Abstract
This article traces oral and visual stories of queer Xicana Indígena artists to address colonial forms of epistemic violence or missing memory. Queer Xicana Indígenas enact forms of remembering through their art to regain cultural and ancestral memory and story. Often times, it is through collaboration and ceremony across generations and with sacred elements that the stories are formed and hidden histories are unearthed. This article demonstrates how art and cultural production can be a form of decolonization. By focusing on the vision of transformation of queer Indigenous artists and cultural producers, I demonstrate how they construct decolonized knowledge that simultaneously reconceptualizes the past, present, and future for Xican@s and Latin@s. Significantly, the historical memory constructed by these cultural producers offer critiques of U.S. and transnational systems of domination that are ultimately expressed in their writing, sculptures, films, and spiritual practices. For example, the art analyzed here, particularly Gina Aparicio’s clay sculptures, offers a direct avenue to examine the conflated history of heteropatriarchy, nationalism, and settler colonialism through the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the subsequent re-colonizing of the land.

Keywords: Remembering; ceremony; Xicana Indígena; re-rooting; visual storytelling; healing
Introduction

Visual culture is a form of storytelling. Usually storytelling is conceptualized in the form of oral tradition as it is passed on from generation to generation; here I meditate on the possibility of learning or remembering history, ancestry, medicine, language, and other forms of ancient knowledge through visual culture. In particular, I present visual representations that have been intentionally created by queer Latina and Xicana Indígena artists to address colonial forms of epistemic violence or missing memory. Queer Latina and Xicana Indígenas enact forms of remembering through their art to regain cultural and ancestral memory and story. My analyses focus on visual art as a space of ceremony and healing, where forgotten histories are rewritten from rooted, non-heteronormative perspectives.

Remembering through storytelling is particularly important in discussion of Xican@ and Latin@ communities who have, to differing degrees, been displaced, “de-tribalized,” and “de-Indianized” (Gonzales, 2012). Colonization was a source of harmful fragmentation for most peoples in Mesoamerica and continues in the present day through colonial legacies of forgetting or misremembering. Cherrie Moraga (2007) suggests that it is important for Xicanas and Xicanos to “re-member” the histories that have been erased due to colonization in order to recover the connections among ancient cultures, stories, art, architectures, languages, spiritualities, and diverse and distinct sexualities. Diane Taylor (2003) sheds light on this debate by speaking of “the colonizing project” and directly addresses the intentional destructiveness of ancestral cultures and memory. Taylor argues,

Part of the colonizing project throughout the Americas consisted in discrediting autochthonous ways of preserving and communicating historical understanding. As a result, the very existence/presence of these populations has come under question. Aztec and Mayan codices, or painted books, were destroyed as idolatrous, bad objects. But the colonizers also tried to destroy embodied memory systems, by stamping them out and discrediting them. (p. 34)

I argue, through the work of the featured artists, that what continues to exist despite this violence is the sacred knowledge that lives within the people—a resistance spirit, la palabra or word, cultural memory, which many times can manifest through visual imaginings and representations, such as sculptures.¹

Marita Sturken (1997) suggests “that memory is a narrative rather than a replica of an experience that can be retrieved or relived” (p. 7). Memories are not exact evidence of something; instead, the narratives tell collective re-memberings or imaginings. She continues,

¹The emphasis on images and performance echoes the insightful formulation that Taylor (2003) draws in her critique of writing that was introduced by the Conquest, that is, “The writing = memory/knowledge equation is central to Western epistemology” (p. 24). Taylor argues, “Although the Aztecs, Mayas, and Incas practiced writing before the Conquest—either in pictogram form, hieroglyphs, or knotting systems—it never replaced the performed utterance. Writing, though highly valued, was primarily a prompt to performance, a mnemonic aid” (p. 17).
“All memories are ‘created’ in tandem with forgetting…Forgetting is a necessary component in the construction of memory. Yet the forgetting of the past in a culture is often highly organized and strategic” (p. 7). Sturken (1997) offers a vital piece of knowledge in this formulation that is needed for remembering, since the forgetting is not random. There are significant reasons for the forgetting, including historical and sexual traumas. As Andrea Smith (2005) argues in her text, *Conquest*, sexual violence was a central component of colonization. The effects of colonial legacies are still being felt in epidemic forms in various communities today through incest and other forms of harm, such as domestic violence. There is a need for intentional remembering for the purpose of transformation or healing. I am suggesting that remembering, becoming aware of or clarifying a memory, can assist in the process of healing historical and/or sexual traumas.²

The question becomes: How do generations remember particularly when records and memories have been destroyed or mutilated due to forced dislocation? Or as transnational feminist scholar, M. Jacqui Alexander (2005), asks: “How, why and under what conditions do a people remember? Do spiritual practices atrophy? Or do they move underground, assuming a different form? What is the threat that certain memory poses?” (pp. 293-294). Her theorizations of memory and the sacred prove to be extremely useful for this project. She asks: “How does one know the stories and histories of one’s people? Where does one learn them?” Later stating, “we had forgotten that we had forgotten. Missing memory…How will I come to know the stories and histories of my people?” (pp. 262-263, emphasis original). This is where visual representations can assist to re-root practices and memories that have been displaced over generations. Macarena Gómez-Barris (2009) says of visual art, it

has the capacity to speak to, contest, elaborate upon, and produce collective experiences that escape the domain of ‘politics as usual’…Visual art carves out new modes of representation that escape the binary logic of history and memory whose reductionist outcome expresses itself as erasure of the experience of violence. (pp. 78-89)

The very experience of remembering creates meaning through a particular context (time and space), while bringing life to a specific topic, genealogy, or legacy.

