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Reclaiming the Americas: Latinx Art and the Politics of Territory

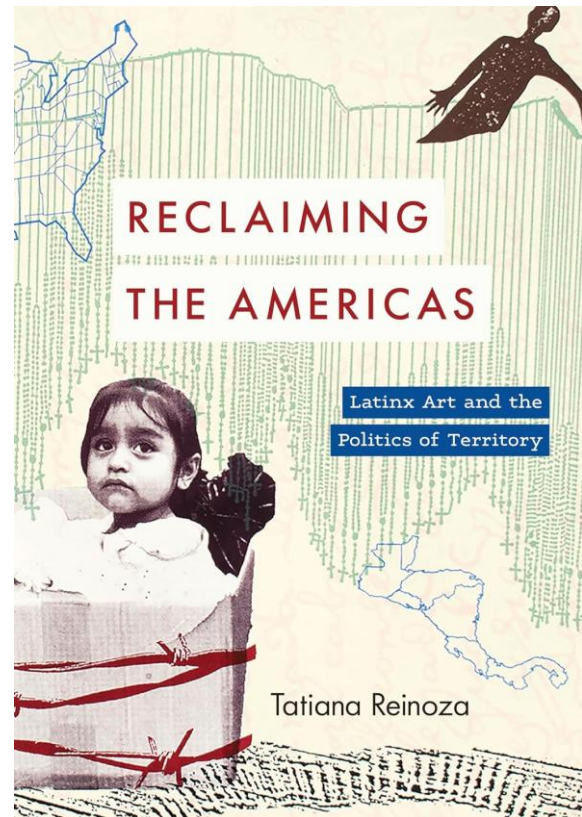
By Tatiana Reinoza

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In her 2020 polemic, *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics*, cultural anthropologist Arlene Dávila makes an affirmative case for “Latinx art” as a category of analysis despite the lack of consensus about its meaning. The Latinx category, she argues, designates diverse groups and individuals of Latin American descent living in the United States, whose only shared experience is having been “racialized as foreigners, undocumented, and unbelonging,” regardless of their citizenship status and historical or current relationship to what is now US territory. Latinx art, she concludes, should be approached by scholars and critics as a “project” of “culture making.” As a point of entry rather than a “term of closure,” the Latinx category acknowledges the heterogeneity of these groups and individuals while rendering them visible within institutions and markets that have historically excluded them.¹

Tatiana Reinoza’s *Reclaiming the Americas: Latinx Art and the Politics of Territory* exemplifies and models Latinx culture making. Like Dávila, Reinoza refuses to define “Latinx” in positivist, universalizing, or transhistorical terms. Instead, she embraces the category as an “operative construct” that brings much-needed attention to artists of diverse national origins, racial positions, and class experiences, who have been constituted as “forever foreign” within the Anglo-dominant imaginary of US nationalism (7). Reinoza explores the ways Latinx printmakers have worked in community-oriented print workshops to combat their exclusion from political and cultural representation and create markets for their work. But she also emphasizes their aesthetic concerns by revealing the conceptual and technical sophistication of their prints (9). Reinoza characterizes her project as the production of a “new cognitive map for Latinx art,” one that is based on “relational latinidades” (7). Her pan-ethnic comparative approach evades



the tendency to homogenize or stereotype Latinx artists and allows for nuanced appreciation of their unique experiences and concerns without disavowing a commitment to the project of collective visibility.

Reclaiming the Americas celebrates the print medium as the cornerstone of Latinx art across four chapters that proceed chronologically, beginning in the 1990s and ending in the early 2000s. Each chapter presents a case study that is anchored in a national political moment that reveals the long history of the United States' entanglement with and intervention in Latin America. In addition to celebrating the print medium, Reinoza calls attention to its "complicity in distributing the spatial logics of colonization" through mapping territories and disseminating information about the Americas during the so-called period of discovery (17). Through close readings of individual prints, she reveals how Latinx artists "reclaim" the Americas through reterritorializing practices intended to counter the effects of early modern prints that "envisioned the Americas as terra incognita (unknown), terra nullius (unclaimed), and terra nova (new)" (2). Each of these reterritorializing practices centers the body as a site of knowledge, violence, racialization, and resistance.

