

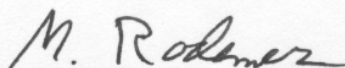
## Your Body Is Your Homeland

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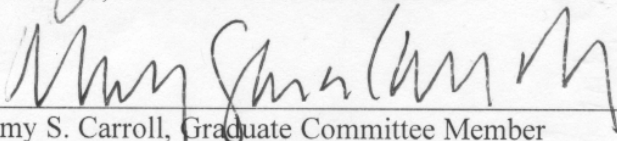
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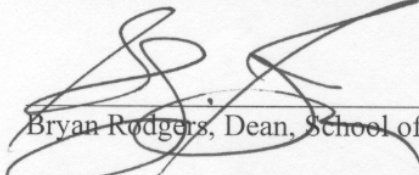
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## Your Body is Your Homeland

### Introduction

I created the installation *Your Body Is Your Homeland* in order to talk about being connected to and dislocated from place simultaneously. When I talk about *place*, I am speaking of human space as well as geography- what Edward Said calls a “socially constructed and maintained sense of place.”<sup>a</sup> In addition to considering the place where one exists and the way identity can be relative to our relationship to a place, I want to consider the geography of the body. Like land, it is constantly remapped, redefined, renamed, and in this process, memory of trauma can be erased.



By locating the objects in an outdoor space, I am able to present them as performers of relational identity and shifting selfhood. I engage critical theory and contemporary scholarship to inform the spatial approaches and elements of my visual language, but personal experience informs each text and mediates everything I see. By approaching serious topics with humor and allowing particulars to remain ambiguous in my sculpture, I employ strategies I learned as a survivor of violence.

I will begin with a summary and analysis of the conceptual framework that led me to the visual work. Following this, I will discuss the significance of the iconography in my work, how geographic thinking plays a part in this project, and which artists and cultural workers have been influential in the formation of my ideas.

## **Part I. Framing the Ideas**

### **Power and Subversion**

*The most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries.*

(Mikhail Bakhtin)<sup>b</sup>



The border fence as seen from the beach at Playas de Tijuana, including a portion of recycled wall from the barracks of Desert Storm used to mend holes made by border crossers, According to eye witnesses, the holes are also from people at the beach on the US side cutting the fence so they could buy paletas (Mexican ice cream bars).

I am considering power: the technology of state control, law enforcement, surveillance apparatus, border fences, the way land is marked and ways that power is expressed through enforcement on bodies. I am interested in manifestations of power in

landscape and how people resist homogeneity, cut across boundaries, and invent new ways of negotiating space. Graffiti acts as a non-institutional and organic form of resistance, and it is enacted upon places while the graffiti artist is an embodiment, of the disruptions in urban spaces, which are meant to reflect order, control and a homogenous citizenry. I extend this notion of performing disruption to members of communities who, by necessity, enact resistance to homogeneity and create new forms (through function) in spaces that do not reflect order or compliance but rather the need to survive. Using what Teddy Cruz calls “transgressive technology” and “improvisational tactics of construction and distribution of goods and ad hoc services,”<sup>c</sup> people transform spaces into places, and everyday people become resistance fighters in the battle against uniformity and fixed notions of identity.

I spent time looking at the organic building practices and unsanctioned public art practices on the northern border of our nation, Southwest Detroit, and on the southern border at Tijuana/San Ysidro. Both of these areas are home to Mexican immigrants, migrants, long time citizens of Mexican descent, and Mexicans who are from here, like me. I set out to look at the public performance of ethnicity and how the practice of everyday life of everyday people reflected in the landscape. I came to wonder how border identities such as my own are navigated and performed and how hybrid spaces were enacted. As a privileged academic and ethnographic researcher working with grants and living without fear of starvation, eviction or deportation, I do not consider myself as a native informant or authority in Tijuana or Detroit. What happened with the artists I met went beyond cultural or phenotypical similarities or differences. Perhaps it was my lack of experience as an ethnographer, but I did not have a methodology beyond being there and making art, so my fieldwork evolved into personal friendships, all-night conversations and artistic collaboration. My thesis project, though heavily informed by my personal relationships with people in Detroit, Tijuana and Distro Federal, is not about them, nor is it an attempt to take their words into my mouth. My project is about the ways my body has been transformed through relationships with human places. What I observed was shifting, changing and layered, and it became impossible to commit all of my findings to writing when the trauma I was uncovering became revealed.



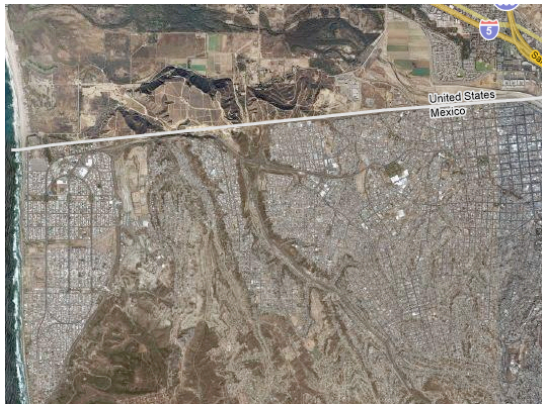
This is an image of a mechanics shop in Mexico City. It was originally a wall painted with a politician's ad, then *graffiteros* painted on top of it, and mufflers are displayed on top the graffiti.

