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Chicana Photography: The Power of Place

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Chicana Photography: The Power of Place

Introduction

Site-specific art, termed earthworks or land art, developed in 1960s and early 1970s in response to concern over the natural environment and as a critique of overtly commercial exhibition practices employed by galleries and museums. The art production of Nancy Holt, Alice Aycock, Robert Smithson, and many other artists interrogated temporality, monumentality, and humanity's connection to nature and its cycles. Holt's *Sun Tunnels* (1973-1976), four massive hollow concrete structures constructed in Utah's Great Basin Desert, channeled light and shadow in relationship to the cardinal directions and the tilt of the earth's axis, while Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a fifteen-foot wide path of earth and rock, swirled corkscrew-fashion into Utah's Great Salt Lake for a distance of 1500 feet. The monumental art piece initially lay above the surface of the salt water, but the rise and fall of the lake's water level periodically obscured the work. During this same period, Alice Aycock constructed *Maze* (1972) in rural Pennsylvania, a wooden thirty-two foot labyrinthine form that, much like Richard Serra's later *Band* (2006), invited audience participation. Due to the remote location and ephemerality of many of these environmental installations, documentary photography became an integral element of the artistic process and often created the only record of the artworks.

The concern with space, location, place, and site has continued to engage artists and theorists since the 1960s.¹ For critics and creators engaged with these concepts, the analysis of the interaction between of the processes of spatialization, identity formation, and memory has emerged as an important aspect of critical discourse. Curator and art critic Lucy Lippard considers the notions of space and place in *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. She differentiates the two terms by suggesting that place implies intimacy, a familiarity with a certain geographic location. In contrast, Lippard proposes that space refers to a physical site, often understood as landscape or nature.² Human interaction and, most importantly, the infusion of memory into space or a geographic site produces place. Lippard states, "If space is where culture is lived, then place is the result of their union."³ An individual's values and beliefs, one's spiritual, social and political views and behaviors then mark the space they inhabit.

Like Lippard, French Jesuit scholar and cultural critic Michel de Certeau considers the production of meaning in particular geographic locations. For Certeau, this meaning occurs as a result of everyday behavior, what he terms "the practice of everyday life." He also considers how society uses, or in his words "consumes," its visual and cultural representations and how, in the process of this consumption, people use and produce space. According to de Certeau, through the "practice of everyday life" or daily actions, pedestrians or "walkers" construct a "text" or an unseen "pathway" in their local environment. The repeated movement of the city's "walkers" forms a pattern of motion, not something fixed, like a line on a map, but a present moment experience.⁴ The pedestrian creates the "text" in the moment of moving through space and leaves a trace that creates a complex web of interrelated spaces, which Certeau compares to voices in a choir, each with their own unique but intermingling utterance.⁵ Certeau situates his ideas about the production and consumption of meaning

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¹ Miwon Kwon provides a comprehensive discussion of the development of site-specific and public art, as well as the major theoretical voices that shape the discussion of space, community, and identity. See Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, First paperback ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

² Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: New Press, 1997), 8-9.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 97.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 99, 101.

within the confines of a primarily urban locale and therefore many of his ideas relate narrowly to life experienced in a large city. However, some elements of his argument, especially his notion of how everyday practices create a text as part of the transformation of space into place, create effective tools for exploring the interactions between people and places.

Contemporary Chicana photographers Laura Aguilar, Kathy Vargas, and Delilah Montoya have produced extensive bodies of work during the past four decades that investigate the body, land, memory, and the issues of identity formation⁶ in relationship to location. In this essay, I use the concepts of space and place as defined by Lippard together with a consideration of Certeau's ideas concerning the creation of a text developed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* to analyze selected images from Aguilar's *Stillness* (1999), *Motion* (1999), and *Center* (2001), Vargas' *My Alamo* (1995), and Delilah Montoya's *Sed: The Trail of Thirst* (2004). These theoretical constructs support an excavation of the multiple meanings of the sites and bodies portrayed in these works. I give a brief overview of each artist's development and then demonstrate how the depiction of geographic space in these artists' work becomes an intimate, personal site where the construction of places and identities occur.

