

Cartoon Transgressions: Citlali, La Chicana Super Hero as Community Activist

Deanna Shoemaker

“Citlali, La Chicana Super Hero” performatively exists in a political comic strip series and as a large-scale mixed media art installation. Artist Deborah K. Vasquez’s renderings of Citlali are framed here as a “macha femme” performance of Chicana resistance and a communal vehicle by which to imagine new gender identities and strategies for social change. Many studies of comics focus on the formal aesthetics of graphics and text, modes of production, and fan practices; this article reads Citlali’s performance around issues of representation for women of color and considers Citlali’s “disidentificatory” function within an activist Chicana/o community in San Antonio, Texas and beyond.

Name a century and I have a monstrous trope of a fearsome woman of color with the power to make Europeans and North Americans scream and run for cover.

— Lisa Sánchez-González, “Godzilla’s Revenge”

She has full red lips, dark brown skin, a mane of long black hair, bulging muscles, and a sneer on her face. Her fierce eyes challenge the viewer. She sports a red bandana on her head and wears tight green pants, reflecting the colors of the Mexican flag. On her feet are rugged cowboy boots, and beneath a bandoleer of ammunition belts, an image of the revered *La Virgen de Guadalupe* of Mexico is emblazoned across her (busty) chest. She wields guns, knives, bow and arrow, and powerful fists and legs to battle injustice. Her signature warning: “*No chingan con mi raza!*” (“Don’t f__k with my race”). She is Citlali, La Chicana Super Hero, a homegrown “avenger of the bronze gente” (brown people) who performs in a serial political comic strip and in large-scale mixed media art installations.¹

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¹ The Citlali comic strip first appeared in newsprint in numerous 2002 issues of *La Voz de Esperanza* (“The Voice of Hope”), a progressive monthly publication from the Esperanza Peace

Based in San Antonio, Texas, visual artist, activist, and educator Deborah Kuetzpalin Vasquez² created Citlali “because of the lack of positive images of her people in majority culture” (*LuchaVista* Magazine). A curator of the 2009 Chicana/o Biennial notes that Citlali’s super hero character is able to explore a wide range of “social and political issues pertaining to Chicanas and other *mujeres* (women)” (Chaverri). Citlali is described as revolutionizing “the classic male comic book stereotypes... [and offering] a superhero for brown women who deserve more than supermodels, anchor stars, and desperate *uber* housewives” (Renaud Gonzalez). While scholarly studies of comics are proliferating, scant attention has been devoted to the burgeoning field of Latino comics (Aldama, *Your Brain* 10). Even less attention has been paid to emerging Latina comics and graphics and the performative and rhetorical potential of their visual creations.

Rámon Rivera-Servera’s study of curatorial practices in an exhibit devoted to the revered Cuban musician Celia Cruz places her visual image and voice within “an economy of performance.” He describes the effect of her larger than life image on an exhibit banner: “Cruz welcomes me with a microphone in hand, head tilted slightly forward, and eyes shut as if caught in a moment of intense performance. She transcends the static nature of the photograph to evoke her body in motion... Above her, framed by Spanish exclamation marks, her signature shout, *azú’car*... further gestures the visual image into an economy of performance (Rivera-Servera 132). While Citlali seemingly exists only in graphics, I frame static but highly evocative visual representations of her super hero voice and body as an intense performance of rhetorical activism. Speaking in both English and Spanish without translation, Citlali demands an engagement with her graphic performance and her culture on her own terms. As she appears in her signature opening panel physically exploding like a rocket out of the center of a graffiti-marked map of Texas, her mouth open in a battle cry, suppressed Chicana/o histories and identities come to life with a renewed sense of outrage and urgency.

and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas. The Citlali art installation first appeared at the Esperanza Center, which also serves as a gallery, in the winter of 2002 and early 2003. Citlali reappeared in a retrospective of artist Deborah K. Vasquez’s work in 2004 at Esperanza and in a new exhibit of her work at Esperanza in early 2005. A Citlali comic book is in progress.

² As a Chicana artist and educator, “Deborah Kuetzpalin Vasquez’s artwork has always reflected her life and her *raza* (people)... Citlali has become the focus of her artistic career, and with this character she has participated in over thirty-five exhibitions including several one-woman shows, both nationally and internationally” (*LuchaVista* Magazine).



Fig. 1. Citlali exploding out of a distorted map of Texas. By Deborah K. Vasquez. “*Ya Vine Pa’ttras*” (Kitchen installation and “Citlali” art exhibit). Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, San Antonio, Texas. December-January 2002.