While I am looking at the borders between nations, I want to transgress the heavily patrolled borders of authenticity and authoritative knowledge, in other words, the hierarchies of knowledge, by using personal experience and community as a texts. Like the Texas-Mexico border that my family and personal identity is hinged upon, migration, movement and change generates new ways of making meaning.

To activate the idea of crossing borders, I consider invisible border crossers like radio waves and corn pollen: these are free to travel at will and cannot be policed through machinations of the state. The behaviors of each of these invisible materials has allowed me to move past referencing televised images of the migrant and immigration in my work, because this imaginary presents fixed ideas of origin, place, and identity.

Border Blasters<sup>d</sup>, the megawatt radio stations that were located along the US/Mexico border in the early 1900s, were the subject of a book by Bill Crawford and when I heard him speak in Ann Arbor in 2006, his talk led me to think about radio as potential border transgressor. US citizens owned these radio stations, and, according to maps and photos presented by Crawford, they were positioned just inside of Mexico along the border so that US laws could not govern or regulate the content or strength of the signal.<sup>e</sup> The average US radio station transmits from 80 to 1000 watts today, and these stations would broadcast up to one million watts. Border Blaster signals were said to have been heard as far away as Finland.





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In contrast to the ease with which radio waves traveled from Mexico by the 1920s, the border was becoming more difficult for people to cross due to quarantines that were enacted in order to protect US citizens from diseases such as typhus, smallpox and lice, believed to be carried by Mexicans and others from tropical regions.<sup>f</sup> Immigration and border control policies in Texas at the time were based on claims that certain people from the global south (which begins at the US/Mexico border) were prone to diseases and thus were a threat to public safety in the US. Eugenicists portrayed Mexicans as intellectually inferior beings and a threat to the pristine “seed stock” of the American family, and that the “irresponsible and uncontrollable breeding” of Mexican women was both a threat to public resources and a reflection of inferiority.<sup>g</sup> As was the case for Jewish, Greek and Chinese immigrants, policies based on racism and xenophobia created a subclass of immigrant and in this case, the propaganda also served to distance American citizens from Mexicans because now they were thought to be disease-prone.

As Stern writes:

The border quarantine helped to solidify a boundary line that had previously been much more nebulous and, in doing so, helped to racialize Mexicans as outsiders and to demarcate Mexico as a distant geographical entity despite topographic and climatic similarity. It not only intensified racial tension at the borderlands, it also catalyzed anti-Mexican sentiment on a national level and fueled nativist efforts to ban all immigration from the Southern Hemisphere. To a great extent, the pathologization of Mexicans represented an extension of the association of immigrants with disease into new racial and metaphorical terrain.<sup>h</sup>

Stern expands the notion of eugenics, from forced sterilization to family planning and immigration policy, by showing how all of these ideas are intertwined into an objective that is invoked regularly in the current immigration debate: protecting the “American” family by keeping the inferior races from infecting the bloodline (read: white supremacy). David Romo, reports in *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An underground history of El Paso and Juárez : 1893-1923* that Zyclon B, used to delouse and eventually to execute millions of Jews in the Holocaust, was first used to delouse Mexicans at the US border beginning in 1929, along with kerosene, cyanide, DDT and gasoline.<sup>i</sup>

It is not white supremacy itself, nor this recently revealed connection between the treatment of Mexicans and the Holocaust that is astounding to me. It is that the state of Texas was enforcing federal immigration laws (and vigilante justice) on the bodies of Mexicans as if they were foreigners. *Texas was Mexico* until 1848, a mere 60 years earlier, so this was not brutality against immigrants but racial cleansing and erasure of people who lived on the land. In the border region in Texas, Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants did not have different designations and were considered Mexicans until the 1930s.<sup>j</sup>

*It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of the others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (W.E.B. Dubois, 1903)<sup>k</sup>*

I cannot imagine how Mexicans became Mexican-Americans. I do not understand how we stopped being Mexicans, but it had to be one-at-a-time, and was not sterile, smooth and clean, like the word *assimilation* sounds. Did we suddenly become hyphenated-Americans when Mexican became another name for diseased?



Where the understanding and acceptance of the trauma and terrorization that my family experienced should be, I leave a blank space. It is the elephant in the room.



