

**San Jose State University**  
**SJSU ScholarWorks**

---

National Association for Chicana and Chicano  
Studies Annual Conference

2001: 28th Annual: Beginning a New Millennium -  
Tucson, AZ

---

Apr 1st, 4:00 PM

# Re(a)d Roots: Grounding History, Identity, and Performance in the work of Celia Herrera Rodríguez

Irma Mayorga

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/naccs>

---

Irma Mayorga, "Re(a)d Roots: Grounding History, Identity, and Performance in the work of Celia Herrera Rodríguez" (April 1, 2001).  
*National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Annual Conference*. Paper 16.  
<http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/naccs/2001/Proceedings/16>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Annual Conference by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).

CHAPTER  
FOURTEEN



*Irma Mayorga*

*Re(a)d Roots: Grounding History,  
Identity, and Performance in the work  
of Celia Herrera Rodríguez*

1. ARTE

I have identified myself as being ‘indigenist’ in outlook. By this, I mean that I am one who not only takes the rights of indigenous peoples as the highest priority of my political life, but who draws upon the traditions—the bodies of knowledge and corresponding codes of values—evolved over many thousands of years by native peoples the world over. This is the basis upon which I not only advance critiques of, but conceptualize alternatives to the present social, political, economic and philosophical status quo...this gives shape...to the goals and objectives I pursue...

—WARD CHURCHILL, “I AM INDIGENIST:  
NOTES ON THE IDEOLOGY OF  
THE FOURTH WORLD”

The trauma of history dividing and uniting the  
wretched of the earth can only be undone in  
strategically adventurous, repeat performances.

—AMIT S. RAI, “THUS SPAKE THE SUBALTERN”<sup>2</sup>

If the intention of a ceremonial element in Chicana art “reveals the role of belief, healing and celebration in the ongoing lexicon of women’s work,” as Amalia Mesa-Bains describes, then Celia Herrera Rodríguez’s mixed-media altar installation, “Red Roots/Black Roots/Earth (Tree of Life),” stages an important reelaboration of this intent.<sup>1</sup> The desire of Rodríguez’s altar is to address and reformat the centrality of violence in the making of *mestizaje*, allowing this work not only to recover the past but also “to underscore the loss inscribed in the social body” of Chicana/os.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, Rodríguez’s woman’s work crafts a cultural narrative that does not immediately leap to conjoin resiliency and hope, but rather, looks back to mark and make perceptible deracination and devastation. Her praxis does not build from a subtle methodology of feminine subversion, satire, or innuendo, but rather, performs a forthright feminist critique of the intersectional loci of gender, history, land, memory, and culture made visible in the tautness of her work’s minimalist symbolic lexicon. In this, her strategy stages an important counterpoint to the dominant aesthetics of Chicana/o *rasquache*.

As Tomás Ybarra-Frausto offers in his well-rehearsed definition, *rasquache* in Chicana/o aesthetics is “a witty, irreverent, and impertinent posture that recodes and moves outside established boundaries,” and it is “rooted in Chicano structures of thinking, feeling, aesthetic choice. It is *one form of a Chicano vernacular*, the verbal-visual codes we use to speak to each other [emphasis added].”<sup>4</sup> Mesa-Bains marks the Chicana manifestation of *rasquache* as “domesticana.” In either instance, what is important to note here is that *rasquache* is but “*one vernacular*” of Chicana/o verbal-visual codes. Often, the aesthetics’ seductive dominance supercedes this overlooked delineation. I suggest here that Rodríguez’s work composes an important, inverted

differential vernacular of Chicana/o aesthetics, which has implicit affiliations to both *rasquache*'s and *domesticana*'s intent, yet molds a revised ethics of remembering for Chicana/o aesthetics. Rodríguez's work renders an efficacious poetics of loss enacted to search out redressive possibilities for the Chicana/o social body.

