Visualizando la Conciencia Mestiza: The Relation of Gloria Anzaldúa’s Mestiza Consciousness to Mexican American Performance and Poster Art

Maria Cristina Serrano

University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd

Part of the American Studies Commons

Scholar Commons Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
Visualizando la Conciencia Mestiza:
The Relation of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Mestiza Consciousness* to Mexican American Performance and Poster Art

by

Maria Cristina Serrano

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Liberal Arts Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies College of Arts and Sciences University of South Florida

Major Professor: Daniel Belgrad, Ph.D. Adriana Novoa, Ph.D. Ylce Irizarry, Ph.D.

Date of Approval: October 26, 2010

Chicano/a, border art, immigration, hybridity, borderlands

Copyright © 2010, Maria Cristina Serrano
Table of Contents

List of Figures ..................................................................................................................... ii
Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ iii
Introduction ..........................................................................................................................1
Chapter 1: Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Mestiza* Consciousness ..........................................................4
Chapter 2: The Relation of *Mestiza Consciousness* to Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s
          *Border Brujo* and *The Couple in a Cage* .......................................................................18
Chapter 3: The Creative Synthesis in Mexican American Poster Art ........................................30
Conclusions ...........................................................................................................................43
References .............................................................................................................................46
List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Still from *Border Brujo* ...................................................................................22
Figure 2.2: Gomez-Peña as *Border Brujo* ........................................................................22
Figure 2.3: Fusco and Gomez-Peña in *Couple in the Cage* .............................................22
Figure 2.4: Close-up of performers .....................................................................................22
Figure 3.1: Andrew Sermeno, *Huelga! (Strike!)* ...............................................................31
Figure 3.2: Unknown, *Tierra o Muerte! Venceremos* .......................................................31
Figure 3.3: Diego Rivera, *The History of Mexico: The Ancient Indian World* ...............33
Figure 3.4: David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Cuauhtemoc Against the Myth* .............................34
Figure 3.5: Malaquias Montoya, *Vietnam, Aztlán* ............................................................34
Figure 3.6: Xavier Miramontes, *Boycott Grapes (Boicotea las Uvas)* ............................34
Figure 3.7: Rodolfo “Rudy: Cuellar, *Bilingual Education Says Twice as Much* ..........37
Figure 3.8: Jose Montoya, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez, and Louie “The Foot” Gonzalez, *Jose Montoya's Pachuco Art: A Historical Update* ......................................................37
Figure 3.9: Victor Ochoa, *Border Bingo* ........................................................................38
Figure 3.10: Laura Molina, *Cihualyaomiquiz, The Jaguar* .............................................41
Figure 3.11: Tina Hernandez, *Ya Basta!* ........................................................................41
Figure 3.12: DC Comics, *Wonder Woman* .....................................................................41
Figure 3.13: J. Howard Mitchell, *We Can Do It* .............................................................41
Abstract

This thesis explores Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of mestiza consciousness and its relation to Mexican American performance and poster art. It examines how the traditional conceptions of mestizo identity were redefined by Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera in an attempt to eradicate oppression through a change of consciousness. Anzaldúa’s conceptions are then applied to Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s performance art discussing the intricacies and complexities of his performances as examples of mestiza consciousness. This thesis finally analyzes various Mexican American posters in relation to both Anzaldúa and Gomez-Peña’s art works. It demonstrates that the similarities in the artist’s treatment of hybridity illustrate a progressive change in worldview, thus exhibit mestiza consciousness.
Introduction

Having been raised in both the Latino and Anglo American cultures, I have always been fascinated by the dynamics between the different traditions. This has led to the study of hybridity and how its expression through the arts illustrates such varying worldviews. I am particularly interested in the dynamics that influence Mexican American or Chicano visual arts. The art is quite complex as it incorporates elements of Indigenous, traditional Mexican and Anglo American cultures. Analyzing these various influences in Mexican American art is a significant means of understanding and appreciating the hybrid experience of the postcolonial world.

In the process of grasping the hybrid experience of Mexican American culture, this thesis poses the following questions: Why are the multitude of varying images, languages and ideas in Chicano/a art so prevalent? Why do Mexican American artists depict these contradictions and juxtapositions in worldviews as a natural synthesis? Is there an alternative way of understanding Mexican American art other than labeling it as hostile and critical?

I began my investigation by looking at the ways in which Mexican Americans were portrayed through history and observed that in most texts, women were portrayed as inferior. The mestizo held “masculine” traits and the construction of identity largely ignored the female experience and continued to be exclusive. Although the Mexican American Movement of the 60’s and 70’s sought civil rights and freedom, it greatly negated women the opportunity to overcome machismo. The Chicana Movement thus
sought to awaken a feminist consciousness by advocating equal rights. Intellectuals like Gloria Anzaldúa began liberating women’s consciousness by voicing the problems within the Mex. Am community and pressing for a change of consciousness. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) presents hybridity in Mexican American art and culture as a progressive unity between the different traditions and ideas that influence the heritage. Anzaldúa’s work discusses the variety of issues that Chicanos often encounter and narrates their experience in the “Borderlands” as continuously changing:

> Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact with one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an “alien” element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being “worked” on. (Anzaldúa, Borderlands Preface)

As a way of eradicating oppression and embracing intercultural dialogue, *Borderlands* discusses a new *mestiza consciousness* that calls for divergent thinking and a tolerance of differences. This new consciousness serves as a resolution to the issues of isolation and the conflicting identities that Chicanos often struggle with.

The issues that Anzaldúa engages in her writings reappear in the visual texts of the 80’s and 90’s and span various Mexican American art forms such as performance and poster art. Guillermo Gomez-Peña performs the various stereotypes and identities associated with Chicanos as illustrations of hybridity. I use the notion of *mestiza* consciousness to analyze the inconsistencies and complexities of Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s performance art in an alternative light. Although the art appears aggressive in its critique of imperialism, it demonstrates a synthesis of ideas and traditions similar to *Borderlands*. 
Mexican American poster art further illustrates *mestiza consciousness* in its expression of hybrid culture. I selected nine posters which illustrate the evolution of the art form from a revolutionary critique of the dominant culture, to one that embraces and celebrates the amalgamation that constitutes the Mexican American tradition. The posters selected for analysis not only express hybridity by incorporating Indigenous, traditional Mexican and Anglo American elements, but best depict the progressive change of consciousness that Anzaldúa advocates in *Borderlands*. This thesis demonstrates the relation of *mestiza consciousness* to Mexican American performance and poster art as an alternative method for analyzing and understanding the intricacies of the art forms.
Chapter One

Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Mestiza* Consciousness

Mexican American art is influenced by a rich history of hybrid culture. The hybrid experience is reflected in the illustration of the various elements of Indigenous, traditional Mexican, and Anglo-American cultures. Throughout Mexican American history, this hybridity has seemingly been depicted as a clash of cultures that portrays a conflict of ideas and world views. The contradictions and juxtapositions found in Mexican American art have been attributed to the continuous struggle between the dominant and dominated cultures. For example, much of Mexican American art includes traditional Mexican iconography along with images of Anglo-American popular culture. Another contradiction is the use of Indigenous symbolism alongside modern technology. The intricacies of hybridization have been explored by numerous scholars and artists in an attempt to define Mexican American identity and understand the multi-cultural experience. To appreciate Mexican American visual art, it is vital to examine the role and development of the *mestaje* in Mexican American history.

