the Southwest, the experience of Midwestern Mexicans was predicated on a working-class identity similar (although not identical) to that of other working-class immigrant groups. Although Humphrey collapses the complexities of social identity into a monolithic class system, what may be

taken from his position is that class, although not the only causality, must be addressed in tension with race, gender, and other social markers.

Much like the Mexican community in Los Angeles and countless other working-class communities of color, Detroit's Mexican community was spatially dissected into two separate parts when city planners ran an interstate highway through the heart of the *barrio* during industrial expansion (see fig. 3). The highway slicing through the community has become, as Gloria Anzaldúa might say, *una herida abierta* (1987, 3). To this day the highway divides the real space of the *barrio*, with community residents and institutions situated on either side of this open wound.

Although Anzaldúa evoked the *herida abierta* to speak about the U.S.-Mexico border, not a highway, she also recognized its application to all borders: geopolitical, community, racial, gender, sexual, and class, among others. She writes that "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (3). In effect, Southwest Detroit is the borderlands *par excellence*: situated between the United States and Canada, divided by the violence of the highway, marginalized by the regional Southwest-centrism of the Chicana/o community, and operating as a brown-skinned neighborhood in the black-white racial dynamics of a northern city. Following the open-endedness of Anzaldúa's *frontera*, I hope to expand our working definition of *la (otra) frontera* to incorporate the complexities of MiChicana/o experiences. After all, *la frontera* cannot be encapsulated simply by the geopolitics of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Michelle Habell-Pallán welcomes the signification of the U.S.-Canada border in our reformulation of José Martí's concept of *nuestra América* (1939). Habell-Pallán writes that "as a scholar trained in the southwest, I had never conceptualized Canada as participating in a larger culture of the Americas. However, my analytical framework was changed forever during my first drive across the northwestern border" between Washington state and the Canadian province of British Columbia (2005, 207). Likewise, many radical working-class Midwesterners construct an imaginary Canada capable of unraveling U.S. capitalist-colonialism (which, of course, it cannot). This imaginary is analogous to the way in which many working-class Mexicana/os envision the United States as enabling familial economic stability. It is through the concretization of this Canadian imaginary with the lived reality of the geopolitical border that *la otra frontera* is manifest. If *fronteras* are to remain theoretically relevant and fertile to our multifaceted intellectual and political projects, they must be reinvigorated to encompass *otras fronteras*, including *la frontera canadiense*.

Not surprisingly, it was along this *open wound*, the violence enacted by the highway and the Canadian border, that MiChicana/o muralists concentrated their didactic, pedagogical, and organizational efforts as part of *el movimiento*. A few hundred meters away from the highway is situated one of the few extant murals in Michigan from, as George Vargas refers to it, the Latino Mural Renaissance. At the corner of Bagley and Sainte Anne streets, artists Moreno and Vargas painted their outdoor mural. Although Chicana/o studies historiography habitually positions the late 1970s as the end of the *movimiento*, Davalos argues that in the Pacific Northwest the majority of Chicana/o murals were actually painted in the 1970s and 1980s and that “by 1974 the mural became one of the most popular visual forms throughout the United States” (2001, 67). In certain areas, such as the Northwest and Midwest, important *movimiento* activities occurred well into the 1980s and even the 1990s. As for Michigan, the late 1970s and early 1980s were the most active years for *movimiento* artists. During this productive period, artists were not only manufacturing vast amounts of work but were also theorizing about the artist’s role within the community and the significance of the physical location in which they constructed works.

So the actual site that *CitySpirit* occupies within the *barrio* is of utmost importance. Likewise, the position of the *barrio* in relation to the border is essential when discussing local Chicana/o cultural practices. As if attempting to reconstruct the border experience *desde el sur al norte*, the real space of the *barrio*, with its physical placement “north of the border,” can serve as a metonym for the Michigan Chicana/o experience. While the border is often used as a trope in Chicana/o studies, it functions here in a much more concealing manner. While Detroit’s Chicana/o community may appear analogous to counterpart communities in the U.S. Southwest, upon closer inspection these similarities become superficial and localized structures and identities need to be clarified.