Resistance and affirmation have come to be hailed as the hallmark qualities of Chicana/o art's expression of the political.<sup>5</sup> Rodríguez reformats resistance's oppositional strategy, stressing the indigenous element of *mestizaje*'s components to invoke redress. The symbolic actions of redress are both powerful articulations of loss and longing and endless searches for remedy and reparation.<sup>6</sup> Affirmation relies upon a sense of the positive, validation, and confirmation to counter past wrongdoing. In contrast, redress revisits loss, demanding retribution, and a setting right of those wrongs. In these considerations, Rodríguez's work constitutes itself within a decidedly redressive performative. Here, I use redress in Saidiya Hartman's illuminating study of the term, which she applies to the examination of a damaged social body:

Redress. . . is an exercise of agency directed toward the release of the pained body, the reconstitution of violated natality, and the remembrance of breach. It is intended to minimize the violence of historical dislocation and dissolution—the history that hurts. Redressive action encompasses not only a heightened attention to the events that have culminated in the crisis but also the transfiguration of the broken and ravenous body. . . into a bridge between the living and the dead. The event of captivity and enslavement engenders the necessity of redress...<sup>7</sup>

Approaching memory with the impetus of redress steers the act of remembering away from nostalgia or ambivalent recollection into a more demanding and constitutive act. It punctures these static layers allowing for the discussion of issues such as dislocation, rupture, shock, and forgetting to emerge.<sup>8</sup> Breach in Rodríguez's Chicana/o vernacular

is her attempt to raise the effacement or obfuscation of Native origin, and Rodríguez's altar attends to articulating Native loss within mestizaje—positioned in her work as a “violated, captive body” of social memory. In her concept, Hartman revises Victor Turner's notion of redress for his schema of the phases of social drama.<sup>9</sup> Hartman recalibrates Turner's ideas to describe more succinctly the acts of abject peoples: the social drama of oppressed people's will repeatedly stall upon the redressive phase without fundamental changes in the external social forces which produce breach and crisis.<sup>10</sup> Hartman's reconceptualization of redress can be located throughout “Red Roots/Black Roots/Earth (Tree of Life)'s” signifying lexicon (figure 1).

“Red Roots/Black Roots/Earth (Tree of Life)” stages the social drama of Chicana/o history, symbolically and figuratively, to evince the tragic scope of mestizaje. The Tree of Life contained within Rodríguez's altar radically breaks from traditional lush and baroque Tree of Life representations. In the mexicana/o figuration of the craft, the Tree of Life signifies good luck, fortune, and prosperity<sup>11</sup> and builds on an iconography assembled from both Native cosmologies and the Christian biblical narrative of Adam and Eve in Paradise. In total, a Tree of Life represents a fecund state of being through its aesthetic.<sup>12</sup> Rodríguez's Tree of Life, her installation's centerpiece, repeats and cites, *with a difference*, the significations affixed to a Tree of Life's symbolic logic. Rodríguez's “Tree” tactically recodes this iconography and remetaphorizes its symbolic lexicon by physically transfiguring the Tree's structural features to emphasize loss and despair.<sup>13</sup> As Rodríguez's exhibition notes explain: “Originally, I thought this altarpiece would be a beautifully sculptured cabinet-like structure made of willow, painted silk and beadwork, where I would place the tree (of life) inside. But such beauty is irrelevant here. It is not where I have been standing, looking out at fragmented families, battered landscapes... So, this is not a beautiful tree...”<sup>14</sup> Thus, her altar bears a desolated tree indicative of this damaged condition.

Since pre-history, the sanctity of trees has been used to signify sacred dimensions.<sup>15</sup> In Native cosmologies, the sacred tree is the figurative

synonym used to connote the condition of human life. Or, as the holy man Black Elk eloquently eulogizes in his oral account,

...These things I shall remember by the way, and often they may seem to be the very tale itself...

But now that I can see it all as from a lonely hilltop, I know it was the story of a mighty vision....of a holy tree that should have flourished in a people's heart with flowers and singing birds, and now is withered...<sup>16</sup>

Black Elk ends his story by igniting the interanimations between the tree and atrocities against his people: "There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead."<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising that Rodríguez's viewpoint as a Chicana, "where I have been standing, looking out," strongly echoes Black Elk's position "as from a lonely hilltop" as when he gazes upon the history of his deracinated, now mutilated people upon a snowy battlefield. Indeed, Black Elk's oral strategy is the precise assessment Rodríguez desires to describe about the condition of her own Native "nation" through her tree's reformatted symbology.

Rodríguez's tree is neither robust nor ornate, but rather, a denuded tree; its evocations resonate with pain, deprivation, dispossession, and grief—structures of feeling and states of being that continue to describe the positionality of Chicana/os within the US nation-state and the indigenous within the terrain of Chicana/o remembrance and culture. Before inducting cultural affirmation, Rodríguez's work inverts the paradigm of *mestizaje* in Chicana/o cultural production, consciously canceling the celebratory spirit of accumulation and fragmentation associated with hybridity's invocation, and in the same vein, measuring the co-optation of these traits by the hegemony of postmodern aesthetics. Through a representational economy of lessness, Rodríguez's altar addresses the "history that hurts" from a consciousness of both feminine *and* feminist mourning to educe valuable indigenous components lost in the cultural *mêlée* of identic formation. This inverse aesthetic abandons *rasquache* in lieu of a modality that refuses to romanticize, flatten out, masculinize, or marginalize indigenous originary sources in Chicana/o cultural production—its aim is to figure a new aesthetic of resistance.