Mexican Americans have been portrayed historically as *mestizos*, oppressed and continually mistreated due to their hybrid origins. Their history illustrates a struggle for identification and equality demonstrated in works like *I am Joaquín* (1967) by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan* (1969) by Alurista and *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature* edited by Valdez and Steiner. These depict the hybrid experience and emphasize the importance of *mestizo* culture in the history of
the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement. The works are unique in that they employ code-switching to illustrate the nature of living “in-between” cultures as complex. They also emphasize the role of Aztec mythology in defining their heritage as resistant and powerful. The anthology for example, brings together various Mexican American texts such as native American poems, essays from the Chicano Movement, and twentieth-century barrio stories, illustrating diversity in Mexican American literary history. Although the works largely exclude the female experience, which I discuss below, they seek to portray the various aspects of the multiplicity of Mexican American culture.

Women have been active participants in Mexican American history, but have been misrepresented in literature; this illustrates a masculinist representation of Mexican American identity. Up until the Chicana Movement of the 70’s and 80’s, the image of the Chicano was identified with traditionally “male” traits and associated with the war-like image of ancient Aztec gods. The machista attitudes of Chicano men subordinated women, and the mestiza was looked down upon as the descendant of a “treacherous” figure known as La Malinche. Chicanas were portrayed in literature as sexual objects whose responsibilities included raising the children, looking after the home, and only supporting their husbands in the struggle for racial equality. In the 1970’s, Chicana intellectuals began questioning the patriarchal system that oppressed them through history and voiced their oppositions to the hegemonic masculinist ideology within the Chicano community. Chicanas gathered in conferences held throughout the U.S.

---

discuss women’s liberation and promote gender equality. The Chicana Movement promoted figures such as *La Malinche* and *La Adelita* as significant female icons of *mestizo* culture. Activists of the movement also defied traditional female roles by pursuing higher education; Chicanas demanded that they be recognized as something other than wives and mothers and sought to become financially and emotionally independent. During the 1980’s and early 90’s, with the publications of Chicana activists such as Ana Nieto Gomez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherie Moraga, and Chela Sandoval, among others, female representation changes. Chicanas began to be recognized as intellectuals, scholars, and artists engaging in the discussion of Mexican American identity and paying attention to the long-ignored female condition.

In the 1980’s, writer Gloria Anzaldúa sought to resolve oppression of Chicanas with her notion of a new *mestiza* consciousness. In her first major work *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1984), Anzaldúa not only retells *mestizo* history, but also promotes her resolution to the various socio-cultural issues that affect Mexican Americans. She advocates revolutionary change by introducing a radical world view that eliminates binaries and challenges the dualistic tradition of Western thinking. Her conceptions engage in more than racial and gender conflict; the new *mestiza* consciousness aims to develop an inclusive society open to multiplicity and inclusivity.

This chapter will first trace the development of *mestiza* consciousness through reference to the Mexican American literary tradition. The portrayal of Chicanos will be discussed in relation to three works that illustrate the role of *mestizo* and Aztec culture in the construction of identity: *I am Joaquín*, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* and *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature*. These works have traditionally depicted the
Chicano conceptually as masculine. The Chicana Movement’s response to this masculinist conception of mestizo identity will then be examined. Finally, Gloria Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness will be discussed as a radical approach to the mestizo identity issue. Her notions provide an alternative way of understanding the juxtapositions within contemporary Mexican American art; they help understand the contradictory images as the illustration of a negotiation of traditions.

Alurista’s *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, presented at the first National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in Denver Colorado in 1967, has acted as a defining declaration of Mexican American racial pride and as a manifestation of Chicano identity politics (Rosales 224). The text calls for nationalism as a tool for organizing and mobilizing Mexican Americans to action; despite any differences in religion, class, or political backgrounds, it “is the common denominator that all members of La Raza can agree upon” (*El Plan* 2). *El Plan* reminds Mexicans Americans of their “proud historical heritage” and emphasizes their destiny to take back the lands seized from their ancestors. It proposes that Chicanos take control of their lives by engaging in community meetings and campaigns. Through national unity, economic control, education, the establishment of institutions for the people, self-defense, and the preservation of cultural values, the plan affirms liberation. *El Plan* is established upon the importance of race and cultural heritage. It asserts that Chicanos are capable of overcoming “oppression, exploitation, and racism” by invoking the mestizaje that unites and empowers them (2).

*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* calls for brotherhood and aims to unite the masses in defense of their culture. It calls for a battle against racism, but ignores the gender issues that plague Mexican American communities. Women’s rights are not addressed and
machismo is never mentioned to maintain a patriarchal system. Chicano men are urged to overpower the Anglos, yet it also suggested that women continue to be subordinate to men. A dimension of the dualistic aspect of Chicano identity is seen here; the patriarchal system empowers men and sustains exploitation through gender. Chicano men are to be controlling and dominant, and Chicanas are to remain subservient, docile beings.

The importance of mestizaje in the construction of a Mexican American national identity can also be seen in Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales I Am Joaquín (1967). This epic poem reflects the nation building of “La Raza” as for example, The Aeneid, did for the Romans. It simultaneously celebrates hybridity while condemning the cruel nature of its origins. It begins by describing Chicanos as “lost in a world of confusion” living in between the cultures of the Anglo and Mexican people (1). The narrator continuously embraces the different aspects of his mestizo identity by admiring Aztec culture in one part of the poem, and honoring Christian figures like Jesus Christ in another. He uses aspects of multiple traditions to define himself against the Anglo, emphasizing the enduring and powerful aspect of hybridity. He demonstrates that although Chicano history has been that of struggle, their resistance is grounded in the ability to continuously adapt and assimilate. Adopted as the anthem of the Mexican American Movement, I am Joaquín avidly portrays the significance of mestizaje in the unification and mobilization of the Chicano people (Rosales 229).

Although the epic poem seeks to establish a Mexican American nationalist ideology, it embodies a masculinist, and therefore, a separatist quality of Chicano identity. The narrator in I am Joaquín refers to his “fathers” and “brothers” as significant participants in the struggle (16). Gonzales mentions numerous male figures such as
Cuauhtémoc, Cortes, Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, Benito Juarez, and Francisco Madero, but only alludes to two females, the deities Tonantzín and La Virgen de Guadalupe. Joaquín is represented as a brutal revolutionary who “killed those men who dared to steal my mine, who raped and killed my love, my wife” (22). The female is depicted as one who is abused and in constant need of male protection. Although Joaquín states he is “in the eyes of woman…I am her and she is me,” (27) he is also “arrogant with pride and bold with machismo” (25). In his representation of the “masses of the people,” Gonzales typically associates a powerful mestizo identity with historical male figures and their contributions to the cause. It seems unfeasible that a Chicana could relate to this revolutionary past and, from this poem, derive the confidence to act in the present struggle.

Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature (1972) also portrays a negative image of Chicana women and contributes to the masculinist representation of Mexican American identity. A majority of the works contained in the anthology are written by men with a predominantly machista2 attitude. The chapters narrate the history of the Chicano people focusing on the experiences and struggles of Chicano men. Written from the male perspective, there are several examples of machista representations of Chicana identity that emphasize the dualism within the Movement and establish a hierarchy. A chapter titled “Life in the Barrios” consists of five stories that illustrate everyday life in Chicano neighborhoods. The barrio is portrayed through the eyes of five male authors who objectify women and portray them as weak and vulnerable characters.