Reinoza also explores the vestiges of coloniality that continue to haunt these reterritorializing practices. She combines insights from borderland studies, critical Latinx Indigeneities, scholarship on the Black Atlantic, and decolonial aesthetics with her intersectional feminist perspective to approach the embodied politics of prints by Ricardo Duffy, Enrique Chagoya and Alberto Ríos, Sandra C. Fernández, and the contributors to the Dominican York Proyecto Gráfica's portfolios. She draws much-needed attention to the contributions of women artists while also acknowledging the gender violence, Indigenous dispossession, and anti-Black racism that sometimes shapes the counter-cartographic aesthetics of Latinx artists. Her both/and approach enables an appreciation of the evolving efforts of Latinx artists to imagine the Americas differently and more ethically within ongoing conditions of coloniality.

While Reinoza emphasizes the political ethos of Latinx prints, she does not privilege graphics associated with Civil Rights Movements of the 1970s, although they are discussed. Rather, she explores printmaking within the context of the Latinx print workshops, residencies, and ateliers that emerged in their wake to foster technical skill and formal experimentation in addition to encouraging political dissent. These spaces of collectivity and creative play supported a home-grown avant-garde that called into question the institutionalization and autonomy of art while simultaneously building an alternative network of support for Latinx art. Sited in underserved Latinx communities, such as Boyle Heights in Los Angeles; Tempe, Arizona; Austin, Texas; and Washington Heights in New York City, the workshops she highlights participated in the creation of counter-publics, bringing to light issues of gentrification, criminalization, exploitation, and erasure while facilitating collaborations with both master printmakers and local constituents. She shows how printmakers laboring to refine their practice in these professionalizing spaces engaged in community building within and beyond the workshop.

Reinoza does not offer a comprehensive survey of Latinx print workshops or printmakers (although she does provide a useful appendix of workshops and collectives in the United States). Instead, each case study situates a small number of prints executed in one of four workshops within a sociopolitical framework while also providing capsule histories of the

workshop progenitors and the culture that enabled the aesthetic and conceptual advances each artist achieved while in residence. The biographical and geographical heterogeneity of the artists she highlights reveal why the Latinx category is hard to define and, for some, hard to comprehend. Likewise, each workshop is structured differently, revealing the various strategies artists have employed to elevate Latinx art. Despite differences in funding, organization, or output, these collectives all combine a commitment to apprenticeship with community development, inspiring an ever-expanding network of Latinx-run workshops and growing a society of aesthetically talented printmakers that continues to this day.

Chapter 1 explores Chicax artist Ricardo Duffy's *The New Order*, made during his third residency in the Experimental Silkscreen Atelier Program at Self Help Graphics & Art (SHG) in 1996. SHG, one of the oldest and best-known Latinx print workshops, was founded by Sister Karen Boccalero, Carlos Bueno, and Antonio Ibañez in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, in 1973. It is a nonprofit that runs community art programs as well as a professional residency. Situating Duffy within the SHG, Reinoza explores his response to anti-immigrant legislation post-NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994) by leveraging Indigenous territorialities associated with both the Chicax myth of Aztlan and the settler myth of the Apache Leap. Duffy appropriates the Marlboro Man campaign to articulate how anti-immigrant legislation, like California's Proposition 187, is an outgrowth and continuation of the ideology of Manifest Destiny that supported the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the annexation of half of Mexico's territory in the nineteenth century. Like the myths of terra nullius and terra nova that authorized the settlement of the West, anti-immigrant propositions constitute Latinx people as fugitives on US land. Duffy juxtaposes cowboys, mesas, and a smoking George Washington with symbols associated with border policing and migrant death to expose the "hypocrisy of American exceptionalism" in President George H. W. Bush's rhetoric about forging a "new world order" during the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990 (41). However, as Reinoza points out, his rendering of the Western United States as Native land through the ghostly avatar of an Indigenous mother replicates the colonial trope of America as an Indigenous woman in Jan Van der Straet's *Allegory of America* from the *Nova Reperta* (c. 1588). Duffy's Indigenous territoriality is thus in tension with his reliance on European landscape conventions that treat territory as a gendered possession.