Laura Aguilar: *Tierra, Cuerpo, Lugar*

Laura Aguilar was born in 1959 in San Gabriel, California, to a first generation Mexican-America father and a mother of mixed Mexican and Irish descent. Aguilar has a condition known as dysphonetic or auditory dyslexia. This form of dyslexia affects a person's capacity to process aural information and limits their ability to understand how individual sounds construct words. Difficulty in sounding out words phonetically interferes with the development of reading skills as well. Aguilar remained unaware for many years of her learning challenge, due to the inability of the Los Angeles public school system to adequately diagnose it. Her auditory dyslexia made correct spoken pronunciation difficult and many people did not understand her when she spoke. Shy and withdrawn during her youth, she credits her survival to her brother, simply saying, "The best thing in my life is my brother. He saved me."⁷ Her brother encouraged Aguilar's interest in the visual medium of photography, which she first gravitated toward as a teenager. He lent her his camera, taught her how to develop exposed film in the darkroom, and helped her make prints from negatives. Aguilar later studied photography at various colleges and photography workshops throughout the southwest. However, she remains a largely self-taught artist.

Like the Chicana photographers I discuss in this essay, Aguilar has produced a body of work that takes the human figure as its central form of inquiry. Some of the best-known images from her early work include the *Latina Lesbian Series* begun in 1987.⁸ The series consists of a number of black-and-white portraits of women who self-identify as lesbian and Latina. In much of this work, the women look unswervingly at the camera and engage the viewer with a direct gaze. Aguilar poses her subjects in environments that appear of their choosing or ones that indicate the person's vocation, such as her portrait of Yolanda Retter Vargas.⁹ In this telling image, the noted activist and archivist stands in front of a crowded bookcase with a laptop open on a nearby table. In addition, Aguilar pushes the art historical genre of portraiture into a distinct expression by using handwritten text as an integral aspect of the image.¹⁰ The hand of the artist, or perhaps the subject, has distinctively marked

⁶ The concept of Chicana and Chicano identity has been of critical importance in Chicana/o Studies scholarship and its literature is extensive. Two resources that have influenced my thinking include Deena J. González, "Chicana Identity Matters (Vol. 22, No. 2, Fall 1997)," in *The Chicano Studies Reader: An Anthology of Aztlán, 1970-2000*, ed. Chon A. Noriega, et al., *Aztlán Anthology Series* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, 2001), Aida Hurtado and Patricia Gurin, *Chicana/o Identity in a Changing U.S. Society: ¿Quién Soy? ¿Quiénes Somos?* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).

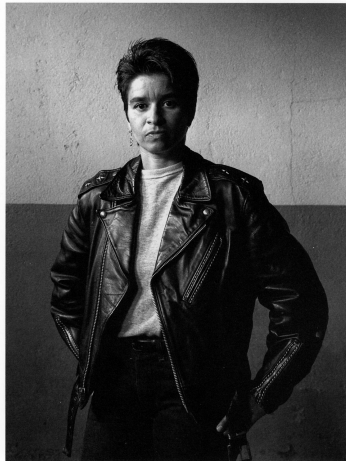
⁷ Telephone conversation with the artist, March 19, 2008.

⁸ Temple University Press published some of the *Latina Lesbian Series* in Diane Neumaier, ed., *Reframings: New American Feminist Photographies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

⁹ Yolanda Retter Vargas was extensively involved in fight for the rights of lesbians and women of color since the 1970s. In addition to activist organizing, Vargas worked as a librarian and researcher, most recently at UCLA's Chicano Studies Resource Center where she shaped a generation of young scholars. She died in 2007 of cancer at age 59.

¹⁰ Photographers have inscribed text on the surface of photographic prints since the early 1960s to ornament the image, to support the visual narrative, or to add graphic interest. In the works described in this essay, Aguilar writes directly on the print's surface, while Kathy Vargas takes the process further. Vargas marks the photograph with text and draws on the print to emphasize particular areas of the image.

the surface of the print. The subjects' thoughts on society's messages about being female or being lesbian are inscribed below each portrait, often accompanied with the woman's signature. Aguilar's portrait of Carla Barboza, Esquire, comprises a prominent example (Fig. 1). The handwriting under Barboza's image states, "My mother encouraged me to be a court reporter...I became a lawyer." The terse text and powerful visual portrayal demonstrate that Carla has pushed beyond society's limits prescribed for women, lesbians, and Latinas.