In 1997–98, nearly twenty years after the initial painting of the *CitySpirit* mural, Michigan artists Vito Valdéz and James Puntigam painted a larger mural across the street, simply titled *The Cornfield*. Similar to *CitySpirit*, this public mural physically and metaphorically repositions Aztlán to the United States–Canada border. Valdéz led the restoration of *CitySpirit* in the same year. Although these two murals are stylistically and compositionally dissimilar, they both play a particular role within the community and help locate the cultural and physical space for the community frequently dubbed “Mexicantown.”

Within one city block of these two murals are the main cultural institutions of the barrio. Immediately to the east is the Roberto Clemente Community Center, named after the famous Boricua baseball player. While nonmembers of the community refer to the area as Mexicantown, the naming of the community center speaks to the Puerto Rican history and thus the Pan-Latina/o identity of the neighborhood.¹¹ To the south of the mural, toward the Detroit River and la frontera with Canada, is Sainte Anne's Church. For George Vargas, the church performs a particular role in the community. He writes that "in recent history, the church has served as an organizing force in the Latino colonia" (2000b). At certain moments in the history of the barrio, Saint Anne's has been instrumental as a meeting place and as a political force for Catholic Mexican Americans.

To the west of the mural, just across the street before reaching the highway, is the Bagley Housing Association (BHA) and its contemporary gallery space. While the gallery doesn't solely exhibit the work of local Chicana/o and Latina/o artists, the majority of its exhibitions feature the work of artists from Detroit and Michigan. In the past, the BHA Gallery has assisted scholars like me in initiating interviews with artists and has allowed us to present papers at gallery openings, usually attended by local artists. The gallery's director, Ursula Murray (2000), has worked with city and state agencies to create traveling exhibitions and corresponding catalogs of art by Michigan Latina/o artists.

La Casa de Unidad, a few blocks away, is another important cultural space within the community. Founded in 1981, la Casa de Unidad offered courses, hosted films and exhibitions, and served as the cultural core of the community. It has recently stopped offering services but hopes to reopen. In *Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Michigan*, Rudolph Valier Alvarado and Sonya Yvette Alvarado write that "the nonprofit organization's mission is to provide southwest Detroit and other communities with the best available resources and programs which discover, develop, celebrate, and advance the Hispanic/Latino arts" (2003, 64). La Casa de Unidad has also published collections of poetry and texts on the cultural history of the Latina/o community in Detroit. Although not mainstream or large institutions, the BHA and la Casa de Unidad have been pillars of the community by exhibiting individual and group shows, providing a space where artists can work with local youth, and developing artist networks within the city and state. Their particular histories need to be written and included in this discussion.¹²

***CitySpirit* as Marker of Michigan Experience**

As this article began by placing *CitySpirit* and *The Cornfield* as sites of community maintenance along *la otra frontera*, I will close my arguments by returning to *CitySpirit* as a signifier of MiChicana/o experience. As previously stated, in the late 1970s Vargas and Moreno, with the organizational help of Carolina Ramón, painted this work, now one of the last remaining movimiento murals in Detroit. *CitySpirit* drew upon multiple influences while asserting itself at the heart of the *barrio chicano*. Its name was an allusion to its funding by the National Endowment for the Arts' CitySpirit Program. The mural, in its specific location in the real space of the community along *la herida abierta*, plays a certain function in asserting a community identity and *home space* for Detroit Chicana/os.

In his work dealing with space and place in urban Chicana/o literature and culture, Raúl Homero Villa writes that

social commentators have long noted the importance of the barrio's internal "geographical identity." This identity, manifest in the unique conjunctural forms of its residents' cultural practices and consciousness, has been a vital mode of urban Chicano community survival against the pressures of a dominant social formation. (2000, 5)

Through their "internal geographical identity," MiChicana/os posit a unique form of localized consciousness, or as Sandoval would conclude, "differential consciousness" (1991). Like the visual production of Mendoza or the XDC, *CitySpirit* serves as a positive articulation of the community's cultural practices. In addition, *CitySpirit* contributes to the creation and maintenance of a Chicana/o home space along *la otra frontera*. Blocks away from the fragmentation caused by the poorly (or cleverly) planned highway construction, the Chicana/o community has asserted a communal sense of identity and home with the painting of *CitySpirit* and *The Cornfield*. Using Villa's language, *CitySpirit* creates a specific "geographic identity" by using both Chicana/o universalisms and references specific to the Detroit Chicana/o community. Many casual observers, Chicana/o and non-Latina/o alike, use the mural to identify the geography of the neighborhood and position themselves within the city. According to Vargas (2000a), thousands of those who have viewed the mural have no knowledge of the original artists or of the work's origins but appreciate it as a visual portrait of Mexicantown and of Detroit.