### **The Institution as Context**

In her powerful short essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,”<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde argues that differences, acknowledged rather than ignored or simply tolerated, spark vital creativity and that our job is to explore ways to be empowered by our differences. She talks about racist feminism and how it has participated in further marginalizing women of color within art and academia in her essay from 1979, and since I am talking about context (site) and art, I need to mention my experience as a queer single mother of color in graduate school at University of Michigan. I am here because of an Affirmative Action fellowship without which I would not have been able to go to graduate school. It has been a great opportunity for me and it will allow me to begin a career as a professional artist and educator, yet one year after I arrived, Affirmative Action was outlawed statewide. Also, there is an ongoing crisis, which began long before I arrived here in which several accomplished scholars who happen to be women of color were given negative recommendations and then denied tenure. The community is agitating and some folks are reexamining their decision to become a part of the academic industrial complex which privileges a range of ideas and experiences that does not include women of color. Lorde says that, “survival is not a

academic skill,” and I find that as a matter of survival, I need to reflect on what it means, to be here-now and to allow my work to reflect my consciousness of being in the masters house. Rather than feeling isolated and struggling with the shifting subject hood object hood, or self censoring because I didn’t want to alienate anyone, I find that I can *perform* the artist, a feminist of color, the mom (who is not married), the survivor, and when I am aware of it and do not allow my desire to be neutral/unmarked overwhelm me and make me cynical, I am able to preserve parts of myself. Performance lessens the blows because I can allow my double to shoulder their weight.



I position my visual work and myself in proximity to the struggle. I struggle to find my own voice as an authority on my own experience, and this has been a learning process. Lorde makes a point that community building is key to advancing the struggle, and I am constantly amazed by the community of scholars, both my peers and professors, who have given me support and taught me to listen to my own voice. I am grateful beyond words for the love and encouragement I experience on an individual level, but the benefits are complicated by feelings about the academic industrial complex including resentment for feeling patronized by an institution I suspect relies on token representation; it also includes frustration that as scholars, we exist in a separate unreality with an unwritten expectation that we leave our disruptive complicated lives at the door. At times, I feel like radio waves or corn pollen because I have infiltrated, crossed the line, and I am moving invisibly through space.

## Bodies, Imagination, and Home/land

I have never made so much work about personal-racial-gender-national-familial identity as I have in the past 3 years while I have been working on my MFA. In part, it is a reaction to the gathering storm clouds from the war and other events in our nation coupled with my acute awareness of the changing climate. I have observed a new wave of hatred and violence directed at Latinos, immigrants and “perceived undocumented people.”<sup>m</sup> The account of an incident from October 2007 in New Jersey below is just one example.



An 85-pound German shepherd has become the unlikely face of the immigration debate in upscale Princeton, N.J., after a judge ordered the dog to be put down for attacking an illegal immigrant last summer. Thousands of people have flooded the Internet and even petitioned the governor to ask that Congo be spared for his attack on Honduran landscaper Giovanni Rivera, who was injured seriously in June and later awarded \$250,000 in insurance money. And while New Jersey Gov. John Corzine has denied calls for a pardon, some town residents are upset the illegal immigrant was allowed to collect monetary compensation for his injuries.

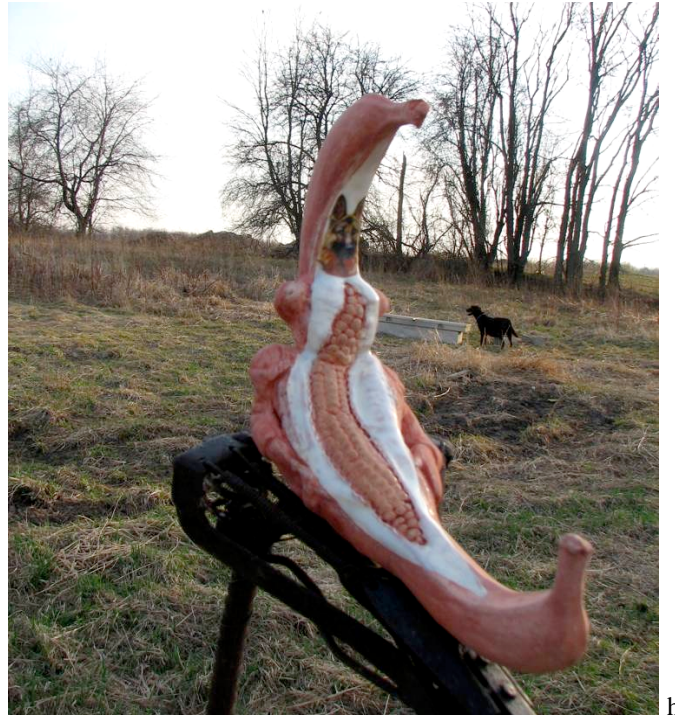
"Too bad Congo doesn't work on the border patrol," one resident wrote online. "Maybe there would be less illegals entering our country." Another poster called Rivera "illegal scum." Rivera has called the attacks racist and political. "We've created a subculture in this country right now. The illegal alien is like a subhuman and that's a dangerous precedent," said Rivera's attorney William Garces.