In stories such as “On the Road to Texas: Pete Fonseca” and East Los Angeles: Passing

2 For an explanation of machismo in Chicano/a society see page 83-85 in Borderlands/La Frontera.
Time” Chicanas are over-sexualized and addressed in a demeaning manner. In stories such as “Tuscon, Arizona: Las Comadres,” women endure physical abuse from their husbands and associate abuse as an ordinary occurrence they must accept. The stories present an ignorant image of Chicana women and support the stereotypical image of Mexican Americans.

In the Anthology, Chaper IX, “La Causa: La Mujer (The Woman)” further illustrates the masculinist attitude that the oppression of Chicanas is merely a subset of the general racial oppression. The chapter addresses the Chicana’s “existence as dependent upon her ability to conform to Anglo society” and the challenges of having to reject her Mexican heritage (275). Mostly written by male authors, it focuses on the continuous racial prejudice faced by women in all phases of daily life. Only in the final pages does the chapter quickly mention the imbalance of power and sexual prejudice found within the Mexican American community.

A Chapter in the Anthology, “La Causa: La Mujer (The Woman)” includes The Woman of La Raza by Longauez y Vasquez, an early declaration of Chicana feminism. It tackles the problem of machismo and how it is ignored to keep men in power and calls for women’s liberation as a process that has to begin in the home to consequently affect the rest of society. A poem by Mary Lou Espinosa, “La Madre de Aztlan,” follows stating that “True woman’s liberation must happen first in the mind of the woman/ Man cannot change his attitude toward woman until the woman perceives her deep psychological self as independent and asserted from man…” (279). These early works ushered in concern for change and demonstrated a step towards a transformation in consciousness.
The Chicana Movement of the early 1970’s sought to awaken a feminist consciousness in Mexican American women. Chicanas began questioning their role in *el movimiento* and their positions within Mexican American society as shown in this excerpt from *La Raza* journal: “What role does the Chicana serve in the Movement? Just how important is she to the Movement that is dominated by men? The men in the movement only think of her when they need some typing done or when their stomachs growl…”

Chicana artists and scholars challenged the subordinate position given to Mexican American women through history demanding recognition and liberation from male control (Garcia 5). With their publications, Chicana feminists mobilized their efforts and created a new image of *la mujer Chicana*. Many embraced *La Malinche* as an influential figure in *mestizo* history:

Doña Marina should not be portrayed as negative, insignificant or foolish, but instead be perceived as a woman who was able to act beyond her prescribed societal function, namely, that of being a mere concubine and servant, and perform as one who was willing to make great sacrifices for what she believed to be a philanthropic conviction. (Del Castillo 123)

Chicana feminists challenged the ideologies of the Catholic Church and attacked the restrictions placed upon them through the image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. They no longer wanted to be portrayed as passive wives and mothers, but as active participants in the Mexican American fight for “freedom.”

---

*3* Anna Nieto Gomez discusses the history of the Feminist movement explaining the major differences between Anglo and Chicana Feminism. As Mexican American women face multiple oppressions, they have created an agenda that addresses the specific needs of Chicanas. Nieto discusses welfare rights, child care, and race as significant issues of the Chicana feminist consciousness.
Gloria Anzaldúa, as a Chicana feminist, challenged the traditional conceptions of mestizo identity as her ideology and lifestyle completely rejected the standards created for Chicana women. Her work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* celebrates Mexican American identity from the perspective of an educated, autonomous, lesbian woman who embraces the various aspects of hybridity and encourages a dialogue among traditions. First, the work is written in a variety of languages from “English to Castillian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl, to a mixture of all of these” (preface to *Borderlands*). Anzaldúa’s text intermingles with Mexican corridos, songs from conjunto bands, Native American poetry and other literary texts to emphasize the inter-cultural mixing of language systems. She uses these various forms as affirmations of a hybrid culture that continuously changes as it assimilates. The author also switches from a personal account of oppression to a collective Mexican American experience; her personalized story thus becomes a reflection of an entire community. The code-switching allows the text to become relatable and accessible to all Mexican Americans, including and especially women.

Instead of simply celebrating her cultural heritage by incorporating code-switching in her text, Anzaldúa uses the different dialects to highlight the oppression occurring within her own community and by means of their “own” languages. She uses code-switching repetitively, not merely as an anti-establishment tool of resistance, but to emphasize the oppression she experiences by her own people. Utilizing Spanish, Anzaldúa comments on the cultural expectations that Chicana women must bear: “Nothing in my culture approved of me. *Había agarrado malos pasos.* Something was “wrong” with me. *Estababa mas allá de la tradición*” (Anzaldúa 16). She frequently
switches to Spanish when discussing her rebellious character and when describing the ways in which she was criticized for being “untraditional.” In a section titled “Cultural Tyranny” Anzaldúa employs code-switching to critique *machismo*; she mentions Spanish words associated with women such as *hociconas, callejeras, mujer mala, puta* and *hija de la chingada* to express the chauvinistic attitude towards Chicanas (17).

As another way of defying the established conceptions of Mexican American women, Anzaldúa changes the traditional use of Aztec mythology that has empowered men and shamed women. She embraces Aztec goddesses in defiance to Catholicism, but most importantly, as examples of ambiguous entities whose dualities strengthen resistance and transcend oppression. To regain female power and status, Anzaldúa invokes *Coatlicue, Coatlalopeuh*, and *Tonantsi* as symbols of duality and ambiguity. Her “reclamation of Aztec deities and traditions begins a reformulation of Aztlan from a male nation-state to a feminist site of resistance” (Saldivar-Hull 60-61). By way of this reappropriation of Aztec culture, Anzaldúa creates a new “mythos” of *mestizaje*. The serpent figure, as a metaphor for sexuality, the underworld, and the feminine, has been changed by Anzaldúa to represent positive images of creativity, energy and life: “By implication, metaphors are imposed upon the individual by the collective unconscious, powerfully influencing the individual’s construction of her/himself” (Aignor-Varoz 49). By reclaiming ancient Indigenous symbology, Anzaldúa changes her conception of the world and “unlearns the masculinist versions of history, religion, and myth” (Saldivar-Hull 65). Having changed her unconscious conception of the world, she creates a positive, liberated image of her Self and other *mestizas*.

---

Gloria Anzaldúa introduces the notion of *mestiza consciousness* as one that not only tackles the problems of a collective hybrid identity and attends to the experience of Chicanas, but also promotes the elimination of binaries altogether. Anzaldúa proposes a consciousness tolerant of opposing ideas and knowledges and rejects the dualities that dominate the Western tradition. Having been oppressed on multiple levels, Anzaldúa presents her perspective on oppression and conceives a way of thinking that can resist its various forms. According to Maria Lugones, “Anzaldúa focuses on the oppressed subject at the “moment” of being oppressed. Thus she can capture and everyday history of oppression and an everyday history of resistance. Her culture, though oppressive, also grounds her resistance…” (Lugones 32). Because she continuously participates in all of these, “the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts” she can slip into one consciousness or the other and thus envision an ideology that accepts and balances all of them.