Performing her insurgent role within the space of a typically racist and sexist symbolic imaginary and within the geopolitical realm of Texas, Citlali becomes a subversive modern day Chicana super hero who re/members her pre- and post-colonial history and culture, challenges stereotypes of women of color, and addresses pressing issues that affect Chicana/os and/or Latinos in their daily lives. While many classic super hero comics have been set in New York City (Reynolds 18), Citlali is deeply rooted in her home in San Antonio, Texas, a drive away from the Mexican border. Vasquez says that Citlali is “very proud of who she is, proud of her humble beginnings, and very conscious of the situation her people are in” (Ayala). She refuses to be defined by, in her words, “*gringos* [or] their *vendido* cultural brokers [Chicana/o sell outs]” who profit from distorted histories of brown-skinned people.³ Citlali’s identity is contextualized within a history of comics and super hero mythology as well as Chicana/o political art. Interviews with the artist and performative analyses of representative Citlali graphics and text are conducted to theorize the potential of cultural performances of “macha femme” to carve out alternative spaces within dominant discourses and offer marginalized communities a vision of social resistance and empowerment.

³ deborah kuetzpalin vasquez, “Citlali, La Chicana Superhero,” Comic strip, *La Voz de Esperanza* [San Antonio] (Feb. 2002): 8-9.

Macha Femme Performance

Reading Citlali as a “macha femme” superhero brings into dialogue two seemingly contradictory terms “to imagine a performance which simultaneously conjures and resists fixed notions of ... femininity across one body” (Shoemaker, “Queer Punk...”). “Femme” implicitly troubles cultural norms of femininity while refusing to deny the power and pleasure of particular feminine identifications. While “femme” has historically been recognized as a performative and sexual identity within lesbian communities, it may also describe “other” performances by women who variously trouble hegemonic femininity and/or express queer desires in subversive ways (Shoemaker, “Queer Punk...”). For example, Citlali, who is often sensuously drawn, is ambiguously represented as neither heterosexual nor lesbian. Her superhero power, however, is deeply rooted in her love of strong women in her family, her community, and in Aztec goddess mythology. While iconic female super hero Wonder Woman comes from an all-female (white) race of Amazon warriors, she is clearly heterosexualized in various episodes (Emad 960). It should be noted that super heroes with secret identities have inspired numerous queer readings (Williamson 3), but Citlali invokes a queer spectrum without hiding behind a mask.

Macha, which can translate to “mannish woman” or “tomboy” in Spanish, injects understandings of “femme” with signs of warrior strength and aggression popularly attributed to particular performances of masculinity. *Macha* also re-signifies cultural stereotypes of the Spanish term “macho” as a hyper-masculine performance of “maleness” and rearticulates it as a possible femme(inine) performance for women of color (Shoemaker, “Queer Punk...”). Author and theater artist Sharon Bridgforth describes a macha as “a woman who stands in femininity as a warrior”.⁴ “The macha femme for Bridgforth is an expression of an energy “that includes emotional, sexual, spiritual, and mental power” (Shoemaker, “Queer Punk...”). Vasquez notes that Citlali reminds her of her own powerful mother and *tias* (aunts) who “weren’t afraid to get dirty” (Ayala). Thus, the theorization of macha femme is intended to represent, as Bridgforth says, a reclamation of gendered and sexual power “in all ranges” (interview). Finally, the macha/femme dialectic reflects how queer communities, queer identified heterosexuals, working class communities, and communities of color can and do engage and collaborate across differences (Bridgforth interview). The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas, where Citlali first appeared and has been featured numerous times in newsletters and exhibitions, is just such a unique and embattled space.⁵

⁴ Sharon Bridgforth, phone interview 3/17/04.

⁵ Esperanza’s mission statement: “The people of Esperanza dream of a world where everyone has civil rights and economic justice, where the environment is cared for, where cultures are honored and communities are safe. The Esperanza advocates for those wounded by domination and inequality — women, people of color, lesbians and gay men, the working class and poor. We believe in creating bridges between people by exchanging ideas and educating

Citali's macha femme performance often relies on an intensely muscular and active body, physical aggression, the use of expletives and demonstrations of rage, intense expressions of sadness, pleasure, and nostalgia, and very direct challenges to "*los gringos*" in power and people in oppressed communities to embolden themselves and fight back. While Wonder Woman, her classic predecessor, squeezed herself into revealing red, white, and blue, Citali wears red, green, and white and represents a resistant *Mestiza* identity within a colonized U.S. landscape. She demythologizes Wonder Woman's iconic symbology of U.S. nationalism and freedom and foregrounds instead the immigrant, the indigenous, the woman of color, the female guerilla fighter, as a way of reimagining a fractured, unjust, and changing national identity. As Emad says of Wonder Woman, Citali's body as "a cultural artifact represents specific gendered nationalisms with meanings that delineate an uneasy, often oppositional, blending of the separate spheres of femininity and nation" (955). However, Citali's image can also be read as an intentionally "monstrous" distortion of norms of gender and race/ethnicity, or what José Muñoz calls a "terroristic drag," which is less concerned with superficial resemblances or mimicry (of a super hero, in this case) and more concerned with "conjuring the nation's most dangerous citizens" (Muñoz 108). By taking over historically white male-dominated spaces of comic book super heroes, Citali's terroristic drag "stirs up desires" and "enables [people] to imagine a way of 'breaking away from the restraint of the social body'" (Muñoz 100).