Not all Princeton's residents believe the incident should be used to fuel an immigration debate. "I would hate my hometown and home state to go down in history as the place where suburbanites value their dogs above their lives of those they hire to tend their yards," one resident said. Even Congo's owners, Guy and Elizabeth James, said their case has nothing to do with immigration. They claim their dog was provoked by Rivera. "They hit my dogs. They grabbed my wife and that's what this case is about," Guy James said.

Currently Congo is living at home, and the James family has appealed the local judge's ruling to put him down. The case now is with New Jersey's Superior Court. <sup>n</sup>

This case hinges on laws that consider whether or not the dog attack was provoked, and in this case, the dog owner insists that Rivera flirted with or threatened his wife, depending on the newspaper you read. (That sounds hauntingly familiar.) Headlines like

“Dog Sentenced to Die for Protecting Homeowner From Illegal Alien” and “Save Congo“ blogs indicate that appearing to be an undocumented worker can mark a person for informally sanctioned death sentences, or other violent punishment.



In the annual “Year In Hate“ issue of the Intelligence Report put out by the Southern Poverty Law Center, while describing the dramatic increases in reports of violent attacks on “perceived undocumented immigrants,” they look at the imagination of those who aspire to lead the attacks:

The growth of these groups is being helped by conspiracy theories and other racist propaganda about immigrants that is being spread by mainstream politicians and pundits. While theories about a secret plan to merge Mexico, Canada and United States into a single country began in radical groups, for instance, many key figures have endorsed them. Indeed, 18 states' houses of representatives have now passed resolutions opposing the "North American Union" — an entity that does not exist and has never been planned, but nonetheless inhabits nativists' nightmares.

Promoting such theories, coupled with a history of ties to white supremacist groups and ideology, is what caused the Southern Poverty Law Center to add a major anti-immigration group, the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), to its list of hate groups last year. FAIR has also promulgated the theory that Mexico is involved in a secret plot to "reconquer" the American Southwest.°

More telling about us than the historic past of ancestors is what we invent in the spaces between the known facts. Much of my work is embellishment and it lives in these places between reality and speculation. It is a reflection of my desire to know things, to indulge in “the pleasures and torments of incomplete forgetting.”<sup>p</sup> I can look at my body and imagine that this part was like so and so, and this person might have had this trait, just like me. Like a map, a time line, and a container for the physical memories of all of the people who came before me, my body reflects all of my ancestors at once, here and at this moment.



i

Joseph Roach says Aztec sacrifice is responsible for “rupturing the memories of the previous ‘Golden Age’”<sup>q</sup> but for whom is the rupture occurring? The indulgence in the imaginary by those who romanticize the exotic others *of the past* creates one set of problems for the living descendants of the so-called others. There is the issue of teaching the history of the Americas to children in school. How easy it was for my teachers to slip into the danger zone and to teach, for example, the mythical fictional Thanksgiving feast as reality, because as reality goes, a turkey dinner makes for a pretty good one. It is an example of the hyperreal that Michael Taussig refers to, when mimesis replaces the actual in daily life.

The alternative to a nostalgic untruth could be complete erasure. My daughter came home with a coloring book image as kindergarten homework in which the pilgrims

were all gathered around the table eating a turkey dinner. There were no Indians in the picture at all. This ruptured my memory of another golden age- my childhood- when I was led to believe that Thanksgiving was the time when Indians were honored for not letting the white people starve.

And even worse, this image suggests that historicized Indians, eliminated from the present, are now being phased out of the past.

Now, when Indians from the global south come north and work in the fields, there is a kind of erasure happening that obscures exactly who they are, why they came here, what labor they perform and for how little money, along with any past that they are connected to, golden, bloody or otherwise. When we buy things for really cheap, we think we are so lucky! And this pleasure from buying things along with the artificial amnesia is critical for the perpetuation of the disconnect between thinking about the land we are on right now and what it means to live here and not have come to terms, as a nation, with the mass murder of native people and ongoing cultural genocide.<sup>†</sup>



j



## Part II Visible Iconography



Juxtaposing and reinventing relationships between icons and creating new symbolic meaning for existing icons allows me to riff on ideas in ways that are not possible for me with text. It is a way for me to wonder, with my eyes and hands, about the relationships of huge seemingly unmanageable ideas, and how I have a personal stake in these relationships. It is a survival mechanism. If I can clearly state an idea in words, I lose interest in exploring it in visual terms because the excitement of a potential new discovery is gone and the work becomes an effort to adequately represent an existing idea. If a relationship or cultural phenomenon seems impossibly complex and I need to know more, working it out visually allows me to come closer to knowing in a way that serves me better than text. The oldest and newest medias- ceramic and digital video- span time, traditions and aesthetic concerns. The contrast of the media is exciting and this juxtaposition inspires to me to work the media like building blocks.

Working with clay connects us to the earth in a literal physical way. Transformation by fire, the process of making earth into ceramics, can refer back to the big boom. The firing process and manufacture of clay objects brings up issues like

tradition, craftsmanship, labor and the means of production. It is welcomed in the world of art, but with much hesitation at this time, which points to the diminished value of physical labor and craftsmanship in our country. Some artists export labor in the interest of maximizing profits.