In “La herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue State” the writer describes the act of seeing and being seen and the subject/object position. The binary concept of Western thought has created boundaries that Anzaldúa believes are the sources of oppression; put into categories of either/or, she believes Mexican Americans do not fit into any of them. The *Coatlicue* state or the state of “in betweeness” in which Mexican Americans often find themselves, is “a state of isolation, separation from harmful sense” (Lugones 33). The *Coatlicue* state encourages resistance and the creation of a new identity, “it represents duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective—something more than a mere duality or a synthesis of duality” (Anzaldúa 46). In between worlds, Anzaldúa yearns to cross into a third, “alien” world; one that eliminates binaries and
accepts all ideologies. Her survival in this new world depends upon her capacity to adapt and continuously transform in this “third space (Moreira-Slepoj 4).” Anzaldúa’s vision of a new mestiza “challenges the dualisms that underpin the power structure of the United States” (Saldivar-Hull 61). She believes it is not enough to question and refute the dominant culture’s views and beliefs but that the oppressed must eventually reconcile with the oppressor or “write it off altogether as a lost cause” and cross into a completely new territory (Anzaldúa 79). In this new territory the New Mestiza must learn to be flexible and change her perspective so that it is inclusive rather than exclusive. “The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (79). She can embrace all cultures at once, never rejecting or abandoning any aspect of one or the other; she is a plural being operating in “pluralistic mode” (79). Often perplexed about the clash of ideas and knowledges, the mestiza develops a new consciousness that helps her deal with her plural personality. This mestiza consciousness attempts to break down the binaries that have dominated her and are the foundation of a history of oppression:

The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originate in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our language, our thoughts. (80)

The new *mestiza* must transcend dichotomies and form a new unity between the contradictions. She must overcome the battle with male chauvinism, with the “dominant white” culture, and most critically, she must end her inner struggle: “I will not be shamed again/ Nor will I shame myself” (87). Like other Chicano/a activists, Anzaldúa believes her people will be recognized with dignity and “with a sense of purpose—to belong and contribute to something greater than our *pueblo*” (88). Mexican Americans will help create an “open” society without the need to be accepted or understood. Rejection due to difference will no longer be a socio-cultural issue; instead, everyone will be invited to participate in the transformation of consciousness and live the “mestiza way.”

Anzaldúa’s reappropriation of Indigenous symbology has allowed her to conceive a consciousness that eradicates established ideologies and creates a new and all-inclusive world view. The *mestiza* consciousness thus allows for a new notion of Mexican American identity; a dynamic, adaptive, flexible personality that accepts all aspects of its multiple cultures. It provides a new approach to analyzing Mexican American visual arts. Instead of the traditional notion that Mexican American artists are struggling in a realm of confusion in between the cultures of the Indigenous, Mexican, and Anglo American, it may be that they are in an “alien” or third world.

Anzaldúa’s conception of *mestiza consciousness* is an effective frame through which to analyze Mexican American visual art. Examples such as performance and poster art depict the negotiation of oppositions that Anzaldúa conceived. The visual works do not illustrate a conflict of worldviews, but demonstrate an ability to continually adapt and accept them depicting a synthesis of traditions. In the process of inclusion, the artists continue to examine the oppressor in an attempt to understand the opposing worldviews.
and create one that does not reject any particular aspect of each. Mexican American visual artists juxtapose divergent ideas and traditions not solely to celebrate one or critique another, but as an expression of the amalgamation of their “new” identity. Chapter two of this thesis will analyze the ways in which the mestiza consciousness is manifested in the performance art of Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Cuban American artist Coco Fusco.
Chapter Two:

The Relation of *Mestiza Consciousness* to Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s

*Border Brujo* and *The Couple in a Cage*

Gloria Anzaldúa’s *mestiza consciousness* offers a unique insight into the performance art of Guillermo Gomez-Peña and its presentation of the complexities of a *mestizo* identity. The art of Gomez-Peña depicts the negotiation of oppositions that Anzaldúa has conceived of as promoting a “global border consciousness” needed to eradicate oppression (Fox 62). Although his works appear hostile and confrontational in the depiction of cultural struggle, they actually demonstrate a synthesis of worldviews by way of intercultural dialogue. As Barbara Kirshenblatt explains in “The Ethnographic Burlesque,” “Gomez-Peña’s works shifts the locus of repudiation and admonishment from the “other” to the practices of othering” (Kirshenblatt 77).

This study applies Anzaldúa’s *mestiza consciousness* as a new method of analyzing Gomez-Peña’s contentious and “extreme” border art. It will demonstrate that although there are considerable differences between these two Mexican-American artists (one example is that Gomez-Peña is a Mexican native living in the United States as opposed to Gloria Anzaldúa who was born and raised in Texas), the effects of hybridity have had similar effects upon their art.

In the process of accepting the different elements of a hybrid culture, Gomez-Peña examines both the oppressed and dominant traditions and ultimately creates an

---

amalgamation that does not reject any particular aspect of each--however juxtaposing the synthesis may seem. The Chicano artist brings together divergent ideas and traditions not solely to celebrate one or critique another, but to express his new-found adaptable and changing identity. This study analyzes how his use of juxtapositions in languages, images, and messages constitutes the notion of an “alien” identity. It will show that these inconsistencies are due to the “in betweenness” aspect of hybridity and that they depict the notions of inclusivity, multiplicity, and a “third” consciousness that Anzaldúa has conceived.

Guillermo Gomez-Peña, performance artist and writer, was born in Mexico City in 1955 and moved to the United States in 1978 to study Post-studio Art at the California Institute of the Arts. He has done pioneer work in performance and video art, installation, poetry, journalism and cultural theory. His artworks deal with cross-cultural issues such as immigration and the politics of language and technology (Gomez-Peña Border Art Clasicos). As a Mexican American artist, he focuses on issues of hybridity, multiculturalism, and the immigrant experience:

I want to articulate the ever-changing parameters of my multiple communities, but always from a multidimensional perspective, the border perspective, the only one I know. I crisscross from the past to the present, from the fictional to the biographical. I fuse prose and poetry, sound and text, art and literature, political activism and art experimentation. (Gomez-Peña Warrior for Gringostroika 16)

His works incorporate pop iconography, kitschy props and stereotypical images of Mexicans, Chicanos, and Anglo-Americans as representations of hybrid culture:

“Gomez-Peña’s border literature allows for the liberating revelation that Latin America
has invaded the US (and Canada) in the cultural and social spheres, not to mention demographics, unleashing a transformation from which there is no turning back” (Smorkaloff 91). He often collaborates with other interdisciplinary artists like Roberto Sifuentes, Michelle Ceballos, Violeta Luna, and Coco Fusco.

Cuban American artist, Coco Fusco, is a New York based interdisciplinary artist and writer whose works deal with intercultural relations and the relationships between “North and South.” Her works include English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas (1995) and The Bodies that Were Not Ours and Other Writings (2001). She has also edited Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas (1999) and Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self (2003) (“Coco Fusco Biography”). The artist performed in collaboration with Gomez-Peña in The Couple in a Cage providing vital insight into the female experience of hybridization and identity performance.