A queer Xicana Indígena methodology of remembering generates a productive tension between colonial and non-colonial frameworks that signify the entangled complexities of historical narratives and memories. While the term queer on its own is often understood as a western hegemonic term that erases women of color or queers of color, the writing of the phrase “queer Xicana Indígena” signals a disruption or queering of colonial legacies that impose norms of gender, race, sexuality, ceremony, and spirituality—actively creating space for decolonized alterities (Munoz, 1999). Similarly, the use of the “X” in the term Xicana signals a conscious politicized identity that insists on intentionally remembering Indigenous cultures, language, roots, and hidden histories of Mesoamerica, i.e. the concept of Ometeotl (dual energies of male

² This logic follows that of post-traumatic stress, when one becomes aware of what caused the trauma that knowledge facilitates the path of overcoming the memory.
and female) that can be likened to the Native American concept of Two-Spirit (Moraga & Rodríguez, 2007). Gina Aparicio’s work shows the possibilities of remembering through a queer Xicana Indígena methodology.

**Gina Aparicio’s clay structures as visual storytelling: Disrupting borders of gender and nation**

Sculptor Gina Aparicio, who regards Celia Herrera Rodríguez and other Indígena and Native American women as her mentors, was a featured artist at the Thirteenth Women of Color Film and Video Festival entitled *Regenerations* on the UC Santa Cruz campus.³ Aparicio, a self-identified queer Xicana Indígena artist with Apache and Mayan ancestry, who was born and raised in Los Angeles, exhibited multiple clay sculptures that evoked a deep remembering of tragedy and healing for Indigenous communities of Mesoamerica. Evident in her clay representations are her intense studies of ancient hieroglyphs, close examination of contested Mexican and Latin American histories, as well as her engagement in Xican@ politics and spiritual practices.

Aparicio’s clay sculptures, although created in the modern day, are reminiscent of ancient art forms that simultaneously disrupt and re-narrate heteropatriarchal stories by centering mujer or gender queer generational memory and knowledge (see Figure 1). The creation of her art is a ceremony, beginning with her queer feminist Indígena vision guiding the molding of the clay. Aparicio mixes red earth color clay with water as she begins to intentionally create a full female-bodied figure that has Indigenous features and is adorned with ceremonial elements associated with life and death. In a sense creating an earth-centered story, in harmony with the four elements (water, earth, air, and fire), based on her imagination of and connection with ancestors. Aparicio uses a kiln (fire) to solidify the clay sculpture before she paints her creation, to further bring her piece to life. This contemporary appearing sculpture incorporates multiple modern colors (as opposed to other singular-toned sculptures by Aparicio) to show her insistence that diosas continue to exist in the current moment, i.e. walk the urban streets of Los Angeles.

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³ The Research Cluster for the Study of Women of Color in Collaboration and Conflict film festival organizers coordinated with the Nineteenth Annual MALCS (Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social) Summer Institute, titled: *Transfronteras: Generations and Geographies. Activistas en la lucha!* (August 2-5, 2006) to host an artist exhibit where Aparicio and others were featured. University of California, Santa Cruz.
Aparicio’s art is a form of oral tradition and visual storytelling in the sense that she creates a revised narrative that is rooted in gender balance and a remembering that Indigenous women led and continue to lead and practice ceremony today (Boone & Mignolo, 1994). According to Taylor (2003), “Cultural memory is, among other things, a practice, an act of imagination and interconnection” (p. 82). Cultural memory requires a deep focus and belief in something more than what is immediately visible in historical narratives or representations. As Taylor argues, “Sometimes memory is difficult to evoke, yet it’s highly efficient; it’s always operating in conjunction with other memories” (p. 82). For Aparicio, constructing memory through her clay structures is a disruption to male-centered Indigenous narratives, such as, Chicano cultural nationalism and Chicano assertions of Aztlán, that dis-(re)member the significant role of female or queer counterparts.

In this sculpture, Aparicio is also remembering the process of re-rooting, or creating an Indigenous centered ceremonial space for Xican@s and Latin@s who are in diaspora. Patrisia Gonzales (2012) argues, “Indigenous Mexican practices in Mexico and the United States are examples of how communal peoples maintain ancestral practices without a defined communal base” (p. 235). Further suggesting, “Indigenous/traditional medicine creates a relationship with nature, the place-cosmos. Through activating Indigenous values of respect, responsibility, and renewal, disconnected original peoples can restore their teachings and cultures. They can change the effects of domination” (p. 235). Through Aparicio’s careful and intentional art piece she creates a space that allows for connection and ultimately healing from colonial legacies.
Aparicio’s sculpture, titled “In the Spirit of the Ancestors,” (Figure 2a) features a “4-foot, 9-inch” Indígena mujer, a sort of replica of Aparicio herself, sitting in prayer. Made of clay, she resembles the red earth and wears moon-shaped earrings to show her connection to the stars and cosmos. She is holding both of her arms and hands out to the heavens with her head in a similar incline, signaling a humble connection to the ancestors above and below. A heart-centered necklace lines her yellow-green top, while her belt holds a calavera (skull) at her core, sitting cross-legged and rooted in blue jeans and matching green shoes. According to Aparicio, the skull signifies cycles of life and rebirth experienced many times during a lifetime, directly challenging linear notions of life and death, while the heart of the necklace is representative of the way one connects with spirit, through the corazon. Her left hand has a swirl or spiral etched in her palm, a symbol that rethinks time, space, and story, representing non-western circular ways of imagining those concepts. While her black hair is pulled back in a braid, signaling an urban diosa en ceremonia, prayer.