CitySpirit was painted in an industrial-grade paint on the side of a building in the center of Mexicantown. The painting is designed in a collage-like

manner with images painted virtually onto one another within the picture-plane of the flat wall surface. The main focal point of the composition is a tree in the center of the painting. This tree extends downward toward the surface of the sidewalk and upward to the roof of the building on which it is painted. To the right-hand side of the painting are a variety of iconographic images relating directly to precolonial Mexico, while the left-hand side locates the mural firmly within the local community. The overall theme of the composition rearticulates the local history of Mexican Detroit, but it does so by way of a self-determining community visual narrative.

The iconography of *CitySpirit* draws directly upon the urban, pluri-ethnic, working-class history of Detroit, but it is grounded in an earth-based, agricultural Mexicana/o labor history, as Vargas notes:

One of the most important models that [the artists] considered was Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* fresco cycle executed in 1932 and 1933 at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Its design features a historical and cultural portrait of the city of Detroit and the state of Michigan, from ancient to modern times. Inspired by Rivera's simple but accurate narrative of the agricultural, industrial and scientific technology of a contemporary era in Michigan, the two artists organized the design elements according to a symmetrical framework: a simple tree would unify the ancient and contemporary worlds. (2000a)

Unlike murals by Chicana/o artists in the Southwest, *CitySpirit* directly links Vargas and Moreno, as well as Detroit Mexicans, to Diego Rivera. Many Chicana/o art historians have asserted that among the painters collectively known as Los Tres Grandes—Rivera, David Alfaró Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco—Rivera has often been seen as having the least influence on Chicana/o muralistas in the Southwest. While this may be an accurate portrayal of Rivera's influence on California muralists, the work of many artists of Mexican descent in Michigan can be traced either iconographically or compositionally to Rivera and especially to his *Detroit Industry* murals. In fact, oral histories tell the story of Rivera's interaction with the parents of a certain Chicano artist still actively working in the community today. Accordingly, Diego Rivera's presence within Chicana/o art in the Midwest is not matched anywhere else in the United States. In 1972, Chicago artist Marcos Raya created a "Chicano version" of Rivera's *Man at the Crossroads*. Additionally, Martín Moreno and George Vargas both continue to evoke Rivera's Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) frescos as a source of both artistic and aesthetic inspiration. In its founding principles, Artes Unidas, a coalition of Latina/o artists

in Michigan, specifically recalls Rivera and Frida Kahlo as MiChicana/o cultural patrimony.

In *CitySpirit*, the iconography of a tree and its root structure dominates the composition, with the tree taking up nearly one-third of the space and the roots and mineral substrata extending the entire width of the working surface. To either side of the tree are enormous hands giving strength and support to the base of the tree. Within its trunk are two ancient sculptural forms, one referencing Africa and the other indigenous Mesoamerica. Here solidarity is established between the working-class peoples in the black and brown communities of Detroit. Since Detroit has such a large African American population, this alignment seems appropriate. Even so, cross-cultural solidarity was a hallmark of the civil rights movement that came to a head in 1968 with Ralph Abernathy's Poor People's Campaign, which included African American, Native, and Latina/o activists and community leaders. Both Reies López Tijerina and Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales participated in the campaign.