As a material, clay can do anything. It can sample and mix by turning the lens on everyday life in the way that hip hop does: combining and blending allows a shorthand conversation that drags entire histories, every meaning and the current interpretation of every single element introduced. To me, clay is a wonder material, with more potential and more room to explore, even after thousands of years of experimental and practical use, than any other medium. What it means in relation to issues like indigeneity, labor and the diminished value of craft, geographic thinking and embodiment, enriches every object and every stage of the process.

Clay is a tactile medium. Body memory includes all touch, human contact, and repetitive movements from dancing, thesis writing or diaper changing, and all of them become involved in my making process.

My figurative sculptures are performers of stillness, dislocation, and loss and though they may seem passive in their silence, they are demanding attention be paid to the empty spaces between memories. Even though they represent split-second glimpses with as little information as a police sketch, they mark a moment in time that might be forever, like a snapshot of a missing child on the TV news.

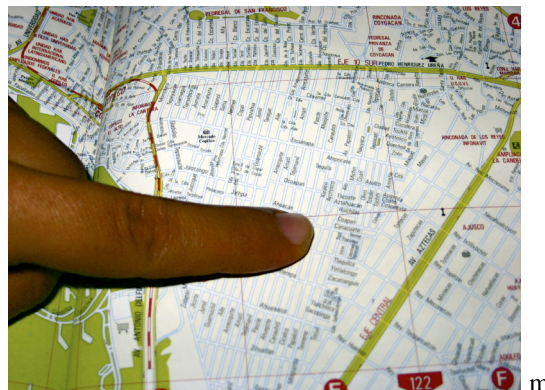


1.

## Geographic Thinking, Spatial Aesthetics: You Are Here.

I think about shifting and relational identity as well as moving borders in my object making, though this has been very hard work. Notions of complex hybrid identities were for me, fixed in location and in time, despite changing boundaries and designations of places. Perhaps is it age releasing my grip on things I thought I knew, but I no longer seek to discover “the answer,” nor do I need to get to the bottom of it or resolve the hardest questions. As an artist, I am relatively comfortable dealing with questions that have no answers and I can do rigorous work with ideas that have no words attached to them yet. As a mother, I found that struggling to be perfectly adjusted to a new situation is an exercise in futility because everything is in a constant state of change and growth.

Recently I traveled to Mexico, specifically to Santo Domingo, in Coyoacan, in Mexico City. Santo Domingo is the largest illegal land invasion in the history of the Americas, which is worth noting.<sup>1</sup> I went to Mexico to search for, among other things, something that would connect me to the place, and when I went there, I found out that I was pura gabacha (a slur for American) in Mexico. For the first time, I was 100% de los estados unidos, all American. It was an unexpected but wonderful gift! And I wanted to soak up all the privilege and entitlement that came with the designation.



What I realized may be obvious to others: identity shifts and it is not a fixed thing, even from day to day, from place to place. As the political and geographic landscape

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<sup>1</sup> *More than 100,000 people migrated to and settled on an ejido (land meant to be distributed to the poor for farming after the revolution) within 10 days in September of 1971. Now there are over a million people in the neighborhood, according to neighborhood historians.*

changes, I am changed, and previous iterations disappear. This calls to mind the truism that you cannot step in the same river twice. But it seems more to me about waking up as a different person each day which reflects and is reflected on the place where you are: it is not just that the river is moving. My work is defined by where it is, where I am, and the context. I lost my desire to show work in a gallery because of my heightened awareness of relational identity.



The image of a map above is an attempt by the Museum of Mexico City to explain how the water system functions. Though it is a problematic illustration in some ways, I saw it at a very important time in my thinking of how bodies are connected to the places they occupy.

I had just come from the Anthropology Museum, and after indulging in nostalgia for a Golden Age all morning, I walked out and literally stumbled and fell onto a tiny barefooted child who was begging for change at the foot of the stairs of the museum. The historicization of indigenous people in the museum and the nostalgia for the past was working me, and I did not see the child with my eyes, even as I looked right at him. He was invisible. I thought nothing of it as I gathered my scattered belongings, and rode 2 peseras and then the subway to El Centro. When I was standing in front of the map snickering and trying not to let my gender analysis get in the way of my enjoyment of the

image, suddenly something clicked. The idea of laying bodies directly onto landscape, and letting my geographic thinking to collide with notions of relational identity became the focus of my next project: *Your Body is Your Homeland*.

In my research, I have looked at graffiti as a spatial practice and a performance of resistance but this had not provided me with a specific link between the formal aspects and appearance of the mark making and the particulars of the sites in which the marks were made. Working with clay as earth allowed me to make the next move.