In the Regenerations Art Exhibit display (Figure 2b), she sits with burgundy maize (corn) in her right hand on top of a layer of red colored rocks, with ceremonial elements around her, including sage, feathers, a rattle, a lit candle, and a ceramic mug with water—strongly resembling an altar for sacred teachings and cleansing ceremony (Halfmoon, 2006). The practice of ceremony is a method of survival that provides growth of spiritual consciousness for Indigenous people who have been “detribalized” (Gonzales, 2012). Cleansing ceremonies are grounded traditional ways to do healing work when someone experiences a form of trauma, i.e. susto (fear), vergüenza (shame), tristesa (sadness) (Román, 2012). Using artistic representation and visual culture as a means to pass on stories and sacred teachings are significant for evoking memory and forgotten histories since practices such as cleansing ceremonies (limpias) are not

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4 Aparicio Interview, 2013.
5 Aparicio Interview, 2013.
easily represented through the written word. Aparicio’s work encourages remembering of sacred healing tools that can be used on an everyday basis to connect with spirit, thus not requiring a connection to an outside institution, i.e. church.

Aparicio’s exhibition set-up further illuminates her process of ceremony and vision in constructing this piece. Aparicio said about this sculpture:

…a lot of times people see Indigenous cultures as something that is dead, as something that no longer exists…it is very much alive, and it’s alive in us and we have a responsibility to keep those things alive for the future generations, so its an attempt to document our history, to document the lineage that has been passed down and to leave that for future generations. So she’s bringing in a lot of these metaphors, but very contemporary, she is like a goddess, but she has on jeans and shoes for instance…She is not the traditional, what you are used to seeing, maybe an unclothed goddess. (Halfmoon, 2006)

Aparicio’s intention for this sculpture was that it would bring together “…things that have been passed on from generation to generation, over hundreds and hundreds of years, through our mythology, through our stories, through our oral traditions, and through our spirituality and spiritual practices” (Halfmoon, 2006). Her efforts to create this piece of visual culture are a direct response to colonization and legacies of forgetting ancestral connections. I witnessed the possibility of passing the sacred knowledge represented by this art piece when a young woman of color from Los Angeles, who traveled with Aparicio and other mujeres from Los Angeles, explained to a two-year-old the elements that surrounded the sculpture. This young woman’s knowledge reflected a deep wisdom by enunciating the story and uses of the ceremonial elements; she explained the process of burning sage, sounding a rattle, and lighting a candle as a form of prayer. She explained how anyone could use these tools. As a participant observer, this moment made clear to me the possibility of passing generational knowledge through cultural production. It also demonstrates how the formation of an Art Exhibit in a women of color, Chicana, Latina, and Indígena space allowed for subaltern and sacred knowledge to be remembered in a respectful and interactive way.

Decolonization of Aztlán

The decolonization of Aztlán is complicated task, however as Chicana feminists have successfully theorized critiques of heteropatriarchy, exclusivity, and male dominance this had led to a re-conceptualization of Chicano cultural nationalism. Strengths of this framework and movement are critiques of imperialism, racist structures, and the search for Indigenous roots. Aparicio’s work is an example of honoring the land through ceremony, without continuing the

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6 It is significant to note that the burning, lighting, or offering of sage is primarily a Northern Native American practice that has been adopted by Xicanas/os and Latina/os. In Mexico and other places in Latin America, it is copal (frankincense) that is burned, lit, and offered during ceremony. The Catholic Church makes use of copal during occasional services, showing how a colonial institutional force co-opted ceremonial elements of the people.
colonial legacy of territorial regulation through borders, a practice the concept of Aztlán ironically purports. Through the decolonization of Aztlán, there is a possibility to reconstruct a relationship to the land that is not based on ownership or re-colonized borders. Through a queer Xicana Indígena methodology there is intentional respect and solidarity building with Indigenous peoples who are connected to the land. Property is a white supremacist notion rooted in colonization that requires adherence to the “pillar of genocide” as theorized by Andrea Smith (2006), and is based on the elimination or disappearance of Native American peoples. Similarly, Morgensen (2011a) argues, “white supremacy and settler colonialism are interdependent and must be theorized together” (p. 109).