To the right of the "Cosmic Tree" are icons delineating the indigenous legacy of Mexico. Both earthly and sacred versions of Quetzalcoatl (who was both an actual human being and a spiritual energy or deity) become manifest inside a representation of Da Vinci's *Renaissance*, or *Vitruvian Man*, as well as the re-creation of an architectural Quetzalcoatl, an image frequently seen in Chicana/o murals. In Mexica culture, this plumed-serpent *teotl* (best translated as "energy," but frequently mistranslated as "deity") was one of the main spiritual figures. In addition to the Quetzalcoatl of Mexica cosmology, Vargas and Moreno include the Mayan Chac Mool figure who, according to George Vargas, "represents a fallen warrior" (2000a). Like other Chicana/o muralists in the Southwest, Vargas and Moreno rearticulate both Mexica and Maya iconography within a single visual narrative. By including specific indigenous Mexican symbology, Vargas and Moreno assert an indigenous-mestiza/o identity for Detroit Chicana/os. This mural establishes the fact that although Chicana/os have migrated to Detroit from the Southwest or Mexico, they are indigenous to this continent and thus cannot be dehumanized as "illegal aliens." This assertion of belonging, as seen in much of the current cultural production being created in Mexicantown, helps fashion a sense of home within Southwest Detroit. As Shifra Goldman and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto write, the use of "pre-Columbian motifs in Chicano art served to establish pride and a sense of historical identity for the artists and the communities they addressed" (1985, 40). *CitySpirit*, elucidating a "historical identity" combined with a "geographical

identity,” is intended for a MiChicana/o audience and helps establish and maintain community along la otra frontera.

While the right side of the mural shows a Chicana/o interpretation of indigenous Mexican histories, the left side portrays modern Mexicantown emerging as a major junction in this postindustrial city. This imagery underscores the strong presence of both Mexican and Mexican American culture in Detroit while representing a critical part of the multicultural, multiracial population in Michigan. Contrasting with the right side of the image, the left side of the mural does not appear as heavy with collage-like imagery. In this portion of the composition, Vargas and Moreno have included many different elements of Mexicantown’s built architectural landscape. For instance, they have depicted the Hubbard Richard building, the location where the mural is painted; Sainte Anne’s Church; downtown Detroit’s Renaissance Center, recently renamed after an automotive corporation; and the Ambassador Bridge, the gateway through la frontera norteña.

Across the top of the mural are a dualistic representation of night and day as well as a man and woman controlling their own destinies, as symbolized by the industrial cogs. Here the homage paid to Rivera is apparent. Unlike Rivera’s *Man and Machine* fresco, which uses images of laborers to represent his vision of a proletarian future, Moreno and Vargas have used laboring Mexicana/os to portray their familial ties to industrial labor, their communities’ dependence on manual labor, and a continued working-class consciousness. So while many aspects of the mural recall Rivera’s fresco cycle at the DIA, Vargas and Moreno append the stories of *Detroit Industry* to fit a late-1970s Mexican American context. Like Nora Chapa Mendoza, Vargas and Moreno use their visual art as a critique of established master and meta-narratives to correspond to their individual and communal lived experiences.

As previously stated, the focal point of the mural is the central element of a tree. According to George Vargas, the tree can be seen as a source of energy, symbolizing the Cosmic Tree that featured prominently in pre-Columbian, Egyptian, Christian, and Buddhist art (2000a). Vargas and Moreno use the tree in much the same way that Rivera uses a “tree structure” in his DIA frescos. Art historian Francis O’Conner has argued that the entire structuring of Rivera’s DIA mural cycle, specifically his use of directionality, comes from the Mixtec Codex Féjerváry-Mayer (1986, 218).

The use of the tree by Vargas and Moreno, and Vargas’s allusion to it as the Cosmic Tree, is a direct gesture not only to Rivera and his use of

directionality but also to the indigenous cosmology and artistic production of Central Mexico. Once again, Vargas and Moreno are asserting the specific identities of Detroit Chicana/os: even though they are geographically distant from Mexico and the Southwest, they are able to incorporate, recontextualize, and rearticulate these “Mexican” epistemologies in the face of adversity. According to Frantz Fanon, this is what differentiates between culture and custom:

Culture has never the translucidity of custom; it abhors all simplification. In its essence it is opposed to custom, for custom is always the deterioration of culture. The desire to attach oneself to tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one’s own people. (Fanon 1963, 224)

After all, these artists and activists are interested in constructing a vibrant culture, not purely reifying custom.