### **Patrolling Body's Borders and Boundaries**

Breasts appear often in my work, and like corn, they reference a range of ideas from utopic safety, to the border between nations, to fear of death and violence. Upon personal experience I build a timeline, and then I narrate a science fiction fantasy, which can function as a surrogate for safety lost and the promise of a better future. Because of the wide range of meanings I reference, it would be helpful for the reader to have a visual foundation upon which to place my sculpture.



o



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q

On the left is a detail of a statue of Artemis from the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus (550 BC), in which her body looks like a corn cob. It is impossible that corn is referenced since there is evidence that corn did not exist outside of the Americas until after the 15 century. Despite this, I thought it was corn when I saw it my freshman year

in Art History Survey I. It impressed upon me a visual connection between breasts and corn, regardless of what the protrusions actually represent. I credit this statue of Artemis, as well as Louise Bourgeois (center), and her reenactment of Artemis in Ephesus in which she embodied this powerful creative force through performance, as inspiration for my work.

On the right is an image of a sculpture from 500AD in Peru, which was constructed using a mold made from an actual piece of corn, and then, using soft clay pressed into the fired mold, the molded parts were laid over a figure. I know this because I make my forms in clay using corn molds the very same way. This image of a mother with two children clinging to her is round and soft in appearance, and it is covered in corn.

On a purely formal basis, corn, nipples and breasts are work very well together because of the round shapes, and pattern and proportion can be employed to create visually appealing forms. Conceptually, there are rich and bountiful references that unfold themselves in front of my eyes as I work, which fuels my thinking about origins, nation, my body as a land, a map or a vehicle.

The tension between functional breast and sexual breast represents a border between my girlhood, and womanhood, and furthermore life and death. As a baby I was nurtured by my mother, breastfed and held close in a bond of intimacy and of security and consistent contact and warmth. While I had originated inside of my mother's body, I was still attached to her breast, and her body continued to maintain all of the functions of my major organs and immune systems as my body adjusted to life in the world. It was a utopia of safety and security. It was my first experience with breasts.

When I was a young girl, men approached me on the street and commented on my breasts. Someone yelled nasty things at me from a car. Someone grabbed my butt at the bus stop. Suddenly I was very aware of the attention and I began to become so angry when overnight I went from being an introverted book nerd adolescent to being what felt to me like public property. I felt inhuman, and at times, threatened and scared.

For people of color, there are things we exhibit in public from the moment we arrive on earth. Our color might determine whether or not we are considered to be

statistical anomalies or part of the norm. People may say, “You are very different from the rest of them.” They may expect very little from you or ignore you because of low expectations. You can prove them wrong and be seen as a model minority. If you were me, it would make you furious. Take that and put breasts on it and you have me as a teenager.

I began to become deeply depressed as I came to terms with how little I could do about what was making me angry. I revolted in every way I could think of, including self-destruction, destruction of property, excelling or failing in school, fighting, and trying to be someone else. None of these things helped to diminish the anger, nor did I feel that I was addressing the problem.



*I considered myself cursed until I was 30 and I breastfed my baby. I was told that this would not be possible after the surgery, and I was happily surprised to be able to produce free and highly nutritious food from my own body. While nursing my child I spent a lot of time thinking about my body and the layers and layers of history that had begun to accumulate on it. It was a revolutionary experience for me to listen to my body and to respect it. Sustaining life and comforting my child reconnected me to my own childhood, which had been severed from my memory.*

*Three years later when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, I saw breasts in yet another way: potential killers. The breasts that comforted me as a child were threatening to kill my mom. Any security they had provided was dashed as I watched my mom go through chemotherapy and almost die.*



### **Listen to Them: Wireless Communication Between Breasts**

I have begun working on an idea that resolves issues I have been struggling with in terms of borders, both geographic and on the body. In the following scene I describe one of the evolutionary outcomes of the negative effects of the patriarchy on the bodies of women. This story creates a roadmap to explain the imagery I have been working with in clay.

*In the future, the pain and pressure of living under the patriarchy takes a toll on the bodies of women, but facing higher death rates, labor exploitation, violence and psychological degradation worldwide, our bodies take the next evolutionary step. We know that breasts communicate with babies non-verbally. A baby would cry in a grocery store, and my breasts would turn to fountains, soaking my clothes. Before my child became ill or entered a particular stage of growth, I craved the foods that the baby needed. We know very little about the ways breasts and children communicate, even as bearers of these mighty wireless communicators.*

*Finally, breasts develop the ability to communicate with each other, unbeknownst to women. Little by little, breasts evolve into worldwide conduits of communication, like the pirates and crews of ships during the era of circum-Atlantic trade who passed information of rebellions and revolts across the ocean. Like the very first radio transmission, and like oral histories, they werve as grassroots tools for the people. The news of the coming rebellion reaches every woman and girl, and the groundwork is laid for the revolution. On the day it begins, the breasts retract into the bodies and up through the throats and into the mouths of women, replacing the tongue as communicator. Once and for all, breasts will be listened to.*



## Corn: Connecting the Body to the Land



Central to my project is the juxtapositions of two ideas: In creation stories found throughout the Americas, corn is the material our bodies were originally modeled from, or the plant itself is what birthed the first humans, and the growth of corn plants is intrinsically linked to human survival; Second, the news that genetically modified corn pollen has been drifting into Mexico and Central America and is putting subsistence farmers out of business. Genetically modified corn pollen is causing plants to produce sterile seeds, which forces families on both side of the border to give up their land and traditions and move to cities to find other work. This illegal imposition of this genetically altered material to the ecosystem of Mexico is an extension of manifest destiny and an expression of imperialism.