The most commanding visual element of “Red Roots” is a small, black, bulto (bundle) held in the Tree of Life’s center (figure 2). The bundle is roughly the size of an infant. Flowing from the bulto’s lower side are crimson strips of cloth, conjuring the image of blood streaming from the seemingly lifeless bundle. Lengths of red cord also emanate from the bulto’s center and tether the bundle to a wooden cross that lies below (figure 3). As Rodríguez explains: “The center of the tree holds a ‘bulto.’ It contains all that is remembered, and all that we have forgotten.” More specifically, the bundle’s leash to the cross serves as metonym for indigenous memory’s constraint in the wake of Christianity. The bundle’s lifeless form visually and strategically ironizes a Tree of Life’s cultural narrative; this tree is unable to produce life, and rather, offers up the fruit of death from its limbs.

Rodríguez’s installation enacts the concepts of redress through an ensemble of indigenous performative components creating what I suggest is a “theater of memory.” As performance theorist Peggy Phelan notes, an increasing variety of the arts have now engaged performative modes to create an “interactive exchange between the art object and the viewer.” In the case of “Red Roots” and the Chicana/o spectator, these interactive figurations form a powerful identificatory circuit as the revenants of *mestizaje*’s violence make petitions to our individually and collectively violated indigenous roots, calling us to redressive actions that can function transfiguratively in retrospective *and* prospective senses.

## 2. ARTE / PERFORMANCE

On this occasion I am, for I imagine that I am; and  
on this occasion you are, for I imagine that you are.  
And this imagining is the burden of the story, and  
indeed it is the story.

—N. SCOTT MOMADAY, “  
THE MAN MADE OF WORDS”

As Amalia Mesa-Bains suggests in her essay for the exhibition *Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art*, Chicana altar-art such as “Red Roots,” which utilizes differential spiritual traditions to address the socio-historical, begins the repair work necessary for cultural healing.<sup>21</sup> In this stead, the *performance* connected to “Red Roots” insists that to heal historical wounds we must make a more thorough assessment of the damages—a closer look at the *cositas quebradas*—which expands Rodríguez’s redressive performative. For this performance piece, Rodríguez again culls from indigenous nutrient sources to create what Western art tends to describe as performance art. However, I suggest here that the endeavor to engage an indigenous performative does not merely serve as a vehicle for aesthetic re-citation, rather it is a search for an alternative consciousness to destabilize the histories of hegemony and oppression. Moreover, this search for a differential consciousness deploys Chicana theorist Chéla Sandoval’s methodology of the oppressed, a theory and practice invoked to engender social change. Sandoval’s interest lies not in identifying how the state subjugates, but rather, how citizen-subjects repel and/or escape subjugation; her interest lies in excavating the technologies needed for resistant acts that lead to emancipation. Of primary concern is Sandoval’s quest to identify an oppositional theory and practice that oppressed peoples can craft and consciously apply in order to generate resistance and liberate themselves from the neocolonial constraints of the dominant social order.<sup>1</sup> Sandoval’s ideas stem from the extensive study of linkages between “the great oppositional social movement practices of the latter half of the twentieth century,” especially those undertaken by social movement groups within the US.<sup>22</sup> In the following analysis, I will read Sandoval’s groundbreaking method against Rodríguez’s performance *Cositas Quebradas (Broken Things)* to consider the political ramifications of Rodríguez’s performance work.<sup>23</sup>

Within the parameters of the overwhelmingly Anglo dominated genre of performance art, Rodríguez’s Chicana figurations attempt to recuperate a resistant art practice. Roselee Goldberg, the first art historian to



organize a genealogy of performance art, defines the genre as “live work by [live] artists....<sup>24</sup> For Goldberg, definitions of performance art must retain an open-ended fluidity: “Performance art actually defies precise or easy definition...”<sup>25</sup> Scholars from a theater or anthropological base have expanded Goldberg’s definition to move performance work out of an art world context, essentially revealing the racial and class-based boundaries Goldberg’s perspective constructs. As Goldberg describes:

It is only in what we call the art world that it is possible to invent a new genre from scratch... The reason is that the art world remains the most permissive of cultural and social sub-sets, whose core of followers are as eager as the artists themselves to be overwhelmed and provoked...<sup>26</sup>

Goldberg’s view of the art world does not mark the closed gates a minoritarian artist, performance or otherwise, encounters when their projects either indict this same “open-minded” spectatorship or scourge their participation altogether.