*My mother encouraged me to be a
court reporter...
I became a lawyer
Carla Barboza Esq.*

Figure 1. Laura Aguilar, *Carla: Latina Lesbian Series*, 1987-1990, Black and white phototext

A much-discussed image from 1990, *Three Eagles Flying* (Fig. 2), indicates an important future direction in Aguilar's work. In this piece, the artist moves seamlessly into self-portraiture and places her body in the center of the triptych, or three-part work. Mexican and US flags appear on either side of her.¹¹ Aguilar approached the work from a very personal standpoint and used the creation process to examine her relationship with her mother and the variety of phenotypes that existed in her extended family. She did not have her mother's hazel eyes and freckles. As she grew up, many people did not connect Laura with her mother based on their visual appearance. As a result,

¹¹ Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has written eloquently on Aguilar's ability in this image to problematize national and cultural identity and to represent both constraint and freedom. See Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "Laying It Bare: The Queer/Colored Body in the Photography of Laura Aguilar," in *Speaking Secrets: Living Chicana Theory*, ed. Carla Mari Trujillo, *Series in Chicana/Latina Studies* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1998), 277-305. Karen Mary Davalos lauds Aguilar's image for its "radical/lesbian Chicana feminist critique" and provides an important reading of the work. See Karen Mary Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 57-59. Amelia Jones has written extensively about Aguilar's work. She discusses *Three Flags Flying* in Amelia Jones, "Bodies and Subjects in the Technologized Self-Portrait: The Work of Laura Aguilar," *Aztlán* 23, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 208-10. In a later publication, Jones investigates how the photographic practice of the self-portrait raises questions of life, death, subjectivity, and meaning-making in the representation of gendered, raced, and sexed subjects. ———, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 27, no. 4 (2002): 947-78.

Aguilar felt a distinct lack of belonging.¹² While this image provides a rich opportunity to think about the interaction between the human body, land, space, place, and nation I am interested in analyzing work the artist has produced within the last ten years.



Figure 2. Laura Aguilar, *Three Eagles Flying*, 1990, Gelatin silver print, Triptych, 24 in. x 60 in. each, Courtesy of Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

The lush series *Stillness* (1999), *Motion* (1999), and *Center* (2001), initiated in 1999 and produced over the next two years, exploits the genres of portraiture, still life, and landscape by fusing female bodies into specific geographic sites. Here Aguilar connects landscape and the female form to the point where these elements merge, the human body becoming earth, land, terrain. The face of the individual is noticeably absent, covered purposefully with a graceful flow of hair or turned resolutely away from the camera. The artist denies us the subject's gaze, which encourages an emphasis on form. Female bodies become sculptural shapes that respond to the rhythmic line of motion created by upright trees and their serpentine branches. In *Motion # 46* (Fig. 3) from 1999, Certeau's idea of everyday practices becomes less apparent. Much as we might wish, unclothed cavorting in nature may not be a typical daily endeavor for many of us. So how does Aguilar's intervention of the nude female body into the natural landscape change a space into a place? Lippard extends her definition of place stating,

Place is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there...A lived-in landscape becomes a place, which implies intimacy; a once lived-in landscape can be a place, if explored, or remain a landscape, if simply observed.¹³

I suggest that the artist and her models' interactions with and exploration of the landscape as part of the process of creating these works, however brief, irrevocably altered these spaces and produced place. The women in front of the camera, as well as the one behind the lens, did more than merely observe this landscape. One easily imagines a lengthy photo shoot with a sequence of poses proposed by the talent and the artist. While not a "lived-in" site, the women responded to the shapes present in the terrain, its cavities, outcroppings, and hiding places, its shaded confines and sunlit expanses, to create the positions they took in the photograph. The women's footfalls have not visibly disturbed the graceful arrangement of dry leaves on the ground and yet, Certeau would argue that movement through the forested location has left a trace or text. A pathway may remain invisible and

¹² Telephone conversation with the artist, March 19, 2008.

¹³ Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, 7.

unmarked. But this site, now transformed from space into place, links conceptually to other locations depicted in the series and therefore produces a network of interconnection.



Figure 3. Laura Aguilar, *Motion #46*, 1999, Gelatin silver print, 16 in. x 20 in.