In the process of understanding how the mestiza consciousness can be used to examine Gomez-Peña’s works, we must engage the themes of sexuality and Indigenous symbology that Anzaldúa’s and Gomez-Peña’s works share. Both themes appear in The Couple in a Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey (1993), a travelling performance featuring Coco Fusco, in which the artists exhibit themselves as Indigenous people from an imaginary island resulting in a performance study of the dynamics of the subject/object position and the effects of colonialism.

In both Border Brujo and Couple in a Cage, the artists employ surrealist strategies to visually represent the cultural elements that influence a hybrid identity.

---

7 See Gaston Criel’s “Surrealism” in which the author elaborates upon the definition of surrealism as a realization of one’s existence: “The merit of Surrealism consists in systematizing this concept, in
Throughout the performances, the artists juxtapose seemingly incompatible realities, which initially shock and confuse the viewer. The realities that coexist within the art cannot be reconciled within the viewer’s mind and therefore seem strange and eccentric. The result is a glimpse of *mestiza consciousness*.

In *Border Brujo*, for example, the artist’s “costume” consists of a mariachi outfit and sombrero along with a banana necklace, an Aztec feather headdress, bone jewelry, animal prints, a Mexican wrestler mask, and a Pachuco hat among other items (Fig. 2.1, 2.2). In a similar fashion, as Guatinaui Indians (made-up characters from a fictitious island) in *Couple in a Cage*, the artists combine Indigenous garments with sunglasses, Mexican boots, sneakers, and other articles (Fig. 2.3, 2.4). These diverse components are identified by the viewer as Indigenous, Mexican, or Chicano, thus visually representing the Chicano/a as a blended personae. The compounded imagery exercises the “freedom” that the artist feels has been negated by cultural standards.

__________

establishing the reason for its existence. It is not a question of art or of literature, but of an “immediate” realization of the deepest part of one’s self.”
Adding to the complexity of costume is the intentional use of kitsch\(^8\) as a statement of cross-cultural negotiations. In *Border Brujo*, Gomez-Peña employs “rasquachismo”\(^9\) presenting numerous “random” everyday, items positioned together in a manner that is intended to appear natural:

---


\(^9\) For further discussion on “rasquachismo” see Holly Barnet-Sanchez’s “Tomas Ybarra-Frausto and Amalia Mesa-Bains: A Critical Discourse from Within.” *Art Journal* 64.4 (2005): 91-93.
In rasquachismo, the irreverent and spontaneous are employed to make the most from the least... one has a stance that is both defiant and inventive. Aesthetic expression comes from discards, fragments, even recycled everyday materials...
The capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado is at the heart of rasquachismo.
(Mesa-Bains 156)

For example, Gomez-Peña places Catholic prayer candles immediately next to a Tijuana clay hamburger. These are simple, common items the viewer may think of as unsophisticated and “kitschy”. By recycling them artistically and as an illustration of his “Mexicanness,” Gomez-Peña makes a statement critiquing the cultural pretensions of Anglo-American “high” art and declares his acceptance of both traditions as equals. He questions the established notions of high vs. low, challenging Clement Greenberg’s notion that kitsch is art of an “inferior” culture. In “Art and Culture” Greenberg claims that peasants will not waste their time attempting to understand a Picasso when a simple and straightforward piece is much easier to enjoy:

There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful—and therefore the cultivated—and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor—and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch.

(Greenberg 16)

Gomez-Peña inverts valueless items to pieces of great value by utilizing the rasquache technique, thus commenting on the cultural status accorded to different ethnicities, and problematizing traditional Anglocentric conceptions of what constitutes art.
The use of the various items presents a problem for the viewer as they are set side by side and produce a dissonant image, thus a disturbed vision of reality. But the items, which include pop culture iconography, ceremonial Catholic pieces, statues of Native American Indians, and a clay model of a hamburger, symbolize everyday experiences of Mexican Americans and depict the exchange of ideas and traditions resulting from colonization. Thus it is a visual representation or performance of mestiza consciousness.

The visual representations of hybridity at first seem perplexing in *Couple in a Cage*, a performance originally intended as a “satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other” (Fusco, 143). Trapped in a cage and on display, the performers act as undiscovered Indians from an imaginary island in the Gulf of Mexico. As in *Border Brujo*, the diversity of images results in a dissonant impression of reality: “Fusco and Gomez-Peña parodied Western stereotypes of what ‘primitive people do.’ Every stereotype was exaggerated and contested—the sunglasses offset the body paint, the ‘traditional tasks’ included working on a computer” (Taylor 167). The performance sought to dramatize the colonial experience by illustrating that what appears to be a struggle between the “primitive” and modern cultures, is actually their communion.

When the spectator first approaches the cage he/she notices two figures that appear to be Indigenous as suggested by their garments. They are silent but partake in “normal” activities such as sitting at a table and watching television. Items in the cage include a laptop computer and a set of weights. The spectator is baffled at the “performance” and does not fully comprehend how such “primitive” beings interact so naturally with “civilized” activities and technologies: “our cage performances forced these contradictions out into the open” (Fusco 152). The Indians’ use of these particular
props (as symbols of “cultured” peoples) was not merely a critique of the postcolonial subject/object position, but a way of inviting viewers into a world of inconsistencies; a way of stirring their preconceived ideas of the contemporary “other” and triggering an intercultural dialogue.

Another aspect of Gomez-Peña’s performance of hybridity is his use of multiple languages and dialects similar to what we have seen in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*. *Border Brujo* begins with Gomez-Peña speaking in tongues while lighting candles. The audience cannot understand what the artist is communicating, but infers that it must be a sort of ritualistic prayer. His tone of voice and his language continually change; at times he speaks in English with a *Vato* accent, at others he chants in Gregorian style, and inclusively addresses the audience in Mexican Spanish and “gringo” English. At first, the changes in language and tone add to the puzzling array of images and messages. As the performance unfolds, the changes occur less harshly as the audience becomes accustomed to the unusual changes. By eliminating the traditionally used English/Spanish binary and using all of these dialects and accents to communicate a message of natural dialogue among cultures, Gomez-Peña performs *mestiza consciousness*. As Fusco states,

> Border Brujo articulates a notion of multiple identity that defies monocultural definitions of a Mexican, a *chilango* (a Mexico City native), or a Chicano. It presents a world of constant intercultural interaction—symbolized by the *Casa de Cambio*—a territory in which opposing worldviews and stereotypes are endlessly juxtaposed. (Fusco, Introduction 47)

Assuming that the audience will catch on to these constant changes constitutes the artist’s invitation to break down the physical and psychological borders that have controlled
communication among people: “*Border Brujo* is another strategy to let you know we are
here to stay, and we’d better begin developing a pact of mutual cultural understanding”
(Gomez- Peña Border Brujo 50).