Directly below the tree, spanning the entire width of the mural, are various mineral, root, and seed elements. The references here are multiple. The use of imagery in a Rivera-esque manner again connects directly to the *Detroit Industry* murals. On the north and south walls of the Garden Court, Diego Rivera used minerals to represent what he saw as the four races of humanity. Below each of these racially constructed figures, Rivera continued depicting the mineral substrata. In a pamphlet on *Detroit Industry*, Linda Downs writes that “gigantic hands grasp materials used in the production of steel, symbolizing both mining in particular and the aggressive drive to capture the riches of the earth in general” (1994, 5). For Vargas and Moreno, in contrast to Rivera, the hands do not pull minerals from the earth but instead grow organically from it. While Rivera expressed an unorthodox pro-industrial Marxism, Moreno and Vargas, as citizens in a late-capitalist United States, have seen the ill effects of industrialization on the earth and on all working peoples. Here, the artists have chosen instead to portray the minerals as remaining in the earth and thus sustaining the hand. The artists have taken an overtly ecological stance.

In his essay addressing *CitySpirit*, Vargas writes that “the unique geology of Michigan is pictured, a source of various minerals and fuels in the Great Lakes region. Iron ore provides steel which is used in the manufacture of automobiles, the state’s leading industry” (2000a). Here the minerals, native to the region, stand in for the brown-skinned Mexican working class. Iron ore, representing the brown Mexican body, positions Detroit Mexicans as an “organic” working-class community (not “illegal,” as immigration

proponents would have it) that works alongside other groups in this location that straddles la frontera norteña. Following Raúl Villa's assertion, the local (read Native) mineral elements, as well as specific references to the lived environment of the local community, are used to position a "geographical identity" for Detroit Chicana/os. It is this identity that the communities in and around Mexicantown create in contrast to the "pressure of a dominant social formation" (Villa 2000, 5).

In Rivera's *Detroit Industry*, the four "races" of humanity extract the materials from the earth, reproducing Rivera's epistemology of *Man (Being) Master of the Universe*, an ideology that he enacted in the infamous non-extant Rockefeller Center mural in New York (*Man at the Crossroads*) and subsequently replicated in Mexico City (*Man Master of the Universe*). In the DIA fresco cycle, Rivera used minerals to represent racial difference, with iron ore representing the indigenous peoples of the Americas. For Vargas and Moreno, the same metaphor applies, but it is enacted in a different manner. While Vargas specifies that iron ore is used to fuel the steel industry, the ore, referencing Rivera, also becomes the metaphoric indigenous Mexican labor. In fact, "la raza de bronce," as expressed in El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán, translates in this mural, for Vargas and Moreno, into "the iron ore people." Since the ore operates as a trope for the Native/Mexican body, as long as the ore remains in the earth the Native and mestiza/o (Mexican) labor cannot be colonized and exploited. In a sense, leaving the minerals unmined signifies the anticolonial body of the Western hemisphere. This simple visual device allows for an attack on the colonizing practices of capitalist economies. Like the narratives of Mendoza, this MiChicana/o mural continues to attack the hegemonic narrative of both the Southwest Chicana/o experience and that of working-class, "immigrant" Detroit. With the iron ore, as the Mexican body, deposited solidly within the earth, the Chicana/o community is represented as having likewise solidified its sense of home in the city and along la otra frontera.

CitySpirit's location at the heart of Mexicantown and its recent restoration have ensured that the mural will continue to be a signifier of home for Detroit Mexicana/os. In addition to its immediacy in the community, one of its creators, George Vargas, is one of the few scholars to document the history of Michigan Latina/o and Chicana/o art. Because of his role as not only an artist but also a cultural critic and historian, this public work may be one of the only movimiento-era murals in Michigan to remain intact after the first decade of the twenty-first century. Yet transformations are occurring within many Midwestern institutions. Barring a total collapse

of the present infrastructure, we may eventually witness the appropriate disciplinary investigation of Midwestern Chicana/o art within both art history and Chicana/o studies. We are already beginning to see these structural renovations, thanks to demographic changes and increased institutional support.

Notre Dame's Midwest Latino Arts Documentary Heritage Initiative could take the initial step by documenting and archiving the vast array of works produced in the region, while Michigan State University's new doctoral program in Chicano/Latino studies can help develop a generation of graduate students aware of the issues facing the Midwestern Chicana/o community and its cultural legacy. As these sorts of projects emerge across the Midwest, there is also a need for a large art historical investigation that publishes works on individual artists as well as the general histories within the region. This could materialize as a simple curatorial project or as the publication of a series of book-length monographs and graduate theses. In addition to the actual efforts taking place in the Midwest, there must also be a paradigmatic shift away from Southwest-centric thinking within Chicana/o studies. Institutions based in California, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico and the individuals staffing them must incorporate works produced by Midwest artists into their programming. I believe that the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center's *A Ver: Revisioning Art History* project, which is possibly the most important Latina/o art historical development in the past ten years, must incorporate additional non-Southwestern artists within its database of Chicana/o artists. As a result of such steps, a richer and fuller understanding of Chicana/o cultural history will be within reach.