Kathy Vargas: *Tierra, Identidad, Antepasados*

Kathy Vargas epitomizes a locally lived life connected to both place and community. Born in 1950 in San Antonio, Texas, Vargas grew up as the only child of loving parents. Vargas reigned as the center of familial attention in the family home on Martin Luther King Drive where she still lives today. Vargas's earliest photographs from the 1970s reflect the nuances of her East San Antonio neighborhood and demonstrate her preference for making art from what surrounds her. A piece from 1979 titled *Front Porch (Woman with Apron)* (Fig. 4) is representative of her initial documentary period, where she recorded her neighbors, local environs, and nearby shrines and cemeteries. Here Vargas celebrates a typical Texas pastime, the social ritual of observing the day's events from the comfort of the front porch.¹⁴ The repetitive motion of the vintage glider, combined with the neighbor's daily walk to and from the porch, epitomizes Certeau's idea of trace, text, and unseen pathway.

¹⁴ Henri Lefebvre's notions of how public interaction produces space are particularly pertinent when considering daily rituals such as those depicted by Vargas. See Henri Lefebvre, "Social Space," in *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1991), 68-168.



Figure 4. Kathy Vargas, *Front Porch (Woman with Apron)*, 1979, Gelatin silver print, 8 ⁵/₈ in. x 12 ⁵/₈ in., Collection of Joe A. Díaz, San Antonio, Texas

A major shift in Vargas' work occurred in the early 1980s. At this time, she abandoned outdoor photography and moved inside the studio. The artist began to stage small scenes from elements of interest, often objects found in her daily excursions. Like Laura Aguilar, she experimented with the placement of text directly on the photographic surface as well as further manipulation of the photographic image through hand coloring. Significantly, much of her photographic production began to reference land, memory, and place as predominant concerns.¹⁵

Given these interests and her life-long residence in San Antonio, one might expect the artist to portray regional histories and locales in her work, in addition to her immediate neighborhood. Consequently in 1995, Vargas produced a photographic series titled *My Alamo*. The Alamo reigns as cultural icon of the fierce Texas spirit of individuality and drive for independence from Mexico, and simultaneously exists as a multi-layered symbol of mission, shrine, war monument, museum, and commercial commodity.¹⁶ It comprises the most visited historic location in Texas, receiving countless foreign tourists as well as endless area school children. In the work, Vargas embeds the racialized, female body within the landscape of this specific regional site.¹⁷ The artist's title announces a personal

¹⁵ For a retrospective of Vargas' art production, see MaLin Wilson-Powell and Lucy R. Lippard, *Kathy Vargas: Photographs, 1971-2000* (San Antonio: Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, 2000).

¹⁶ For important scholarship on the Alamo, see Richard R. Flores, *Remembering the Alamo: Memory, Modernity, and the Master Symbol* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), Raúl A. Ramos, *Beyond the Alamo: Forging Mexican Ethnicity in San Antonio, 1821-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

¹⁷ In *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*, José David Saldívar analyzes the cultural and theoretical constructions of the border between Mexico and the US. His treatment of the Islas' and Lomas Garza's engagement with location and regional environs of Texas and California demonstrates the simultaneity of the global and the local. See José David Saldívar, "The Production of Space by Arturo Islas and

claim to space and territory. She declares that she possesses the site; she marks the location with her presence and claims the local territory as her own. This bears out Lippard's idea that place implies familiarity. The artist's use of the phrase "My Alamo" implies an intimacy, reducing the diverse nature of the site's power from something grand, distant, and monumental to something personal, contained, and closely claimed as an integral part of one's life.

The *My Alamo* series consists of six pairs of hand-colored gelatin silver prints and each of the twelve prints that comprise the work advance a visual narrative of Vargas' relationship to the site. I discuss a single photograph from the twelve images that comprise the work, the first print. In this print, the artist articulates her ancestral connection to the Alamo and marks the site with indigenous and familial presence. Vargas's great-great grandfather Juan Vargas had lived in Northern Mexico in the province of Coahuila y Tejas for six years before rebellious voices urged separation from Mexico. When Mexican President and General Santa Anna approached San Antonio in mid-February of 1836 to quell its revolutionary rumblings, he forcibly conscripted Tejanos into his existing military force. Juan Vargas was one of these suddenly made soldiers. Although Juan was a Mexican citizen forced to perform a major responsibility of citizenship, Santa Anna's officers questioned his loyalty because of his indigenous heritage. Juan participated in the Battle of the Alamo armed with the only weapon the Mexican army thought appropriate, a broom.