Although the artist continuously changes his personae in *Border Brujo*, the Aztec
“character” dominates for several reasons. Using Indigenous imagery, language, and
ritual allows him to freely experience a part of himself that he has previously had to
suppress and/or reject. The Indigenous aspect of his identity has been the one most
greatly negated and attacked. Thus through this performance, he is asserting its ability to
persist. The audience is then forced to ask themselves, who is this foreign identity and
why is it a key factor in the piece? Gomez-Peña not only recognizes and celebrates a
culture that has been ignored, but is self-fulfilled in the process. The liberating experience
achieved by the artist parallels Anzaldúa’s in *Borderlands*, she states:

> When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face,
my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act.
It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this
learning to live with *la coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a
nightmare into a numinous experience. (Anzaldúa 73)

The indigenous theme is ubiquitous in *Couple in a Cage*; along with the display
of “civilized” behavior, the artists act out “exotic” activities and rituals such as sewing
vooodoo dolls and grooming one another (Fusco145). In addition to educating the public
and attempting to change the “unconscious of American society”, the artists also become
conscious of the effects of colonialism (Fusco 152). As the artists put themselves on
display, they too become vulnerable and put themselves in the “object” position; they
now experience the difficult aspect of being “seen”: Fusco has stated, “Gomez-Peña found the experience of being objectified continuously more difficult to tolerate than I did … my experiences as a woman had prepared me to shield myself psychologically from the violence of public objectification” (Fusco 162). Anzaldúa believes this violent experience resulting from oppression is linked to Western conceptions of the gender binary (Anzaldúa 83). As a homosexual or “half and half,” she conceives reality as limitless and invites her reader to embrace human nature as evolving:

What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other…I am the embodiment of the hieros gamos: the coming together of opposite qualities within. (Anzaldúa 19)

In many of his works, Gomez-Peña deals with gender and sexuality in ways that emphasize tolerance and ambiguity. He does not limit himself to the portrayal of “masculine” personae, but wears makeup and female clothing to illustrate a flexible interchange among sexes. Many of his works are overtly sexualized and include characters performing or photographed in the nude and in erotic positions. His works, like Anzaldúa’s, openly tackle the “border problem” by manifesting identity and gender issues as not binary.

Initially, one might consider Border Brujo and Couple in a Cage as statements of conflict between “North and South, Anglo and Latin America, myth and social reality, legality and illegality, performance art and life” (Gomez-Peña Warrior 75). At times, Gomez-Peña exerts anger and frustration at the dominant culture for oppressing those with historically less power. He often questions why the Western tradition has regarded the “other” as incapable and insignificant; why their customs have been misinterpreted
due to a lack of interest and awareness: “You thought Mexican art was a bunch of candy skulls and velvet paintings…” (Gomez-Peña 86).

He answers through his “extreme” performance of stereotypes and identities in order to expose the audience to the multiplicity that is Mexican American culture. By witnessing this eccentric performance, the audience is shocked and realizes they previously perceived absurdities as reality; most conceived the “other” as strange and now realize that they are the ones being mocked for their ignorance. Although confrontational in his performance, the underlying message is not a hostile one. As Fusco states in “Introduction to Border Brujo”: “Although his tone is often biting and sardonic, Border Brujo’s message is ultimately of hope” (Fusco 47). The works display the self-discovery of a malleable identity described by Anzaldúa as the new mestiza. Like Anzaldúa, Gomez-Peña weaves in and out of personalities, continuously challenging his systems of thinking. Influenced by various worldviews, Border Brujo examines what Anzaldúa calls the Coatlicue state in which a third perspective is created and an “alien” world may be embraced:

We want to bring back the ghosts and unleash the demons of history, but we want to do it in a way that the demons don’t scare the Anglo-European others, but force them to begin a negotiation with these ghosts and demons that will lead to a pact of co-existence. (qtd. in Tobing-Rony 191)

As Gomez-Peña and Fusco explore the “process of othering” they partake in the “travelling” notion that Anzaldúa discusses. The artists use reverse anthropology to study the “other” and gain a better understanding of oppression. As Anzaldúa “weaves” in and out of personalities and identities, the artists continuously change and transform from the
oppressed to the oppressor partaking in the notion of *mestiza consciousness*. The artist’s ability to transform their consciousness and “travel” from one worldview to another illustrates the pluralistic mode of thinking Anzaldúa envisioned in *Borderlands*.

The performances do not exemplify a state of uncertainty, but an acceptance of diversity; they call for a dialogue among cultures in an effort to explore a post-modern identity. As Daniel Belgrad describes, “the discourse of cultural hybridity envisions the collapse of colonialism’s structural inequalities into a polyglot global culture, where cultural difference becomes the basis for creative syntheses” (Belgrad 249). The following chapter will examine this creative synthesis in Mexican American poster art.
Chapter 3:

The Creative Synthesis in Mexican American Poster Art

Gloria Anzaldúa’s *mestiza consciousness* not only provides new insight into the performance art of Guillermo Gomez-Peña, but also into the discussion of the significance of Mexican American posters. Like performance art, Mexican American posters illustrate themes of Indigenous symbology, traditional Mexican iconography and images of Anglo-American popular culture. They similarly explore hybridity by employing the *rascuache* and surrealist strategies used by Gomez-Peña. Like the works of both Anzaldúa and Gomez-Peña, the posters simultaneously depict the pain and suffering caused by hybridization, while celebrating the possibilities and empowerment of multiculturalism. They use the hostility towards the dominant culture imaginatively and constructively to explore the “process of othering” in an attempt to resolve the internal conflict caused by hybridity. This chapter will analyze nine Mexican American posters to illustrate the evolution of the art form from the early 60’s to the twentieth century.

Early Mexican American poster art of the 60’s and 70’s illustrates the pressing needs of the Mexican American Movement’s fight for reform (Fig. 3.1, 3.2). In the early 60’s Cesar Chavez emerged as an iconic Chicano figure as a representative of Mexican
American farm workers\textsuperscript{10}. The United Farm Workers organization (UFW) used strategies such as strikes, fasts, and boycotts to rebel peacefully against harsh and oppressive working conditions (Rosales 130). Although the UFW’s intentions were nonviolent, posters of the time depict impassioned people with an aggressive stance against inequality. As George Lipsitz states, “unlike art created primarily for the approval of critics and for display in galleries and museums, these posters functioned as crucial components of a Chicano public sphere created by community-based artists and activists at the grass roots” (Lipsitz 72).

These early posters express a hostile message against the dominant Anglo-American culture. Their call for reform utilizes strategies that exert a sense of frightening

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{image1}
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{image2}
\caption{Fig. 3.1 Andrew Zermeno, 
\textit{Huelga! (Strike!)} 1965}
\caption{Fig. 3.2 Unknown, 
\textit{Tierra o Muerte! Venceremos} 1970}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{10} See Rosales chapter 8, “The Struggle in the Fields” in \textit{Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement}. 
power. Tere Romo asserts “the Chicano artist’s initial strategy towards political activism combined revolutionary and culturally affirming imagery” (Romo 95). *Huelga! (Strike!)* illustrates such great exigency for equal rights. In the poster, a Mexican American farm worker holds a UFW flag and runs uncontrollably towards a dream of equality. He fervidly yells “huelga!” as he steps over the large red letters communicating the focal message of resistance. The poster’s open composition is largely significant indicating that the Mexican American farm worker will no longer be detained by the boundaries and restrictions put upon him. As the worker leaps out of the poster and confronts the viewer, he asserts his irrepressible need to be recognized and accepted. This passionate portrayal of the Mexican American’s demand for freedom illustrates the Movement’s sense of urgency.