Genetically modified corn pollen performs manifest destiny by invading and obliterating crops and rendering indigenous breeds of corn sterile. In my work, corn can reference the plants that were cultivated since the beginning of human history in the Americas as well as the infected crops and the sterile seeds produced which makes the family go hungry and move to the city. In can be both the conqueror and the conquered,

and when it appears on figures, they can perform disruption, stillness, silence, domination, and loss.

These ideas are not just juxtaposed but embodied in Mestizos and Chican@s who have the blood of the conquered and the blood of the conqueror running through our veins. I occupy an interstitial space wherever I am, but here, in the belly of the beast, it is the performance of the conquered and conqueror on this land that defines me. Erasure, invisibility and trauma compels me to explore and search for imagery that reflects what has not been addressed.

### **Part III: Influences**

#### **Greyson Perry**



Greyson Perry, left, and his wife and daughter, right, 2006

The life and work of contemporary ceramic artist Greyson Perry has been a huge influence on my practice because he has found a way to talk about childhood sexual abuse, the layered complexities of daily life for the body of a survivor, and the entire history of pottery simultaneously while not being didactic. In particular, I am interested in the way he uses his experience of trauma, memory and embodiment to assert his voice as a survivor and present not only the aesthetically lovely and graceful techniques and traditions but the horrifying, confusing and ambiguous. In his work he does not shy away from the shocking, and his use of recognizable vessel forms keeps the work grounded in

traditions of ceramics. This is almost a cover for what I perceive to be the most graphic and open portrayals of abuse and terror from the point of view of a child translated with sophistication and skill into visual art. He is confrontational, vulnerable, and fierce. He makes his own clothing. He bravely asserts his right to be who he is.



When I want to work on ideas like cyclical migration or post-colonialism, for example, this type of collaging works well to express non-linear behaviors and complex layering of temporal, differing experiences and points of view. We can see this in music the way sampling and scratching take existing elements to use as building blocks toward new cultural production. The way that a sample from an old album becomes a reference to particular traditions, a personal memory, the era or technology or political strife of the time, images can function the same way, and do so very well in Perry's work.

### **Maya Lin**

In a video conversation about her recent project called *Confluence*,<sup>8</sup> architect and artist Maya Lin retraces the path of Lewis, Clark and Sacagawea on their trek to the west coast of the US. She turns to native people living along this route that led to western expansion for the colonies. Her concept of “people as a lens through which to view landscape,” has been very helpful to me as I consider both valuing my own personal

experience in telling about place and also when I consider her methodology and transcendence of the role of public artist, now facilitator. Her work has many functioning aspects for me but the strongest one is that she points her attention to living people and local ideas in her research leading up to the installations. She is working against the way we lay official histories upon native lands and people, because by historicizing and placing them in the past it obliterates the people who are living. Living oral history and local knowledge is facilitated by her project, unseating much of the established and authoritative knowledge about westward expansion and manifest destiny, which are sterile terms for racial cleansing. After extensive work with local communities, she is creating a permanent platform for the ideas by facilitating several large-scale site-oriented installations. As a notable figure in contemporary art and architecture, Maya Lin is making a visible intervention in our country's deeply ingrained notions of the discovery of the west.

### **Suzanne Lacy**

By demonstrating how the artist can be a conduit for the community and facilitating communication,<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Lacy's work has factored heavily into my conception of my role as an artist. Below is one of Lacy's projects called The Roof Is On Fire in which she arranged to have teenagers park on the roof of a garage, and local leaders, police, parents and teachers were allowed to walk around and listen in to their conversations about themes such as what they thought of images of themselves in the media, authority, unwarranted police and teacher harassment, and what they thought were solutions to these problems. Communities and even the most marginalized members of

marginalized communities- youth- can to speak for themselves.



fig. 35: *The Roof is on Fire*  
Performance with 220 Teenagers. (on a rooftop garage)  
Oakland, CA, 1994, © Suzanne Lacy



fig. 36: *The Roof is on Fire*  
Performance with 220 Teenagers. (talking in parked cars)  
Oakland, CA, 1994, © Suzanne Lacy

y

Our consciousness of the hierarchies of knowledge and how power is expressed in the name of tradition is reflected in every aspect of our work as artists. In telling the stories of others, *representing or presenting people as subjects*, we risk further distancing ourselves from the communities we live in, belong to, or work with. Lacy resolves this potential problem by doing research and conducting lengthy interviews, and in the work itself, she expects people to represent themselves in all the unpredictable messiness, contradictions and unexpectedness that this might include. She relinquishes control and plays the role of the facilitator.