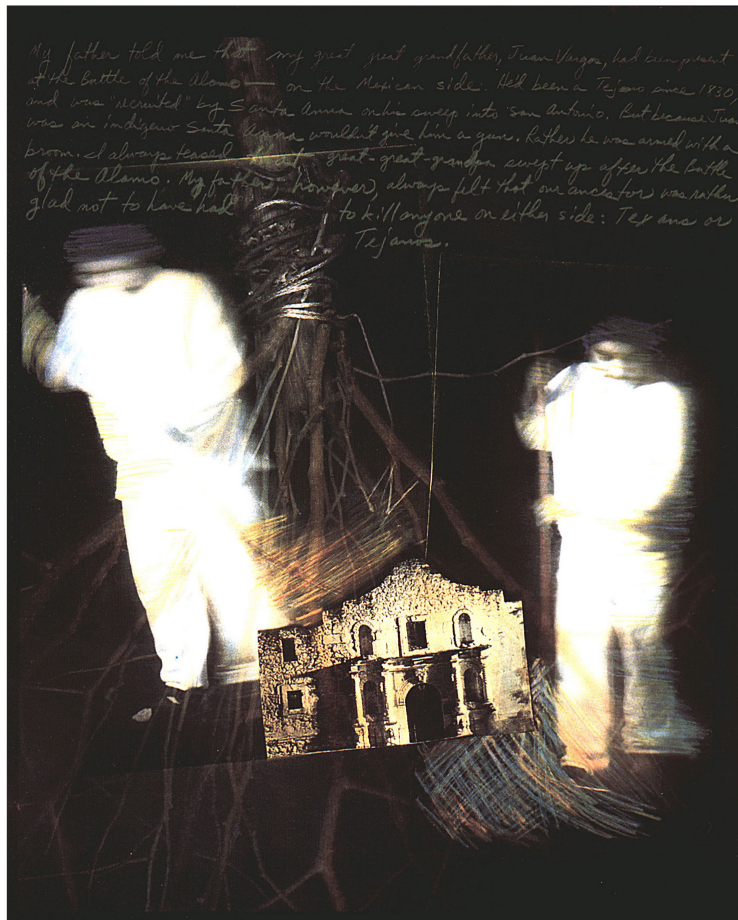


Figure 5. Kathy Vargas, *My Alamo*, 1995, Hand colored gelatin silver print, 20 in. x 16 in.

The artist depicts her ancestor as a non-violent actor at the Alamo, vigorously cleaning up after the battle, relegated to this task by phenotype and ethnicity (Fig. 5). Vargas "writes" or inscribes the absent history of indigenous peoples of the Americas into the site by locating her great-great

Carmen Lomas Garza," in *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 72-94.

grandfather, a Zapotec originally from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, as an active participant in the creation of meaning at the site. By visually imagining and documenting a narrative that contests previous constructions and interpretations of the site's events, notably those that picture Mexican soldiers as barbaric and the Alamo martyrs as heroic, the artist re-appropriates the site of the Alamo. I think that Vargas's work engages de Certeau's notion of text by revealing unacknowledged or silenced pathways created by everyday acts. Although literally swept up in profoundly important historical events, Juan's actions begin to produce a family connection to the site. Through the embodied depiction of the "practice of everyday life" in her photographic series, Vargas reconstitutes these invisible pathways and makes the physical trace of individual action evident to the viewer, an ancestral remnant not apparent to those who visit and consume the site. The artist illustrates layers of information generally invisible or absent in popular representations of the site, including the presence of women of color and indigenous peoples. Her portrayal of the previously unacknowledged presence of these groups serves to contest existing narrations and claims the Alamo as personal, intimate, and familial place.

Delilah Montoya: *Tierra, Sed, Espacio Extenso y Intimo*

Delilah Marie Merriman Montoya was born in Fort Worth, Texas, on December 7, 1955, to Amalia García, a Nueva Mexicana, and John Merriman, a second-generation Polish immigrant. Montoya is one of four female siblings, the mother of daughter Lucy, who recently completed her medical degree, and a grandmother of three. Although born in northern Texas, and named after a bar her parents passed while driving through the vast expanses of West Texas, she grew up in the dirty, impoverished, and noxious smelling stockyard district of Omaha, Nebraska. She spent the first two decades of her life in the Midwest before permanently relocating to Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1970s. Like Laura Aguilar, Montoya's public education was woefully inadequate, her high school a place of rampant drug trafficking and prostitution. She graduated with deficits in both reading and writing. Only at age nineteen with the birth of her daughter, did her word recognition improve by reading children's books to Lucy at night.