*Tierra o Muerte! Venceremos* uses a similar strategy to arouse a rebellious strike against oppression. The title, which translates to “Land or death! We will overcome,” relays a potent message of opposition and endurance. Like *Huelga!* this poster similarly calls for resistance, yet instead of focusing on the individual’s power to enact change, it centers on the power of community. The shouting figures emerge abruptly from the red background holding their firsts in the air to symbolize power. Although fairly simplistic in composition, the message is clear: power in numbers is the effective way to overcome injustice and gain respect in a discriminative society. These revolutionary posters were not merely the artistic outcome of the social movement, as Lipsitz explains, “they played crucial roles in constructing organic solidarity and in defining collective ideology” (Lipsitz 73).
During the 70’s, posters continued to depict a message of resistance, although artists turned to *Indigenismo*¹¹ as counter-cultural sources of empowerment. Alurista’s *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* gained momentum as it justified the southwest U.S. as Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Aztec Indians. Poster art for this period shows that Chicanos embraced their Indigenous roots in an even greater manner by adopting Aztec symbology and mythology into their works and referencing a connection to their Indigenous past (Fig. 3.5, 3.6). The references to Aztlán and Indigenous imagery can be traced back to the works of the Mexican *muralistas* (Fig 3.3, 3.4). Their murals often narrate a rich heritage of Aztec origin that later reappears in Mexican American poster art.

Fig. 3.3 Diego Rivera, *The History of Mexico: The Ancient Indian World* 1929-35

---

¹¹ The *Indigenismo* movement arose during the Mexican Revolution and according to Encyclopedia Britannica, advocated “a dominant social and political role for Indians in countries where they constitute a majority of the population.” The ideas of the *Indigenismo* movement were emphasized during the Mexican American Movement as an Indigenous past became a source of empowerment and resistance for Chicanos.
Montoya’s *Vietnam Aztlán* relays an anti-war message by connecting the horrors of the Vietnam War with the history of Aztlán and the Mexican-American struggle. The term *fuera* indicates a call for the retreat of the United States not only from the Vietnam War but also from the occupied territory of Aztlán. The poster draws parallels between Vietnam and Aztlán as victims of the imperialist agenda of the United States. It also
utilizes irony as the same troops fighting for “freedom” in Vietnam, are second-class citizens in the U.S. The poster aims to unite the Vietnamese and Chicano people in an effort to defeat the imperialism of the dominant culture. The poster states “unidos vencerán,” “together they will overcome” creating a sense of camaraderie not only between the Vietnamese and Chicano people, but also between all non-Anglo peoples. Once more there is an illustration of fists, this time, coming together to communicate a message of powerful unity and brotherhood. Another significant statement is conveyed through the facial expressions of the figures. They look stern, defiant, and very much focused on defeating oppression and gaining equal rights.

*Boycott Grapes*, another poster of the UFW organization, employs Aztec imagery as a statement of counter-cultural resistance. The poster ensures that the Indigenous, having been massacred in the process of colonization and imperialism, continue to exist as examples of resilience and strength. The Indigenous figure crushes grapes in a threatening manner as to demonstrate the violence that may be reciprocated if the Movement’s demands are ignored. Much like the figures in *Vietnam Aztlán*, the Indigenous man holds a firm expression of temerity. His piercing eyes stare at the audience in an intimidating manner as to arouse instability in the viewer. This serves to validate the potency of the Movements by creating a sense of uneasiness in the dominant culture. The strategy of *Indigenismo*, used much like Anzaldúa and Gomez-Peña, serves as a mutual reminder to both Mexican and Anglo Americans of the continuing persistence of the *mestizo* people.

In the late 70’s and 80’s, poster art significantly changed due to the labor, political and educational reforms established in the United States. Chicanos attained equal rights
and became recognized as leaders, scholars, intellectuals, and artists. The Chicano and Chicana Movements gained success and intellectuals like Anzaldúa began discussing hybridity in a new light. As discussed in chapter one, in the process of exploring a hybrid identity, Anzaldua discussed hybridization and multi-culturalism in a more constructive and tolerant manner. Mexican Americans began celebrating their multi-cultural heritages, even accepting their Anglo-American influences. Posters, instead of solely displaying political messages, now aimed to celebrate their achievements by illustrating Mexican American pride and heritage. Tere Romo asserts that “in visualizing a new Chicano cultural identity, artists became part of a cultural reclamation process to reintroduce Mexican art and history, revitalize popular artistic expressions, and support community activities” (Romo 100). Posters were being commonly used to announce the exhibition of art shows, musical and theatrical performances, and to promote educational seminars in the barrios. Jose Montoya’s *Pachuco Art: A Historical Update* and Rodolfo Cueelar’s *Bilingual Education Says Twice as Much* are prime examples of the poster’s communicative functions as advocates of heritage and education (Fig. 3.7, 3.8):
Posters from the late 80’s up until contemporary times continue to be used for communication in the barrios, although there is a new emphasis on hybridity. Like Chicano literature, performance art, and mural painting, poster artists superimpose Indigenous, traditional Mexican, and Anglo-American pop culture images. They not only emphasize the significance of the Indigenous tradition by incorporating Aztec imagery but also include Catholic iconography such as La Virgen de Guadalupe, patron mother of Mexico. The Aztec and traditional Mexican icons are oftentimes juxtaposed with references to Anglo-American popular culture such as comic book heroes. The poster artists use their aversion of the dominant culture as a creative impulse to illustrate the future of hybridity as a continuous and inevitable process.

Like Gomez-Peña, the posters use surrealist strategies to capture the attention of the viewer. They employ rascuache techniques to invert the kitsch process and comment
on the validity of art. For example, Victor Ochoa’s *Border Bingo* uses a traditional Mexican game template to organize his poster (Fig. 3.9). The template is unique to the Mexican *Lotería*, a traditional Mexican game similar to Bingo (Iglesias and Swanson). The *lotería* cards are not only considered components of a game, but also revered as Mexican folk art. These rascuache items have been transformed into folk art and now, used by Ochoa, the cards become subjects of poster art. Like Gomez-Peña, the artist inverts kitschy items into artistic icons of artistic significance.

Gomez-Peña’s performances of various Mexican American “characters” express the internal conflict of identities he often experiences. Ochoa similarly illustrates this struggle in *Border Bingo*: “the poster presents an extensive array of images, icons, signs, and symbols evoking the shared social history and the common collective of people of Mexican origin in the U.S.” (Lipisitz, 74).

![Fig. 3.9 Victor Ochoa, Border Bingo 1987](image)

When first examining the poster, the viewer identifies an array of characters associated with the Mexican American experience. These include *El Vato, La Migra, El*
Nopal, La Turista, La Criada, El Marine, La Facil, El Indio, and La Punk. These “border” characters are exaggerated, portrayed stereotypically as a statement of the absurdities believed to be the “border” experience. In a satirical manner, the poster actually illustrates the harsh reality of Mexican American history. The changes that have occurred in Mexico as results of imperialism are demonstrated by the transformation of El Indio to El Nopal, then into La Turista and finally into La Punk. The changing characters mimic the influence of American culture on the Mexican way of life. The immigrant experience is depicted with the characters of La Migra and El Marine; these are illustrated as impetuous and aggressive figures that pitilessly attack Mexican immigrants. La Migra is illustrated with a huge pair of binoculars holding a net and on the look out for illegal “aliens.” It seems as if La Migra is looking to capture escaping animals, rather than human beings. Similarly, El Marine holds weaponry as he intends to “hunt” anyone who does not belong. Chicana stereotypes are also addressed as the artist characterizes Mexican American women in two traditional ways, as either faciles (easy), or criadas (servants). As discussed in chapter one, Mexican American women traditionally had limited paths they could choose in life. They could either become prostitutes, or wives and mothers thus perpetually perform the role of caretaker. These Mexican American stereotypes resemble those discussed by Anzaldúa and performed by Gomez-Peña. Although the joining of varying images may confuse the viewer at first, the divergence illustrated is eventually to be experienced as an identity synthesis, a visual representation of mestiza consciousness.