### Colectivo Sin Nombre/The NoName Collective

*A cow in a field is a cow. A cow in a gallery is art.* (Allan Kaprow)



z

I met Manuel Gonzalez and Qaadir King when they were 10<sup>th</sup> graders and I was the art teacher at Cesar Chavez Academy High School in Southwest Detroit in 2003, and they have been the single biggest influence on my practice as an artist, educator and cultural worker. I was in my first year of my MFA at University of Michigan when they contacted me and we decided that we would make a video together. The video project evolved into an art collective, and we continue to make multi-media art and to perform Gentle Takeovers to this day. Constantly astounded by their talents and ambitions as individual artists and by working with them as collaborators, our projects completely changed the way I see teaching and learning. I am grateful and owe so much thanks to Manuel's brother Juan, who is also a part of the collective, Omar Sanchez, Paul Almendarez, Cheryl Fost, Mario Contreras, and all of the young artists who directly or indirectly were involved this work. They opened their homes to me, shared their talents, were patient and kind when I was stumbling trying to bridge my ideas and the institution, and they taught me to relinquish control, when to shut-up, and how to let an abandoned building speak to me about cultural production and hybrid space.



#### **Part IV: Conclusion**

I sample objects and use and reuse them to stretch the meanings and symbolic value they potentially portray, and I enjoy the wild unpredictable associations that

viewers bring to the images. This is the way I can talk about the past, right now, hierarchy, same-ness and difference, and even fantasize about the future. I can draw correlations between disparate notions of time and self-hood by simply placing icons, laden with multiple meaning, in proximity. I can make puns and distract people from seeing what it is that makes me uncomfortable. It is a freedom I have not had with other methods or materials, and clay, because of the nature of the material, has allowed me to model and sample together with absolute control. When I combine this with geographic thinking and ideas of relational identity, I am able to realize my sculptures as performers in the context of the places they exist.



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<sup>a</sup> Said, Edward W. *Invention, Memory and Place*, Critical Inquiry 26 (Winter 2000), University of Chicago

<sup>b</sup> DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. Intro. John Edgar Wideman. Vintage: New York. 1990

<sup>c</sup> Cruz, Teddy, *The Allure of Tijuana*, from the exhibition catalog *Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana/Extraño Nuevo Mundo: Arte y diseño desde Tijuana*, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Distributed Art Publishers. 2006

<sup>d</sup> Crawford, Bill, and Fowler, Gene. *Border Radio: Quacks, Yodelers, Pitchmen, Psychics, and Other Amazing Broadcasters of the American Airwaves*. Texas Monthly Press. Austin, 1987; Limelight Editions, NYC, 1991; University of Texas Press. Austin, 2002

<sup>e</sup> In some cases, broadcasts were conducted in the US through a telephone wired to the station across the border. All manners of non-sanctioned and unregulated programming from psychic healing, to medical advice and prescriptions delivered on air (such as medicinal goat testicles to improve virility), to political rabble rousing, was transmitted at up to 1 million watts during the years these stations functioned. Programming was said to travel as far as the USSR where the KGB was reported to have listened to it. This was also where music by the Carter Family and Lydia Mendoza (the Nightingale of the Border) were first heard on the airwaves, and it is where Wolfman Jack played “race records” and built a cult following.

<sup>f</sup> Stern, Alexandra Minna, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, University of California Press, 2005. p57

<sup>g</sup> Stern p 58-59

<sup>h</sup> Stern p 67

<sup>i</sup> Romo, David Dorado, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923*, Cinco Puntos Press. 2005

<sup>j</sup> Romo p37

<sup>k</sup> Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. Vintage Press. 1990 (intro)

<sup>l</sup> Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider, Essays and Speeches*, pp110-113, Crossing Press. 1984

<sup>m</sup> [Intelligence Report](#), Southern Poverty Law Center, 2008

<sup>n</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/WaterCooler/story?id=3940538>

<sup>o</sup> <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=886>

[The Intelligence Report](#), Issue 129, Spring 2008

<sup>p</sup> Roach, Joseph, *Cities of the Dead, Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Columbia Press. 1996. p7

<sup>q</sup> Roach 121

<sup>r</sup> In April 2008, Canadian human rights workers revealed the locations of 28 mass graves where children were buried when they died during their participation in the compulsory Indian Residential Schools programs. Read about the grave sites here:

<http://media.knet.ca/node/3685>

And read more from Professor Andrea Smith about the Boarding Schools Healing Project

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/amnestynow/soulwound.html>

<sup>s</sup> Maya Lin describes the project in the video, and I paraphrased her words.

<http://www.confluenceproject.org/>

<sup>t</sup> Lacy, Suzanne, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Bay Press, Washington, 1994.



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