Cultural critic Coco Fusco’s recent work (re)considers performance in terms of Latin American and U.S. Latina/o contexts. Fusco identifies three overarching tenets that differentiate Latina/o performance.<sup>1</sup> First, Latin American popular culture creates differential foundations, visual languages, and gestural vocabularies for Latina/o performance. Second, whereas Euro/American artists expropriate and co-opt ritual and religious sources for their work, Latina/os delve into their own heterogenous and colonized pasts for performance vocabularies.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Fusco offers the “spatialization of power.”<sup>28</sup> The spatialization of power extends through regulatory systems such as racialized xenophobia, the militarization of national borders, and the relegation of neighborhoods, pushing power into the spaces of working, social, and domestic life. Due to the spatialization of power, Latina/o performance artists use signifying strategies with socio-political orientations therefore envisioning their art practice in public spaces as “symbolic confrontations with the state.”<sup>29</sup>

Rodríguez's performance engenders Fusco's delineations. In particular, Rodríguez draws from Native storytelling to shape the form, content, and effect of *Cositas Quebradas*, which I now position as storytelling. Here, I adopt Kiowa artist/scholar N. Scott Momaday's conceptions of storytelling to locate, in part, the political structure of Rodríguez's performance work. As Momaday instructs, stories are told to be believed; they are true "in that they are established squarely upon belief."<sup>30</sup> A story is a statement on the human condition and centers upon a certain event. As the human condition involves moral considerations, stories involve moral implications.<sup>31</sup> Telling story is "essentially creative, inasmuch as language is essentially creative."<sup>32</sup> Creative encompasses two different but connected senses. A story draws from the same well of thought and perception as do correlative activities such as painting, sculpture, or dance. The basic desire to express, to render to others and to oneself one's position in or of the world inhabits the cores of these activities. However, relating story is also creative in an existential and performative dimension: speaking aloud thought brings into existence, produces, creates, makes real the person telling the story, the audience listening, and the story itself. As Momaday explains: "[the storyteller] re-creates his vision in words, [thus] he re-creates himself. He affirms that he has existence in the element of language, and this affirmation is preeminently creative."<sup>33</sup> This act of creation extends to her listeners: "[The story teller] creates his listener in the sense that he determines the listener's existence within, and in relation to, the story..."<sup>34</sup> In storytelling, words contain power, magic, and endow a person with the means to effect change in the universe.<sup>35</sup>

The resonances between storytelling's ethos and the methodology of the oppressed's oppositional technologies to effect social change are manifold, and their conjoined use within Rodríguez's work enables her to decolonize performance art practice and with it the social sphere.<sup>36</sup>

Rodríguez's installation "Red Roots/Black Roots/Earth (Tree of Life)" stands in the rotunda of Santa Clara University's de Saisset Museum, the first artwork one encounters after proceeding through the museum's main entrance. Immediately next to Rodríguez's imprisoned Tree of Life sits a smaller altar: a chimney made from four tiers of stacked

firewood and positioned in the center of a serape laid on the ground beneath it. Directly in front of this “fire” altar is a vase of fresh cut flowers, more folded serapes, a full bottle of tequila with shot glass, and other personal items—all ofrendas for remembrance. Across the chimney’s top sit Talavera plates with small votive candles that glow quietly—a symbolic fire burns.

Rodríguez is nowhere to be seen as people mill about the reception, cautiously making sure not to carry their plastic wine glasses beyond the “refreshment” room and into the main exhibition of art “objects.” I learn of this mistake by carelessly attempting to cross from one space to the other with my own glass of wine. A museum docent curtly informs me of my infraction and escorts me back towards the “proper” space for refreshment consumption. Art and nourishment, in this arena, have distinct, impermeable boundaries. Elements attributable to class-based protocols of behavior linger in my mind after this altercation. Yet, the interception serves to remind me of the institutionality of the space that I have entered, which is a strange, ironic twist considering the domestic origins of the Chicana altars on exhibit.