The mestiza consciousness is further illustrated in Tina Hernandez’s Ya Basta and Laura Molina’s Cihualyaomiquiz, The Jaguar. The posters are not only feminist
representations created to help fight gender oppression, but also depict Anzaldúa’s vision of an adaptable identity (Fig. 3.10, 3.11). For example, Cihualyaomiquiz, The Jaguar clearly embodies the ongoing struggle for women’s liberation by claiming that Chicana women “resist, and will never be tamed.” Ya Basta! states that “it is enough, you don’t have to suffer anymore.” The posters empower women through both a literal and visual message of resistance. Both depict fierce female characters portraying aggressive characteristics in a rebellious stance. Like the earlier posters, these present an urgent need for a change in the social structure, however, they now depict the Anglo American tradition as a powerful and influential part of their identity. They unite familiar images of American popular culture such as Wonder Woman (Fig. 3.12) and Rosie the Riveter\(^\text{12}\) (Fig. 3.13), with unique Indigenous and Mexican characteristics illustrating the transformation of poster art to a more inclusive medium. The various cultural elements that take part in the Chicana experience are relayed to show the interchangeable effects of hybridity. Like the performances of Gomez-Peña, the posters explore the “process of othering” using the strategy of converging images from both Mexican and Anglo American traditions as an equalizer. The poster artists are not merely “borrowing” from the Anglo American tradition, but cleverly translating a universal message of equality; they demonstrate the ability to adapt to changing traditions while retaining a strong sense of cultural heritage.

\(^{12}\) Rosie the Riveter came to symbolize working American women of WWII. She became a cultural icon of the United States and is commonly used as a symbol of feminism.
Anzaldúa’s *mestiza consciousness* helps understand the historical progression of Mexican American posters from an art form that heavily and aggressively critiqued the dominant culture, to one that embraces hybridity in an attempt to relieve the tension of difference. Although contemporary posters continue to question imperialism and the effects of colonialism, they are more prone to accepting the notion of changing
consciousness and exercising multiperspective. They have evolved to illustrate a
tolerance for ambiguities and contradictions; like Anzaldúa, the poster artists depict a
Mexican American identity as flexible and pluralistic. In relation to Anzaldúa and
Gomez-Peña, poster artists internalize the Mexican American struggle and manifest their
negative and positive experiences through creative forms. Anzaldúa’s conception of a
new mestiza consciousness may seem utopian, but as society has shown in its
progression, the idea of a global culture is apparently becoming reality. The influence of
hybridity in all aspects of society becomes more apparent as consciousness becomes less
exclusive and more open to new and divergent ideas. Mexican American performance
and poster art not only contribute a rich portrayal of Chicano/a history, but also provide
an engaging perspective on what may be the future of hybridization and a new “world”
culture.
Conclusion

This thesis has explored Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of *mestiza consciousness* and its relation to Mexican American performance and poster art. It has examined how the traditional conceptions of *mestizo* identity were redefined by Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* in an attempt to eradicate oppression through a change of consciousness. This notion was then applied to Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s performance art discussing the intricacies and complexities of his performances as examples of *mestiza* consciousness. This thesis finally analyzed various Mexican American posters in relation to both Anzaldúa and Gomez-Peña’s art works. It demonstrated that the similarities in the artist’s treatment of hybridity illustrate a progressive change in worldview, thus exhibit *mestiza* consciousness.

Chapter one introduced Mexican American heritage as multi-faceted due to its heterogeneous roots. It discussed the various Indigenous, Anglo-American, and traditional Mexican influences that constitute Chicano/a culture. The chapter particularly focused on an examination of Mexican American literature and its portrayal of cultural identity. It traced Mexican American literary history emphasizing its masculinist approach especially during the Movement, a vital time in Chicano/a history which sought civil rights and equality. The study went on to examine the radical changes made by Gloria Anzaldúa to the masculinist ideologies of the Movement. Her approaches to the discussion of cultural identity challenged the established traditions by eliminating the binaries that dominate Western thinking. Her notion of *mestiza consciousness* ushered in
an alternative way of dealing with inner conflict by embracing and celebrating all aspects of hybridity. Her literature demonstrates a negotiation of oppositions through the use of code-switching and the interchange of literary styles. It also appropriates Indigenous concepts as paths of progression towards a future free of oppression. Her conceptions call for a change of consciousness from the traditionally binary form to a pluralistic way of thinking; tolerant of ambiguities and welcoming to difference, this new mestiza consciousness attempts to resolve both external and internal struggles by envisioning a “third world” in which oppression due to difference is nonexistent.

Chapter two reveals similar qualities between Anzaldúa’s theoretical resolution to oppression and Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s performance art. It analyzes two performance pieces in which the use of juxtaposing languages, images, and ideas express the negotiation of oppositions that Anzaldúa has conceived. Like Anzaldúa, Gomez-Peña uses the hostility towards the dominant culture as an expressive medium of resolution. The artist employs kitsch and rasquache techniques to comment upon the validity of art and culture affirming the absurd nature of the high vs. low standards that permeate the Western tradition. His surrealist techniques serve to shock the viewer and challenge him/her to consider new ways of communicating and thinking, thus promoting a change of consciousness. Similar to Anzaldúa’s Borderlands, Gomez-Peña’s Border Brujo and The Couple in a Cage employ code-switching and the use of various languages and dialects interchangeably. The artist also acts out the multiple personalities associated with Mexican Americans focusing on the Indigenous aspect of himself in the liberating and self-fulfilling process. He often mixes Indigenous costume, language, and ritual with
modern technology and futuristic elements to portray, like Anzaldúa, that progress cannot be attained by negating but only by including and accepting.

The final chapter continues the study of *mestiza consciousness* as a new approach to Mexican American visual arts. It focuses on poster art, an affirming and influential cultural identity tool. The chapter traces the evolution of Mexican American posters from an art form that expressed acute hostility to one that illustrates a harmonious amalgamation of traditions. It proposes a significant change from the posters of the 60’s and 70’s to those created in the 21st. century. Whereas earlier posters exhibit a revolutionary and threatening tone to demonstrate Chicano/a resistance, the posters of contemporary times illustrate an inevitable and progressive union among cultures. Like Gomez-Peña’s works, the posters do not ultimately envision a utopia as they continue to explore the painful results of colonization; however, they do accept the possibility of reconciliation as a resolution to the border crisis. The creative synthesis illustrated in the work of these Mexican American artists indeed demonstrates that the possibilities for change in world consciousness are active and infinitely dynamic.
References


Del Castillo, Adelaida R. “*Malintzin Tenepal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective.*” Garcia 122.


Iglesias, Veronica and Swanson, Kent. “Mexican Loteria Card Games.”