In the end, MiChicana/o visual culture acts as a (re)centering device within the barrio and establishes an organic sense of community and home along the U.S.-Canada border. By turning to *CitySpirit*, as well as to the work of Mendoza and the XDC, I hope that we may begin to rectify the omissions and absences in the development of an expanding Chicana/o artistic canon. Through the simultaneous problematization and resolution of *la frontera*, we begin to transcend the present discursive limitations of Chicana/o studies and open up new possibilities. After all, is it not this "opening up" that allows the borderlands to be so politically transgressive? And if so, have MiChicana/o artists and activists succeeded in opening up *la frontera*? *Vamos a ver*.

Notes

1. Examples of such reductionism are unfortunately quite frequent. For instance, the work of Carmen Lomas Garza is commonly positioned as “folk art.” In *Arte Latino: Treasures from the Smithsonian American Art Museum* (2001, 46), Jonathan Yorba considers her paintings “delightful works,” as if the work of Lomas Garza serves no other purpose but to “delight”!

2. It is interesting to note that while Santa Barraza calls South Texas her home, Carmen Lomas Garza produces her images about South Texas from San Francisco.

3. A reference to Michigan does appear on page 137 of *Chicano Narrative*. This is in relation to Rolando Hinojosa’s evocation of Michigan in *Estampas del Valle* (1973), which was later rewritten in English and reissued as *The Valley* (1983).

4. This is discussed in my article in *Third Text*, “El renegado comunista: Diego Rivera, La Liga de Obreros y Campesinos, and Mexican Repatriation in Detroit” (Miner 2005).

5. It must be noted that many artists were in fact complicit in the production of an essentialized Aztlán. These artworks are commonly addressed in Chicana/o art historical literature. Here, I am interested in explicating the complexities and multiple Aztláns, as opposed to a monolithic Aztlán.

6. Although little has been written about the history and activism of the XDC, many of its core organizers are presently working on various historical projects that address Chicana/o history and activism in Michigan and the Midwest.

7. Although it may appear that attempting to create a definitive typology— aesthetic or otherwise—of MiChicana/o art would make sense within the overall scheme of this essay, I have intentionally avoided this discursive stance. Diverging from the work of Alicia Gaspar de Alba, in particular her essay “There’s No Place Like Aztlán: Embodied Aesthetics in Chicana Art” (2004), I contend that the codification of “ethnic” aesthetics simply sustains a community’s marginal position within larger art historical fields. Although MiChicana/o art and visual culture may produce a unique visual language, I believe that it is more informative to recognize its ambiguous influence than to attempt to codify what it is.

8. For information on the Midwest Latino Arts Documentary Heritage Initiative, see the project’s website at <http://www.midlad.org>.

9. The unpublished work of Estrella Torrez, visiting lecturer at the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University, delineates how Mexican and Mexican American agricultural labors have been systematically stripped of language sovereignty through educational policies.

10. While the term *colonia* (colony) usually demarcates a rural community, within Michigan both rural and urban Latina/o communities have been considered colonias. Within the historiography of the region, some of the earliest English-language texts about Michigan Mexicans refer to the “Detroit Mexican colony.” Therefore, in this essay I use the terms *colonia* and *barrio* interchangeably. Similarly, Juan R. García (1996) uses *colonia* when discussing urban Mexican communities in the Midwest.

11. Similarly, Wayne State University's Latina/o studies program, although in peril of collapsing, is named the Center for Chicano-Boricua Studies, highlighting Latina/o solidarity in the city of Detroit.

12. A sustained study of the history and role of the Bagley Housing Association gallery and La Casa de Unidad is a project that should be undertaken, but the specific role of these institutions within the Chicana/o art movement in Detroit falls outside the scope of this paper. I mention the gallery so that readers can place *CitySpirit* in relation to important community institutions.

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