Aztlán, like Chicano nationalism, has been severely contested and disrupted by Chicana and Latina feminists (Ramírez, C. 2002; Fregoso & Chabram, 2006; Blackwell, 2011). The mythical homeland of Aztlán was based on a notion of territory that positioned the ancestors of Chicanos as the original peoples of the U.S. Southwest, disregarding other Indigenous peoples and histories. The settler colonial logic of Aztlán was central to the formation of Chicano cultural nationalism. It emerged as result of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and Mexican “loss of land,” which ended the war between the U.S. and Mexico. The Treaty made legal the “transfer” of land from Mexico to the United States, including California, Texas, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada, among other territories. In addition to land that was taken by force and subsequent reconstructing of political nation-state borders, racial hierarchies were established through the divisive language of the Treaty of 1848.

A critical Xicana Indígena methodology asks: What does focusing on the “loss of land”, due to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, obscure in terms of ancestry in Central Mexico and a shared history with Native people? The mythical formation of Aztlán was an important strategic formation for Chicanos who had been forcibly displaced during conquest and the construction of nation, and thus denied access to Indigenous historical narratives, languages, and cultures. Still, the ownership claim to the land known as the U.S. Southwest must be uprooted within Chicano/a consciousness.7 Employing Indigenous decolonization as a methodology facilitates the disrupting of the settler colonial logic emphasized by Chicanos who claim Aztlán as a literal territory without the acknowledgement of other tribes and peoples. Further, I argue that the focus on the legacies of the U.S.-Mexico war is limited because it overlooks the Spanish conquest in central Mexico as a significant moment of colonization for Chicanos. Critically revisiting the history of Mesoamerica, particularly from a feminist perspective, makes Indigenous and gender queer ancestry become increasingly central to forgotten stories of the ‘Mexican-American.’ As Blackwell (2011) argues, Aztlán made women “invisible through the construction of nationalist patrimony that universalizes masculine subjects through the category of ‘Chicano,’ encoding a gendered mode of remembrance” (p. 95).

Aparicio’s vision and creation of “In the Spirit of the Ancestors,” shows the layers of sacred knowledge that are informed by a spirit of resistance to the annihilation of Indigenous cultures. Central to Aparicio’s narrative is a concern for future generations to know non-

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heteronormative Indigenous cultures, histories, and spiritual practices that have been disappeared, or read as non-existent in modern day society. Her effort to produce this representation allows the viewer to integrate contemporary forms of an urban Xicana who is walking a spiritually connected road, ancestry in the present day. This is of particular significance because, according to Gonzales (2012), “the ceremonial discourse and rites were precisely the spaces of Mesoamerican knowledge that the Spanish sought to annihilate” (p. 71). It is to the conquest of Indigenous people by the Spanish that I move to through continued analysis of Aparicio’s clay structures that assist in remembering forgotten histories.

Cuica Maquixtia, Nahuatl language and formation of Mexican nationalism

Aparicio displayed another clay sculpture at the Regenerations art exhibit, it features “a women crucified on the cross,” who is “impregnated and her womb is the earth,” a representation that is reminiscent of an outcast who challenges dominant structures. According to Aparicio, her name in Nahuatl is Cuica Maquixtia, “which translates into she who sings to be free, she’s blind folded” (Halfmoon, 2006), she is unclothed, and she wears a long braid. Her hands and feet are literally crucified, nailed, and tied on the large cross behind her. In this extraordinary political sculpture, Aparicio expresses her critique of “issues from institutionalized religion to patriarchy,” formations of dominance that were central to the conquest of Indigenous people in Mesoamerica (Halfmoon, 2006). This sculpture visually represents the colonization by the Spanish Crown in the early 1500s and the resulting disruption of Indigenous spiritual practices and ways of life through their forced disconnection with the land. It is significant that Aparicio created this artwork to remember the trauma experienced by the ancestors of “detribalized” and “de-Indianized” Xican@s and Latin@s. Cuica Maquixtia opens a path for healing.

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8 Halfmoon, 2006. This image appears on page 64 of Hidalgo de la Riva (2006) special issue, Chicana Spectators and Mediamakers.
Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) identifies “Remembering” as one of “Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects.” Smith (1999) writes, “The remembering of a people relates not so much to an idealized remembering of a golden past but more specifically to the remembering of a painful past and, importantly, people’s responses to that pain” (p. 146). In this case, Aparicio creates a stunning piece of art as a response to layers of complicated histories that caused multiple forms of destruction through forced dislocation, sexual violations, and intentional erasures of spiritual practices. Smith (1999) continues, “Both healing and transformation become crucial strategies in any approach which asks a community to remember what they may have decided to unconsciously or consciously forget” (p. 146). Through a queer
Xicana Indígena tracing of colonial historical occurrences it is possible to bring sanación or healing to the ancestors of displaced peoples, by remembering the dominant forces of conquest.

Aparicio, with this layered and complex piece, critiques the imposition of Christian ideology and a white-centered racial hierarchy, while centering a female-gendered body that holds the earth in her womb. Fittingly, Alexander (2005) suggests, “If healing work is a call to remember and remembering is embodied then we want to situate the body centrally in this healing complex” (p. 316). Aparicio’s sculpture accomplishes this by centering a naked body of a full-figured Indigenous mujer that is rarely seen or honored in dominant forms of religion. According to Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1996), the process of forced Christianization can be conceptualized as the de-Indianization of a population. Aparicio’s piece is a resistance to the de-Indianization that resulted from colonization:

De-Indianization is a historical process through which populations that originally possessed a particular and distinctive identity, based upon their own culture, are forced to renounce that identity, with all the consequent changes in their social organization and culture. De-Indianization is not the result of biological mixture, but of the pressure of ethnocide that ultimately blocks the historical continuity of a people as a culturally differentiated group. (Batalla, 1996, p. 17)

During colonial times, in what became New Spain or colonial Mexico, the mixed-blood mestizo had higher authority than the Indigenous (pure blood), simply because mestizos possessed Spanish blood. Historian Maria Elena Martínez (2008) names this “Limpeza de sangre,” which translated into the purity of blood. Martínez argues, “Spanish notions of purity and impurity of blood were fictions, ideological constructs based on religious and genealogical understandings of difference that despite their invented nature were no less effective at shaping social practices, categories of identity, and self-perceptions” (p. 61).