Without refreshments, the crowd gathered drifts between and among the many Chicana altar inspired artworks. Latina/os are present, more so than would normally gather together at the same time in a decidedly Anglo museum space but, for the most part, the audience is comprised of an Anglo audience that looks well acquainted with an opening reception’s museum and gallery behavior. Because this particular museum is located on a college campus, the crowd has many Anglo, college-age students as well as academic-type older adults. And, I like to think, because it is a Latina/o occasion the young are also present—babies in strollers as well as older children swimming quickly among the mostly slow moving current of us adult folks. Rodríguez’s performance piece will take place amid the reception and drastically reorganize its convivial mood.

The central events of Rodríguez’s storytelling in *Cositas Quebradas* are the impact of colonialism, the ideologies of nationhood (U.S. and Chicana/o), and the absence of memory. In her story, she demonstrates

the intersectionality of land, history, language, class, and race for both Chicana/o peoples and, in particular ways, for a larger American populous. The performance this essay documents was specifically geared for a Californian audience.<sup>37</sup> The story in *Cositas Quebradas's* performance evolves organically—one topic lays the ground for others to emerge, exposing the interrelated and imbricated nature of the events described. Yet, the ways in which Rodríguez weaves the topics together has a discernible trail of affinity and structure of feeling—one which I posit makes rhetorical sense to an audience of peoples of color and Chicana/os in particular. The piece is short, and as Rodríguez speaks, she performs rituals and gestures familiar with altar traditions such as offering food and drink to those present, asking the audience's involvement in strategic ways.

Semiology, reading the signs of power, comprises the methodology of the oppressed's first technology. Rodríguez's performance addresses the institutionality of museums and the systems of power they support in her opening thoughts:

Regreso. [I return.] Regreso aqui otra vez. [I return to another time here.] Regreso aqui otra vez. [I return to another time here.] Aunque, tambien es un dificil. [Although it is also a difficult thing.] Pasodad. [To create that passage.] Tambien dificil [It is also difficult.]...I will speak to you in this language and maybe I will speak to you with passion but if I speak to you that way, los watchos [the watch], los watchos [they watch]. Los que comen mucho. [They eat a lot.]...Los Americanos [The Anglo Americans.]...long journey...to stand here like this before you again. And say these words to you.<sup>38</sup>

Rodríguez is not innocent to the challenges her Chicana art places on the "signs of power" that museums feed the public imaginary. Her opening words mark the "journey" that artists not subscribing themselves to these subjugating standards must make to gain entry into these institutions. Elsewhere in the performance, Rodríguez reads and deconstructs, the

second technology of the methodology of the oppressed, how museums entrench systems of power through symbolic display: “The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and 50,000 Native people killed, 50,000 disappeared.”

<sup>39</sup> She then takes a plate from the chimney’s surface and smashes it with an ax over the chimney. The plate falls through the chimney’s opening and crashes to the floor, shattered. Her story continues after this jarring act: “Gone, like that. Gone. But what do we have left of them? Everything they left behind in their homes. We wonder sometimes how those things got into museums. Don’t you? You think that they [Native peoples] walked up and said ‘Oh, here’s my sacred things please keep them for me so that in five thousand years you’ll understand me?’ Just like you understand the Greeks, right?”<sup>40</sup> The “you” in her question is wielded in both a rhetorical sense to museum institutions and explicitly directed towards the ideological sensibilities of Anglo members of the audience. The physical event of breaking down objects—an act which she repeats throughout *Cositas Quebradas*—semiotically and materially reads and deconstructs dominant cultural logics, powerfully enforcing and metaphorically enacting what Sandoval describes as an essentially internal cognition for the methodology.

Sandoval’s third technology, meta-ideologizing, is what she describes as an “outer” technology, a “political intervention”<sup>41</sup> or act by a subject who seeks to effect change in the social order, accomplished after the previous two inner cognitions have changed consciousness.<sup>42</sup> This third technology relies on tactics in “relation to power,” which yield “the creation of new, ‘higher’ levels of signification built onto the older, dominant forms of ideology.”<sup>43</sup> I argue here that Rodríguez’s work engages two distinct social orders, that of the art world and the other in relation to the larger U.S. nation-state. In terms of performance, Rodríguez’s piece moves in, through, then outside of performance art’s pre-conditioned genre script in important ways. For instance, she does not consider her work “performance art”:

I don’t consider myself a performance artist. I really haven’t sought out venues in that way...It’s about audience. I really feel that every time I do the

performance the people I care about are the few scatterings, you know, of Native people, peoples of color in the audience. I don't feel like I'm educating or [that] my task is to address the art world.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, her practice enfolds many of the same characteristics that define the genre. However, through Native storytelling practice and purpose she consciously refigures the genre's particulars to meet the needs of an audience often unacknowledged by the work of performance art. The political intervention in this instance is one with redirects the self-interest and essential whiteness that characterizes performance art in America. Moreover, Rodríguez's challenge to the genre is the very act of appropriating and then refashioning it with alternative histories, identities, and ideological objectives.