Chapter 2 details the collaboration between the Mexican-born, San Francisco-based artist Enrique Chagoya and border poet Alberto Ríos on a lithographic portfolio titled *You Are Here*, produced and published by Segura Publishing in 2000. Founded by Joe Segura and Lisa Sette in Tempe in 1981, Segura Publishing grew out of Segura's print-research facility at Arizona State University. As a for-profit publishing house and gallery, it offers artists access to master printers and hosts both Latinx and non-Latinx artists through an exclusive residency program. In *You Are Here*, Chagoya and Ríos undermine Western cartography's projection of a disembodied subject by producing surreal maps that defy logic and index embodied territorialities. Chagoya and Ríos's collaboration demonstrates the continuities between the experimental geographies that emerged to combat neoliberalism's biopolitical surveillance in the early 2000s and the arithmetic mapping of the globe in the age of "discovery." They reclaim the spatial epistemologies of Amerindian maps in the pre-Columbian world to cast doubt on scientific reason and to recenter the body as both subject and agent of knowledge. Reinoza argues that, unlike other case

studies in her book that claim singular subject positions, *You Are Here* “subvert[s] the paradox of reconquest and gesture[s] to a potential future where multiple ways of knowing and envisioning territory can productively coexist” (111). The concept of “embodied territoriality” developed in this chapter informs the two that follow.

Chapter 3 focuses on two panoramic screenprints, *Coming of Age (Transformation)* and *CAUTION: Dreamers in/on Site*, that Sandra C. Fernández, an Ecuadorian–American (born in the United States but raised in Quito), made while a Serie Project artist-in-residence at Coronado Studio in 2008 and 2013. Serie Project, created by Sam Coronado in 1993, is a residency program in Austin, Texas, in which artists produce limited-edition fine-art prints. It was originally subsidized by Coronado Studio, a for-contract press he ran out of his private studio. Reinoza explores Fernández’s mestiza territorialities, an approach to questions of national belonging informed by Fernández’s experience growing up in Latin America, where *mestizaje*, or the idea of racial mixing, is normative. Her *mestizaje* is also informed by radical Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, whose retheorization of *mestizaje* Fernández encountered during her time living and working in the South Texas borderlands. In her prints, Fernández draws upon her own experience as a border subject to critique the monoethnic imaginary of white nationalism that prevails in the United States (fig. 1). She argues that this imaginary fuels the criminalization of unaccompanied minors navigating the gauntlet of cross-border migration or undocumented youth weathering the precarious protections of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). Fernández layers references to the neoliberal redevelopment of Austin in the early 2000s that enticed and exploited migrant laborers over a substrate of colonial codices to denaturalize the bordering practices of postcolonial nation-states across the Americas, which racialize and criminalize undocumented people. While Fernández deploys *mestizaje* strategically as a counter-hegemonic discourse within the United States, Reinoza asserts that the artist also replicates its tendency to ignore “the African presence and the history of slavery that shaped modern economies in the Americas” (150).