Within this fictive spectrum of “purity and impurity” blood characterization, Indigenous people were deemed to have “stained ancestry.” One of the biggest fears the Spanish Crown held was that converted people, even those who accepted baptism, would not let go of their ancestral beliefs. As a result of this fear, based on the fiction, Martínez (2008) described, “Indigenous people were…policed and punished” for religious “transgression” (p. 101). This historical context is operative in narrating the purpose of Aparicio’s remembering while creating Cuica Maquixtia.

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9 As argued by Martínez (2004), particularly in her arguments of la “limpeza de sangre.”

10 Bonfil Batalla (1996) details, “The colonial enterprise engaged in destroying Mesoamerican civilization and stopped only where self-interest intervened. When necessary, whole peoples were destroyed. On the other hand, where the labor force of the Indians was required, they were kept socially and culturally segregated” (p. 62).

11 Martínez (2008) argues further, in the Americas, “the colonial discourse of purity of blood was…initially propelled by the Christianization project and by Spanish distrust of the religious loyalties of Jewish converts—by religious utopias and anticonverso sentiment” (p. 129).
Complexities of Náhuatl Language and “Indian” Identity

Aparicio’s earth-toned provocative sculpture has a Náhuatl name. This is also a significant form of remembering since Nahuatl was a dominant Indigenous language that is often associated with the Aztec, since the Aztec were the ruling power during the Conquest in the early 1500s. Batalla (1996) makes a striking argument about the language of Nahuatl, in relation to domination and conquest; he says,

Náhuatl was the preferred tongue, and its teaching was proposed as a general method of facilitating preaching in all of New Spain. To a large extent the ‘Náhuatlization’ that can be observed in many parts of the country resulted more from missionary action than from Aztec expansion…The ability to communicate was converted into a means of control and domination. (p. 87)

Nahuatl was used widely in New Spain and among Indigenous people in the Americas until 1821, the year that Mexico became a nation (Forbes, 1973), although the widespread use of the Nahuatl language was not necessarily by choice. To reduce the effort in learning multiple Indigenous languages, the Spanish rulers mandated the use of Nahuatl by all the tribes as the language of communication.

This example shows us the complexity and co-optation of the language. Aparicio purposefully names this piece in Nahuatl to remember and re-root the language in its Indigenous context through a strategy of decolonization. Aparicio says of the significance of using Nahuatl, it is one of the Indigenous languages from the central valley of Mexico, and so in an attempt to try to preserve those Indigenous languages…so many have been lost. Not lost, but…very violently taken away…so it is an attempt to preserve that and to reintroduce that into the community…in Los Angeles. (Halfmoon, 2006)

It is a layered and complicated history that surrounds the Indigenous language of Nahuatl. Its reclamation despite the misuse by colonial forces is significant, as is the tracing, honoring, and learning of other Indigenous languages that have been disappeared or are currently marginal to the Spanish language (a colonial language). Language holds knowledge, history, and culture.

Aparicio, who is Apache through her matrilineal side and Guatemalan (Mayan) through her patrilineal side, has several other clay figures that are named in the Nahuatl language, actively remembering and centering an Indigenous worldview. The exposure of this language to her (mostly urban and “de-tribalized”) audiences provides a consciousness of Indigenous

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12 Bonfil Batalla (1996) claims, “Mexico City is the place with the largest number of speakers of indigenous languages in all the Americas” (p. 52).

13 For an important discussion on Chicanos/as and variations and uses of the Spanish language, see Anzaldúa (2007) “Chapter 5: How to Tame a Wild Tongue” in Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza.
concepts not available if Chicana/os and Latina/os are only engaging with the Spanish and English languages. Aparicio’s artwork links an analysis of colonization to the ever-receding access and fragmented or forgotten knowledge concerning Indigenous languages, cultures, and spiritual practices that was connected with the formation of the Mexican nation.