With these larger considerations in mind, Rodríguez's surreptitious ingression into the rotunda begins her meta-ideological tactics. For example, her presence is not formally announced; rather, she quietly seeps into the crowd, remaining undetected by almost all of the exhibit's visitors. Unlike the fanfare of formal stage presentation or the overtly portentous airs of much performance art, Rodríguez's entrance is a quiet ritualistic cleansing of her speaking space. Rodríguez circles her altar, stopping to honor each of the four directions and the Tree within. In this circumscription built of prayer and ritual, she endeavors to decolonize her space from that of the institution that contains it. Upon reaching the smaller wood altar, she shakes a gourd rattle to gain the audience's attention. The prayer, the claiming of space, the rattle all sew native orientations into performance, even as they reference and signify dominant performance art practice.

Rodríguez's Chicana storytelling, like Native storytelling, is driven by creation and this creation, at its core, centers on an ethical ideological code to mobilize a democratic that produces social justice. To achieve this fourth technology, as Sandoval denotes, power must be redistributed "across such differences coded as race, gender, sex, nation, culture, or class distinctions."<sup>45</sup>

Once the audience has focused on Rodríguez, the next segment of her performance changes the distribution of audience members to produce mestizo bodies. Rodríguez informs the audience that the ground she stands upon is “What’s left of my land,” indicating the blanket below her feet, “I welcome you to what’s left of my land.” The intention here is to read through the artificiality of geo-political constructions imposed on the earth, exposing California’s once Mexican and before that Indian origins, again deconstructing sign-systems. This reading leads to a line of interrogation into the false democratic that the U.S. nation-state cultivates in its historical imaginary. The mestizo body is a corporeal entity that counters this false democracy. Therefore, to puncture this imaginary and redistribute power is to call forth those who can materially counter this ideal. Rodríguez invites the audience to search their own ideological and identic formations: “If you would like to join me on my land, those of you who call yourselves indios, those of you who remember where you are from...I ask you to take a blanket and stand on it. Open it up. Those of you who remember how to open up that blanket...and join me in my nation.”<sup>46</sup> She waits for response after her call, which will break down the formal barriers between spectator and performer, aligning with storytelling’s practice: the storyteller creates his listener.<sup>47</sup> Slowly several women come forward, unfold blankets, and sit with Rodríguez in a Native reality. “Opening a blanket” is metaphoric language that interpellates the hail of dominant ideology and asks that Chicana/os recognize and recover their Nativeness. Physical bodies, bodies that respond, mark a differential consciousness in the perception of Self, disidentifying with U.S. nationalism, and in this instance, undermining museum authority, which promotes the false ideal of a bygone “Other” that needs protection, paternal watch. The women who come forward also expose the historical divide between the Anglo and Latina/o spectators present. This act both performs power’s distribution and engenders its redistribution; it *redresses* a damaged social body: “I welcome you home,” Rodríguez confirms.<sup>48</sup> A story is told to be believed and in their covenant those gathered on blankets subscribe that this can become their nation.

Rodríguez's ethical ideology then begins to connect the disproportion of contemporary U.S. democracy with past acts to create passages for differential consciousness and an ethical democratic. Rodríguez recounts that then President Clinton had expressed horror at how a foreign nation of people was "quickly disappearing because other people were taking their names away...and so we went to war."<sup>49</sup> She focuses on U.S. foreign policy and the ways in which social justice is exported, but has yet to reconcile or acknowledge its lack within US national borders:

[Pres. Clinton]...was so upset at the loss of names...He was so upset that he had to send bombers because there was a nation losing its identity, there were people who could no longer claim the land, there were names that could no longer be said. And so I'm standing here nameless. My name was taken away a long time ago...And words that I want to say, but everything's a little broken, a little fractured.<sup>50</sup>