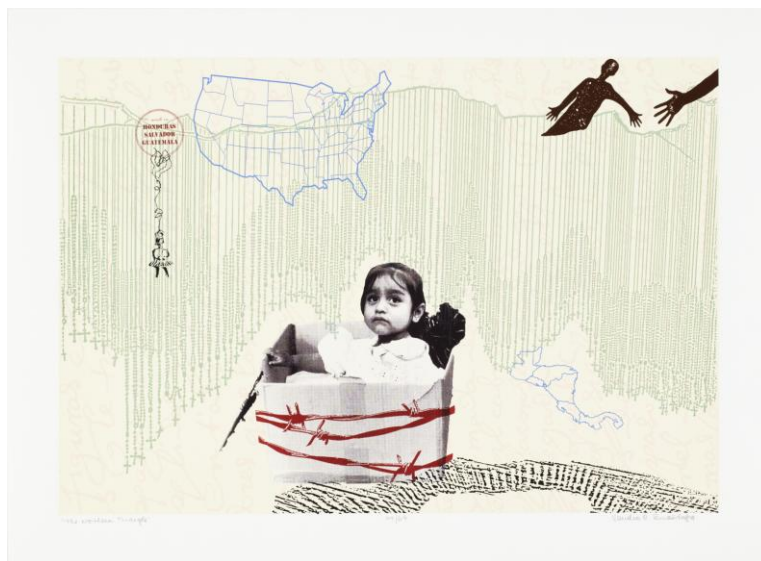


Fig. 1. Sandra C. Fernández, *The Northern Triangle*, 2018. Serigraph on paper, 18 x 26 in. (image), 21 15/16 x 30 in. (sheet). Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, Purchased through the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund, 2019.18.1 © Sandra C. Fernández

Chapter 4 redresses this tendency to ignore Africa in discourses of mestizaje. Reinoza explores the significance of aqueous territorialities to the border experiences of Caribbean diasporas through a discussion of the Dominican York Proyecto Gráfica (DYPG) portfolio called *Manifestaciones* (2010). Founded by Pepe Coronado (no relation to Sam) in New York in the early 2000s, DYPG is a loose collective of US and island-born Dominican artists who produce themed portfolios using a variety of printmaking techniques. The DYPG eschews a brick-and-mortar facility in favor of collaboration across studios and workspaces. Reinoza traces how artists affiliated with the DYPG, like Scherezade García (fig. 2) and Miguel Luciano, disclose the impact of US interventions in Hispaniola and its role in the anti-Black formation of *Dominicanidad* (Dominicanness, or assumptions on the island about who is a Dominican and what constitutes membership within the national mestizo imaginary). Their prints explore the impacts of surges in Dominican migration to the United States since the 1960s, revealing the ways that the experiences of Dominicans in diaspora reorient the racial geography of the island's mestizo identity to the Black Atlantic. The artists in the DYPG not only foster community between the racialized US-born Dominican York community and island-born Dominicans, but they also challenge anti-Black racism in both the United States and the Dominican Republic.



Fig. 2. Scherezade García, *Day Dreaming / Soñando Despierta*, from the portfolio *Manifestaciones: Expressions of Dominicanidad in Nueva York*, 2010. Archival inkjet and serigraph on wove paper, 6 15/16 x 9 in. (plate), 11 5/16 x 15 1/16 in. (sheet). Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, Purchased through the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund, 2019.21.6 © Scherezade García

Across all four chapters, Reinoza places Latinx art within a transnational and hemispheric framework without treating the work of these artists as derivative of their US or Latin American peers. She shows that Latinx printmaking collectives have always encouraged international and cross-racial alliances. Moreover, she draws out the personal and professional itineraries that connect Latinx artists to print workshops and art schools in the United States, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic. Each case study reveals the aesthetic erudition of Latinx artists who reference canonical styles and vernacular traditions in sophisticated and knowing ways. Additionally, Reinoza contextualizes each print within broader artistic tendencies that include other Latinx artists and media as well as histories of more mainstream movements.

Reinoza concludes with an argument about the benefits of institutionalization for Latinx avant-garde movements and the positive gains that have been made in recent years. But she also tackles the ongoing coloniality that haunts the politics of territory. She asks, “How can artists avoid the pitfalls of reproducing colonial thinking in their attempts to reclaim the Americas?” (206). And she

calls on scholars to practice more nuanced approaches to decolonial aesthetics that embrace and explore the contradictions of a Latinx imaginary circumscribed by “often-overlapping colonial histories” and embroiled in “horizontal cultural battles that are rooted

in epistemic violence” (206). Her book models this nuance and demonstrates why the methodologies of art history, foremost among them close formal readings of singular works of art, are essential to the project of Latinx art. At the same time, *Reclaiming the Americas* demonstrates that the history of Latinx printmaking it surveys is necessary for a more capacious history of art in the Americas.

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Notes

¹ Arlene Dávila, *Latinx Art: Artists, Markets, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5, 9.