A central project in the establishment of the Mexican nation, similar to earlier forms of colonization was to de-Indianize the people, so that Indigenous and ancestral roots were not the center of identity formations or understandings of self. Instead, a mixed-blood or mestizo race took form that was legitimated because of its malleability within the imperial world; most importantly for the purposes of colonial strategy, it eliminated the “Indian.” As Indigenous scholar Renya Ramirez (2002) argues, “The dominant discourse says that Indian identity must remain silent and hidden…. in both Mexico and the United States, the Indian is supposed to disappear” (p. 6). Ramirez further argues that:

...if a criterion utilized in the United States to determine Indian identity were employed in Mexico, almost ninety percent of Mexican population has enough Indian blood to be considered Indigenous, if Mexicans knew their tribal ancestry. These figures demonstrate how the Mexican Nationalist narrative [of] mestizaje has decreased the power of the numerically strong Indian population in Mexico. (p. 4)

This knowledge of ancestry is particularly significant in that, as Ramirez notes, “if mestizos in Mexico decided to identify as Indians, it could transform the political and ethnic composition in Mexico dramatically” (p. 4). Ramirez offers an important argument for interrogating the categorization of mestizo, which as a form of identity can homogenize, and consequently can impede the work of tracing one’s ancestral lineage. Similarly, Batalla (1996) critiques the way the Aztecs are centralized in narratives of Indigenous people in Mesoamerica. He suggests that their hypervisibility obscures other Indigenous tribes and, as a result, Indigenous people in Mesoamerica tend to be subsumed, homogenized, or assimilated into the categories of a constructed nation, such as Azteca-Mexica, Mexicana/o, or Mexican-American. There is an argument here to reclaim Indigenous roots, subjectivity, and methodologies, while doing the work to excavate one’s familial history for tribal affiliations that go beyond the popularized or dominant narratives that Chicanos and Chicanas, or Latinas or Latinos tend to claim. I now turn to a discussion of Womyn Image Makers, a filmmaking collective who joined forces to support each other on their journeys to tell their stories and remember.

14 Chicana writer Ana Castillo does this form of ancestral tracing in her 1995 text, My Father was a Toltec.
**Womyn Image Makers: Communal and collaborative disruptions of hierarchies**

Womyn Images Makers (WIM) came together in May 2000 (Mercado, 2001). This collaborative of queer Indígena Xicanas and a Centroamerica who have roots in El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, the San Francisco Bay Area and East Los Angeles collaborated and co-conspired together for over ten years. The four members who made up this non-hierarchal Indígena centered filmmaker collective were Maritza Alvarez, Aurora Guerrero, Dalila Paola Mendez, and Claudia Mercado. According to Mercado (2001), “These urban Xicana, Indígena, Mestiza filmmakers and visual artists…share a passion for representing our stories: sensual morena narratives, obsidian experimental digital collegas, slice of life adventures and herstorical ancestral portraits” (p. 29).

They build on a Xicana Indígena subject formation that is transnational and diasporic, in the sense that it defies the boundaries of nation-state demarcations. Aurora explains, “Latinos who identify as Xicanas are starting a resistance to mainstream culture and colonialism and have a spiritual base that is rooted in their indigenous ancestry.” In their films, there is a visible constant connection with Indigenous practices—spirituality, prayer, and ceremony are central elements of their storytelling. Queer Xicana filmmaker Aurora Guerrero recalls the emergences of her spiritual practices that influence her visual storytelling:

For me, my identity as a mujer Indígena really surfaced when I started to learn about my history and that was [during] my freshman year in college, so coming into my identity as a Chicana meant wanting to learn more about my own history. I started reading about other people who weren’t ashamed of acknowledging their Indigenous ancestry, I felt a very profound need to connect to that, it felt very organic…I felt an immense pull to come back to my spiritual self and so I started to connect to Indigenous practices, mostly through Native North American sweats, Lakota sweats and then Diné tipee ceremonies, and I had done a few Mexican Indigenous sweat lodges. I really started to connect my spirituality, between 18 and 24, my Indigena side, and then I started connecting beyond that to Santería which brings a lot different spiritual practices together, from the Indigenous, to the Catholic, to the African and that is what feels like home to me because its representative of all my ancestry.

Aurora’s story demonstrates the non-linear complexity of her spiritual journey, as well her influence and connection with multiple forms of spirituality, including the influence of Native North American practices.

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16 Guerrero Interview with author, 2013.
The four mujeres who make up Womyn Image Makers (WIM) joined forces and created a sacred space to build collective trust for storytelling through film, “with the intentions of opening up dialogue and documenting their art and methodologies of collaboration and visual art production” (Alvarez & Zepeda, 2006, p. 128). Their filmmaking was groundbreaking, as queer Indigenous identified mujeres who collectively burned sage, participated in ceremony, and mentored a youth circle. Their intentional collaboration defied Hollywood’s individualistic film industry strategies, as well as Hollywood’s whiteness and heteronormativity. WIM also defied dominant structures through critiques of colonization, imperialism, retelling histories of violence, and addressing the complexities of war and police brutality. As independent filmmakers, WIM managed to not only put the stories of Indigenous identified queer women of color on the big screen, but intentionally worked to create a space for women of color and people of color to be a part of the filmmaking crew. As a result, opening doors for aspiring artists to develop their creative talents and receive guidance in the process of film production.