Rodríguez's socio-political critique indexes the unapologetic irony between U.S. foreign and domestic policy, more importantly, it elaborates how peoples native to this continent have undergone the same travestied processes that now incite indignation and military action. Rodríguez fortifies this corollary once more as she yokes the processes of undemocratic action to the history of Catholicism's strictures: "Strangers came up [to indigenous populations] and they said . . .kneel down and open your mouth, and stick out your tongue."<sup>51</sup> She demonstrates this posture by closing her eyes and producing her tongue and then continues her narrative: "And they put that little piece of bread there on our tongue, and we had no tongue, and we had no names, and we had no land, and we had no rights."<sup>52</sup> The ability to connect differentiating sign-systems of power, break apart their structures, reassemble them through their own fortifications, in the stead of egalitarian democratic ends, requires the differential movement of one's consciousness, the last technology of Sandoval's rubric used to cast off oppression and move towards emancipation. Rodríguez's transcoding of signifying processes



in both dominant ideological constructions and in its attendant sub-systems, such as the exclusionary practices of art production or xenophobic nationalism, insists on a decolonization and positions her as a practitioner of the methodology of the oppressed.

As Rodríguez recedes from her altar at her story's end, she leaves the audience with a final, cautionary thought: "I just came here to break a few things today. Tenga cuidado [take care], 'cause there's a lot of broken things in your path."<sup>53</sup> Her performance practice has broken many things—the strictures of representational economies, the figuration of ritual traditions, the aesthetics of Chicana art practice, and the tenets of colonization. Here, in the work of the oppressed's methodology and a Chicana indigenous performative of memory, breaking things is not to render them inoperable, but rather, a transgressive act, a creative act, a redressive act, which push through and beyond an object's, an ideology's, and a colonial consciousness's delimitations. And, this breach is the burden of Rodríguez's story for Chicana/os.



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ward Churchill, "I am Indigenist: Notes on the Ideology of the Fourth World," in *Struggle for the Land* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993): 403-451.

<sup>2</sup> Amit S. Rai, "'Thus Spake the Subaltern': Postcolonial Criticism and the Scene of Desire," in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed. Christopher Lane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 91-119.

<sup>3</sup> Amalia Mesa-Bains, "The Language of the Feminine Gender and Representation Among Chicana and Latina Artists," *Contemporary Art by Women of Color*, Exhibition Catalogue (San Antonio: The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center and the Instituto Cultural Mexicano, 1990): 11. The title of Rodríguez's installation, "Red Roots/Black Roots/Earth(Tree of Life)," is an important point of entry into her work. The title's first component, "Red Roots" symbolically identifies the pre-conquest identity of Chicana/os, namely the element of Indian origin in Chicana/os' cultural and corporeal make-up. Modulation from the vibrancy of "Red" to the withering of "Black" roots linguistically charts the historical and cultural loss of the Americas' indigenous peoples accomplished through invasion and European contact. In the phrase's final unit, "Earth (Tree of Life)," Native origin is intimately connected to loss of land or earth. The earth holds the memory of both indigenous origin and its death in the effacement of colonialism—which produces the title's final turn: a Tree of Life that grows from

this remembering earth's historical ground. In effect, the title creates a journey of historical remembrance and gestures towards recovery suggesting Chicana/os' Indian origin is regenerative but cannot be reinvoked in any facile or affirmative sense without also taking into account the devastation which must accompany the act of remembering. Moreover, the tripartite title ties together life's continuance with land and the land's survival with human life.

<sup>4</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 75.

<sup>5</sup> Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* (Los Angeles: UCLA Wright Art Gallery, 1991): 155.

<sup>6</sup> This is demonstrated in the two terms repeated use, most explicitly in the groundbreaking exhibition CARA, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* at UCLA.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>8</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 77.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that in her thesis Hartman is addressing black slavery in 19th century America. However, her concepts, I argue, readily describe the condition of a parallel history, that of Chicana/os and Mexican Indians. In this, I am suggesting that implicit and explicit resonances exist between these two "histories that hurt." Enslavement extended to Native peoples in the Americas and was wrought from racial hierarchy, as is the case of African slavery. While the extenuating circumstances that describe these two histories often diverge radically, the places where they cross-cut and intersect must be examined and discussed. In this, I am indebted to the fastidious theoretical labor on black slavery that richly informs my own thinking.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>12</sup> The town of Izúcar de Matamoros, Mexico is particularly renowned as an early center for crafting Trees of Life in Mexico. A web feature on Izúcar features this history: "Famous 'árboles de la vida' have been created for centuries in Izúcar [Mexico]. It is believed, according to artist craftsman Francisco Flores [a leading family of the craft in Izúcar], that they bring good fortune and prosperity to the family that possesses one of them. 'People pray to God for miracles, however the candlestick itself is a miracle. Many years ago, people (specially [sic] the godfather in a wedding) began to give a candlestick to the newly wed, if the couple did not have one of them in their home they had misfortune in everything they did; their land did not produce any crops, they could not have and raise any children, their cattle was not good enough and their marriage was a failure. However, if they had a candlestick or tree of life, their land produced enough crops to live in abundance, they had many children, and a very happy life together. So the candlestick became the synonym of life, and people began to call the candlestick 'árbol de la vida' tree of life, since it offers you the miracle to live healthy, rich and happy', says artist craftsman Francisco Flores." "Izúcar de Matamoros El Árbol de la Vida," Magic Mexico, online. [http://www.digiserve.com/magicmex/cand\\_history.html](http://www.digiserve.com/magicmex/cand_history.html) [Accessed 12 March 2001].