To support herself and her daughter, Montoya earned an Associate of Arts degree in commercial photography and art in the late 1970s. She then worked as a medical photographer at the University of New Mexico for ten years, while pursuing her undergraduate education and two advanced degrees in Studio Art. Her academic career began in 1994 when she was hired to teach photography at the Institute of American Indian Art and California State University, Los Angeles. After teaching on the east coast for a number of years, Montoya joined the faculty at the University of Houston in 2001 and currently serves as a tenured professor of photography and digital media.

In her creative work, Montoya, like Kathy Vargas, first recorded the world and people around her in black-and-white images. Initially influenced by French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and American documentary photographer Bruce Davidson, Montoya quickly abandoned "straight" photography and began manipulating the surface of the photographic print with a combination of drawing, painting, and various printmaking processes.¹⁸ Much of her early work drew inspiration not only from the regional landscape, but also from her maternal grandparents' New Mexican heritage and spiritual practices. Montoya's mature body of work investigates the revision of female stereotypes and icons, uses visual and textual narrative or storytelling as an underlying theme, and often documents various Chicana and Chicano communities as a means to address broader political concerns.¹⁹

Sed: The Trail of Thirst (2004) combines the Montoya's keen sensitivity to landscape with her documentary acumen. The artist conceived and executed the work in collaboration with Orlando Lara, then one of her students at the University of Houston. In 2003, Montoya and Lara traveled to the Arizona-Mexico border and photographed routes taken by workers passing through the Sonoran

¹⁸ Straight photography developed during the mid-1880s in response to Pictorialism, a movement that closely imitated the aesthetics of painting as a means to validate photography as a fine art. Pictorialist photographers altered negatives, scratched photographic paper, and captured images with cheesecloth placed over the camera's lens in an effort to achieve painterly effects. In contrast, straight photographers believed that photography inherently possessed its own distinct aesthetic and that photographs should be made without any modifications during capture or print processes.

¹⁹ Montoya directly confronted gender stereotypes and limiting societal messages with her recent documentary photography series on women boxers. See Delilah Montoya, María Teresa Márquez, and C. Ondine Chavoya, *Women Boxers: The New Warriors* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2006).

Desert to the United States.²⁰ The artist captured images of the terrain, the impact of the migrant's journey on the desert landscape, and cast-off objects found along the trail. Montoya debuted the project in Houston, Texas, as part of the city's 2004 Fotofest biennial.²¹ Significantly, the organization declared water as the biennial theme for that year.

Montoya chose to display *Sed* at Talento Bilingüe de Houston, a Latino cultural arts center that has been in operation for thirty years. In its initial showing at Talento Bilingüe, the work consisted of a wall-sized photomural comprised of numerous documentary images, a video that revealed the process of walking the trail at various locations, and an altar comprised of objects left behind during migration.²² Montoya had collected these personal possessions while photographing the border areas and she displayed the discarded belongings such as rosaries, driver's licenses, and backpacks on the installation's altar. One of the most poignant items that graced the altar was a single red and black cowboy boot, the size that would fit a three-year old child. Further, the video, while visually revealing the desert's beautiful and potentially tragic terrain, also encircled viewers with the sounds of migrant footsteps moving across the landscape. Montoya brought to life a complete experiential environment for the spectator.

In 2008, the exhibition opened at Los Angeles' Patricia Correia Gallery simply titled *The Trail of Thirst*. In this most recent version of the show, the artist eliminated the video and the altar and instead, surrounded viewers with colorful large-scale panoramic images of the desert landscape, the trails that crisscross its terrain, and the artifacts that constitute a human life littered in the land along the trail. Previously, Montoya had composed the photomural with numerous small-scale images, visually "stitched" them together using computer software, and printed them out as a single piece displayed on the entire length of Talento Bilingüe's gallery wall. At the Patricia Correia showing, the exhibition design enclosed the viewing public in every direction with images of border landscape. This comprehensive visual embrace combined with the sheer scale of the photographs dramatically heightened their power.