Womyn Image Makers methodologies for creating art and storytelling are reflective of a larger collective vision that can be encapsulated in what Mendez named the philosophy or legacy of Indigenismo, which she also referred to as “people of the land.” Mendez, who handles the production design in the collective, suggests that “indigenismo or people of the land” is “reflective of our working-class backgrounds, and how we realize that we have to work together as a whole and that each of us has our strengths and we can build upon that…[T]he way that we are doing it is through visual communication, a visual language” (Alvarez & Zepeda, 2006, p. 130). It is insightful to see how the philosophy of Indigenismo is conceptualized by Mendez and then applied as a practice within this filmmaker collective. Their form of collaborating is a manifestation of ceremony. Womyn Image Makers created a circle of creativity with one another that honors everyone’s work, talents, and vision. Guerrero, remarks, “we are really creating something very new. We don’t really have anyone, at least within filmmaking, to model ourselves after, so we are creating a new space” (Alvarez & Zepeda, 2006, p. 129). With these reflections both Mendez and Guerrero show not only the significance of their work for future generations, but also how their critiques of hierarchy and individualism are central to their methodology and ceremony of filmmaking and community building.

Pura Lengua: Practicing decolonized filmmaking

As previously mentioned, the four collaborators have roots in various regions of Latin America, hold different familial histories of migration to the U.S., and have traveled to different parts of the world. It was their particular life histories and experiences that inspired their collective

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17 Mercado, script supervisor of Pura Lengua, further observes, “There are other Xicanas and Latinas that have been making films and Latinos that have been making films, but they have been following the conventional protocol of the system, following the hierarchy of filmmaking…and there was no collective or collaborative collective of mujeres [that could help us]. We had to go to each other to help feed our dream and make it possible” (Alvarez and Zepeda, 2006, p. 130).
critical perspective of nation-state politics and their desire to constantly make visible the violences and injustices inflicted on poor, working-class, queer, and Indigenous communities.\textsuperscript{18} It is an awareness of colonial legacies and fierce critique of neo-liberal politics that seeps through the central themes of WIM’s intense short film \textit{Pura Lengua} (All Tongue). This 11-minute short film is based on real events that were scripted by Maritza Alvarez, the director of photography. Alvarez, notes that WIM is often referred to as a “gang” because of the way they present themselves collectively. She received funding and access to equipment through a Los Angeles based film school to produce Womyn Image Makers’ award-winning film \textit{Pura Lengua} (Alvarez & Zepeda, 2006).

This groundbreaking short film shot with a backdrop of the L.A. punk scene, features an urban queer Xicana’s story of healing from heteronormative and state violences. According to Mendez, it was a “one week shot” with “long hours” that was filmed while the cast and crew where also working full-time or part-time jobs aside from the making of the film.\textsuperscript{19} Their efforts to produce this film reflect the vital impulse of grassroots collective creativity mirrored in women of color methodologies.

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\caption{Womyn Image Makers production. \textit{Pura Lengua}, Film still of “Reina Armas,” 2004.}
\end{figure}

The story line of the film \textit{Pura Lengua} features the tragic and healing narrative of an urban Xicana’s experience and struggle with queer love and heteronormative state violence. The connections between the different layers of state and colonial violence are shown through the main protagonist, Reina Armas, an urban Xicana from Los Angeles, whose heart is broken by

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\textsuperscript{18} WIM’s second short film, \textit{Viernes Girl}, directed by Aurora Guerrero and funded by HBO has a marked scene when one of the leads, a queer Salvadoreña who lives in Pico Union, “flips-off” a poster representation of the civil war in El Salvador. Although this film is humorous in nature, the collectives’ critiques of repressive nation-state politics make the final cut.
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\textsuperscript{19} Mendez Interview with author, 2010.
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her female lover and whose body is beaten by the police, reflecting the layers of violence in her urban environment.

The film begins with a community poetry reading where Reina, who has visible scratches on her face, hesitantly approaches the microphone to share her story. She turns to Cihuatl Tonali, an Indigenous women’s drumming collective who is present at the reading, and asks for a “beat.” Reina’s storytelling ensues with the shake of a rattle. Mendez said of this film, “she [Reina] uses poetry to give herself word [palabra] and talk about her relationships, what she went through.” The remembering begins with Reina calling her friend from a California jail, proclaiming, “they fucked me up,” referring to the beating she received from the police.

Betrayed by her lover, who decided that her son “needed a father,” Reina was sharing story and drink at Placita Olvera with friends to relieve her heartbreak. Reina with her disillusioned heart takes a look at a surrounding tiendita (little shop) only to find a necklace on display that resembled one she wore, a sacred turquoise necklace Reina’s ex-lover had honored her with while pronouncing the words, “will you marry me.” When Reina had attempted to give back the necklace during the break-up, her ex-lover insisted she keep it since her grandmother, who the necklace originally belonged to, “would have liked for you to have it.” The betrayal in this queer relationship reveals the internalized homophobic violence that can occur when living up to heteronormative expectations.

The presence and contradictions of the necklace on her body and in the store display angered Reina, particularly as she entered the store only to find a presumably white owner from Delaware. When the store owner asked Reina accusingly if she will be “buying anything,” implying she needs to pay for the necklace she is wearing, Reina reacts by saying “I guess you would call this a free market…what else are you going to take from us wasichu?” In the next instance, all collides as the disgruntled owner calls for police protection to notify the state of Reina’s supposed criminality. When the police arrive on the scene, and Reina attempts to flee, they accusingly ask, “Why are you running?” This particular scene critically suggests the way in which neoliberal policy, i.e. NAFTA, and state police function as structures of domination, a particularly poignant critique as the audience witnesses the policing and gentrification of this historic location.