<sup>13</sup> The mexicana/o idiom of the Tree of Life usually features a highly stylized, leaved tree, with flora, sometimes birds, and prominent representations of the bodies of Adam and Eve with the Garden of Eden's serpent placed between them.

\* Links in resources page may no longer be active.

<sup>14</sup> The ideas I employ here owe their origin to the ideas contained in José Muñoz's theoretical work in "The Autoethnographic Performance: Reading Richard Fung's Queer Hybridity," *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 80.

<sup>15</sup> Celia Herrera Rodríguez, "Artists' Biographies and Statements," *Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-Inspired Art* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Constance Cortez (Medford: Tufts University Gallery, 1999): 65.

<sup>16</sup> Celia Herrera Rodríguez, "Artists' Biographies and Statements," 65. As Rodríguez observes: "In the Lakota tradition, the tree is life sacrificed so that we may offer ourselves, our prayers. . . . The Mexican stories that survive tell of life rising up from the underground river, flowing through the roots of the great Tree of Life and spilling out into the world. And in ancient Greece, tree next to stream meant 'sacred place.'"

<sup>17</sup> *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, as qtd. in N. Scott Momaday's, "To Save a Great Vision," *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997): 21-27.

<sup>18</sup> Momaday, *Black Elk Speaks*, 21-27.

<sup>19</sup> Celia Rodríguez, "Artists' Biographies and Statements," 65.

<sup>20</sup> Peggy Phelan, "The ontology of performance," *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> N. Scott Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Spiritual Visions in Contemporary Art," in *Imágenes e Historias/Images and Histories: Chicana Altar-inspired Art* (exhibition catalogue), Constance Cortez, ed., (Medford: Tufts University Gallery, 1999, 1-10): 8.

<sup>23</sup> Chéla Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>25</sup> Rodríguez' s installation has stood alone for exhibition in various galleries and museums. However, upon occasion Rodríguez supplements the installation with the performance of *Cositas Quebradas*.

<sup>26</sup> Roselee Goldberg, *Performance; Live Art from 1909 to the Present* (London: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979): 9.

<sup>27</sup> Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Coco Fusco, "Introduction: Latin American Performance and the Reconquista of Civil Space," in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, Coco Fusco, ed. (London: Routledge, 2000). *Corpus Delecti* is a first time gathering of critical writings on the work of Latinos in the Americas performance work.

<sup>30</sup> Fusco, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

<sup>41</sup> To see this process, we must unyoke our view of the performer. The use of the term “performance” engenders in a Western orientation to the world certain attitudes towards “liveness.” We have been encouraged to view communication between performer (actor) and spectator as essentially false. The spectator recognizes yet engages in the artifice that they witness, cognizant that they feed into a unique temporal-spatial world of fiction where suspense, reversals, and deferrals are intended to be decoded within the event. In Momaday’s indigenous epistemology, creating conventions to mediate between fact and fiction does not occur in storytelling because of fundamental differing conceptions of how truth and knowledge is dispersed and obtained in one’s experience of the living world.

<sup>42</sup> Rodríguez, interview by author, tape recording, Oakland, CA, 23 November 2000. *Cositas Quebradas* was first performed at Tufts University Gallery and geared towards a Bostonian audience.

<sup>43</sup> Celia Rodríguez, *Cositas Quebradas*, de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, April 2000.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 111.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>49</sup> Rodríguez, interview.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>46</sup> Celia Rodríguez, *Cositas Quebradas*.

<sup>47</sup> Momaday, *The Man Made of Words*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Celia Rodríguez, *Cositas Quebradas*.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.