Figure 6. Delilah Montoya, *Migrant Campsite, Ironwood, AZ, 2004*, Digital photographic print, Courtesy of Delilah Montoya

In *The Trail of Thirst*, Certeau's idea of a text writ large in the land by daily human movement comes into powerful play. Montoya's photographs reveal this text in windswept arid vistas in images such as *Migrant Campsite, Ironwood, AZ* (2004) (Fig. 6) and *Hills* (2004) (Fig. 7). In *Migrant Campsite*, the photographer plays with the ideas of presence and absence. Unlike Aguilar and Vargas, Montoya does not openly depict the human figure. The image shows debris, traces of human interaction, that lingers in the desert after workers have moved on. This residue represents the person now absent from the space, and yet physically marks the location with their continuing presence. Similarly, three human shadows appear on the photograph's far right, crisp outlines of their bodies

²⁰ For a study on the treatment of southern Arizona locations by Chicana writers, see Mary Pat Brady, "Razing Arizona," in *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 13-48.

²¹ Fotofest is a national arts and education organization that produces exhibitions every two years around a single theme and offers various public programs throughout the year.

²² Montoya has used photomurals with altars in previous work. See Victor Alejandro Sorell, "Guadalupe's Emblematic Presence Endures in New Mexico: Investing the Body with the Virgin's Miraculous Image," in *Nuevomexicano Cultural Legacy: Forms, Agencies, and Discourse*, ed. Francisco A. Lomelí, Victor A. Sorell, and Genaro M. Padilla (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 203-45, Victor A. Sorell, "Behold Their Natural Affinities: Revelations About the Confluence of Chicana Photography and Altarmaking," in *Imágenes E Historias/Images and Histories*, ed. Constance Cortéz (Medford: Tufts University Gallery, 1999), 21-28.

formed by the sun. Their presence provokes questions. Who are they? Is this their temporary shelter? Do the items belong to them? Montoya leaves these questions unanswered.

In the powerful composition *Hills*, the artist records an uneven pattern of small mountainous slopes against a desert sky. Perhaps this scene reminded Montoya of the Sandía mountain range that frames Albuquerque. Desert brush and cactus compose the mid-and foreground of the image, while a well-worn path arcs through the left-hand side. Following Certeau, the trace left behind reveals the practice, the daily lived reality of migrating. The trails taken by the migrants traverse the landscape. With each weary step, the travelers etch their lives directly into the earth.



Figure 7. Delilah Montoya, *Hills*, 2004, Digital photographic print, Courtesy of Delilah Montoya

Some of the migrant trails documented by Montoya, like the one pictured in *Water Trail, O'odham Reservation, AZ* (2004) (Fig. 8) run through reservation land near the Ironwood National Forest in Arizona. Individual tribal members placed plastic containers of water along the trail as an act of mercy and in an attempt to reduce deaths along these dangerous corridors. The translucent water jugs glow eerily against the textures of tree, cacti, and rock. Their placement orders the path and indicates the next step in the journey. Montoya's lens records the stark and desolate beauty of the desert landscape now embedded with historical narratives of migrants and those who compassionately assist them. The tragedy and triumph of these important human stories change an isolated and perhaps forbidding space into an unforgettable place.



Figure 8. Delilah Montoya, *Water Trail, O'odham Reservation, AZ*, 2004, Digital photographic print, Courtesy of Delilah Montoya

Conclusion

I have discussed two theorists, Lucy Lippard and Michel de Certeau, whose work on space and place have inspired my consideration the work of Chicana photographers Laura Aguilar, Kathy Vargas, and Delilah Montoya. A brief overview of their lives and art production contextualized the later discussion of particular images that reveal how simple everyday acts, such as walking, sweeping, or watching a parade, leave both metaphorical and literal traces in the terrain. In their work, each of the artists has transformed space or geographic location into place, something intimately known, something that holds human history, something of great power. Lippard poses the question, "If place is about memory, but no one who remembers is left to bring these memories to the surface, does a place become a no-place, or only a landscape?"²³ I maintain that the work of these Chicana photographers helps us, and those who come after us, to remember the lives lived and the identities contested and fashioned in the geographic sites these artists depict. The traces that we and others leave in the landscape change it forever and reveal the power of place.

²³ Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, 23.

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