The racial and heteronormative lines are clearly marked when Reina responds to police officer’s interrogation of where she got her necklace: “from my girlfriend you pinche puerco.” The cop replies, “so you like pussy, huh?” Confiming that her story is plausible, yet due to her resistance as a brown queer Indigenous womyn she is still in violation of the law and will suffer the consequences. Fists fly towards Reina as the officer yells, “get the rope.” Cihuatl Tonali’s

20 Mendez Interview with author, 2010.

21 Placita Olvera or Olvera Street is a historical landmark in the heart of Los Angeles. It is a gathering site for Latinos, and particularly the Mexican or Chicana/o communities. Tienditas sell treasures, forms of artesanía and other merchandise that is difficult to find in the regular U.S. market. A few streets over from Chinatown and Union Station, this historic site also frequently hosts Aztec dancing-danza ceremonies and other forms of prayer and community building. In 2011, there was a petition circulating addressed to the mayor of Los Angeles to “Save Olvera Street” from various forms of gentrification.
music and words are played while Reina is being beat by the police, as the viewers we hear, “defendete mujer” (“defend yourself woman”) over the drumbeats. The film ends shortly after the police violence, in the location where the film began, with Reina speaking her truth in a circle of mostly women, Reina remembers that she is “armed by her ancestors,” a force that cannot be taken away from her despite the violence she endures.

This short film identifies heteronormativity as a form of relational and state violence where patriarchy and racism meet as systemic culprits that have been internalized and legitimized in multiple spaces. Reina is fully aware of these contradictions, and WIM’s filmmaking supports the main character’s growing awareness of the injustices she is experiencing. It also shows the implications of colonial history and cross border neo-liberal policies in the urban environment of Los Angeles. Simultaneously, the film collaborative intentionality in representing Reina’s healing through poetry, drumming, and storytelling offers the viewers and the protagonist a way to deal with the layers of violence in her complex urban landscape.

What is perhaps most impressive about this film collaborative was their dedication to breaking with the hierarchies of filmmaking and working as a collective to tell their personal stories, what Mendez called, “stories from spirit,” narratives that have a meaning and purpose. In addition to their methodology of working in a communal collective, Aurora who described the making of Pura Lengua as “a combination of guerrilla filmmaking skills with dashes of formal training,” said, “We have lots of respect for each other as artists, which makes it easier for us to trust each other when it comes to making those spontaneous creative decisions. We’re also similar communicators. We’re both good listeners and extremely patient.”

A collective dream WIM held, before they parted ways, was to start a Xicana/o and Latina/o community media center with a theater and gallery space, a place where community members could learn storytelling and filmmaking skills to write and create representations of their own narratives.

**Conclusion**

This article has traced how queer Xicana Indígenas and Latinas create art to do the work of remembering and healing. I have shown how the featured cultural producers in this article participate in various forms of ceremony and actively work to evoke ancestral memories in shared spaces and through practices of creative ritual. Both their visual productions and process of creating are forms of ceremony. These artists provide a space of healing for communities who have been disconnected from their ancestry. They intentionally work toward decolonizing Indigenous lineages, and regaining knowledges and cultural memory through intentional critique of heteropatriarchal state and nationalist politics.

22 Mendez Interview, 2010.

Through their own narratives and visual representations these queer Xicana Indígenas are doing the collective work of remembering and decolonizing knowledge with the purpose of regaining cultural memory. The artistic production of these cultural artists and visionaries, as well as their methods of collaborating to create sacred knowledge, contributes to queer Xicana Indígena and Latina discourses of remembering. The decolonized subjectivities these artists create for themselves are a direct result of their respective self-reflection and self-naming, as well as a testament to their tracing of Indigenous ancestry.

Within the subjectivity of Xicana Indígena presented here there is a desire to connect with the land, despite the disconnection that has occurred due to violence. Xicanas are actively doing the work to acknowledge settler colonial legacies and the displacement of Native American people. There is an intention to build solidarity, dialogue, and spaces of healing despite the missteps of Chicano nationalism.

Memory, the way one remembers; forgetting, what is left out or forgotten due to traumas; and historical narratives of ancestry have also been central themes in this article. The work of remembering makes it possible to piece together expressions, perspective, and theories through mediums of alternative (creative) methodologies. These representations can engage the complexities of difference and the interconnections of local and global relations of power. The remembering I focus on occurs through various forms of cultural production, including media-film, music, poetry, sculpture or a fusion of these. The process of remembering entails enacting ceremony to recall ancient memories, stories, and practices whose existence has been previously threatened by forms of colonization (i.e. de-Indianization and de-tribalization). Remembering is about healing. The purpose of remembering is to enable the telling of a story or the re-telling of forgotten or misremembered history, and the creation of subaltern historical narratives that open space for transformation. The “remembering” I conceptualize here facilitates a “re-rooting” in the present moment through a revised perspective on the importance of restoring the connections among history, culture, language, land, and spirituality.²⁴

²⁴ Central to this remembering are critical forms of mapping race, gender, sexuality, and class in all its complexities and structures. An analytic that is akin to what Lugones (2008) calls “the modern/colonial gender system,” which she partly characterizes as a form of “intersectionality” that has been theoretically formulated by women of color feminists. Lugones (2008) illuminates, “Intersectionality reveals what is not seen when categories such as gender and race are conceptualized as separate from each other” (p. 4).
References