In a lecture entitled "Godzilla's Revenge" delivered at The University of Texas at Austin, Dr. Lisa Sánchez-Gonzalez theorized the activist woman of color committed to speaking out against oppression as:

a monstrosity, a rupture, a hole, a gash: a Cassandra, a *Malinche*, a witch, a bitch, a persona non grata whose personhood is never guaranteed. You are a paperless woman, or worse, a stain on the *legitimate* papers — blood stain, tear stain, spit — your words crawl under the skin, under the soil of the weed field, like worms, waiting to break through, breed, fester and eat their humble share of the harvest. You are pestilence, plague, anathema — just for being.

Sánchez-Gonzalez argues that activist women of color should not, however, "stop 'acting up' and being 'confrontational,'" but should instead become guerilla fighters and embrace their monstrous roles. In other words, be a Godzilla: "Godzilla is a woman of color, confronting modernity and its institutions, reminding everyone with her unique power, her embodiment of horror, that something is fundamentally wrong" (Sánchez-Gonzalez). Women of color have historically been rendered doubly monstrous through not only gender but also racial stereotypes. Sánchez-Gonzalez's strategic appropriation of the image of gendered monsters such as Godzilla vividly demonstrates both the woman of color's double jeopardy within a white, male-dominated society and her potential power to enact radical cultural critique by flaunting her status as menacing monster. Publicly embracing and performing the

and empowering each other. We believe it is vital to share our visions of hope... we are *esperanza*." See www.esperanzacenter.org for more information.

female “monster” speaks to strategies by women of color that move beyond melancholic depictions of degradation into more overtly aggressive, menacing, and celebratory performances that transform fixed images into something altogether new.

Citlali invites viewers to see how bodies deemed “monstrous” due to differences of race/ethnicity, gender, or sexuality can occupy and partially camouflage themselves within dominant signs, symbols, and other verbal and visual languages to revolutionize representations and social restraints from the inside out. In Homi Bhabha’s terms, the “inappropriate” colonized subject steps into the representational image of power (the super hero) to gaze, menacingly, back at the colonizer; “the observer becomes the observed” (Bhabha 89). Citlali’s terroristic drag conjures the white comic book super hero, but with a crucial and menacing difference; she disrupts rather than upholds signs of authority and provokes fear and insurrection with her Chicanisma⁶-inspired ferocity. Cuéllar defines “chicanisma” (or xicanisma) as “ideologically rooted in the Chicana feminist ‘Mexic Amerindian’ consciousness that rejects machismo, exclusionary ethnocentrism and nationalism while emphasizing our prehistoric tendencies toward interdependence and cooperation that transcends gender, class, race, and geographic boundaries.” Citlali’s unruly juxtaposition of iconic pop culture hero and outright rebellion against embedded power structures also recalls Bakhtin’s notions of the carnivalesque as a highly public and chaotically ambiguous space of insurgency where physical spectacle and unconstrained speech function to invert power structures and transfigure notions of culture, knowledge, and pleasure (Bakhtin 62).

La Chicana’s Hybrid Identity

According to Vasquez, “Citlali” is an Aztec term of reverence meaning “to reach for the stars.” The artist describes Citlali, whom she first created in 1998 as a graduate student and who has remained foundational to her artistic work, as a “combination of indigenous women, their Chicana activist daughters, and the spirit of strong women more generally” (personal interview). Not your mainstream, corporate comic book super hero, usually white and male or super-leggy buxom white female, Citlali is deeply rooted in a hybridized grassroots Chicana/o culture; she is “*una mezcla*” (a mix) of the old and the new. Vasquez’s Citlali series, often painted on rough plywood or printed on cheap newsprint, is explicitly political art that ruptures the symbolic economy of art as commodity and insists on Chicana/o art as activism and inspiration for an embattled community struggling in the conservative confines of San Antonio, Texas and beyond.⁷ As Esperanza curator Irma Mayorga says, “Deborah’s work...is

⁶ See Ana Castillo’s *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico. 1994.

⁷ In 1997 the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center along with two of its sponsored organizations, the San Antonio Lesbian and Gay media Project and VAN, was defunded by the city of San Antonio after a series of public and private attacks. In 1998, Esperanza filed suit

Chicano art born of a need to help mobilize a political movement... If Vasquez's work is considered radical... it's only because it's radical to recover history, to reteach a culture lost to us" (qtd. in Ayala).

Identifying as Chicana/o is an inherently politicized act that grew out of movements of cultural nationalism in the civil rights era of the 1960s and 70s. In her book *Latina/o Communication Studies*, Bernadette Calafell explains that "Chicano" is a "formerly derogative term for Mexicans in the United States [that] was re-appropriated by activists as a strategy of empowerment" (17). "Use of the term *Chicano* signifies a moment, culturally and historically, during *el movimiento* where Chicana/os proclaimed autonomy and created a sense of clarity for themselves via the self-designated label *Chicano*" (Holling and Calafell 67). Many Chicana/os strategically claim to be descendents of indigenous Aztecs who thrived in the landscape of the United States' Southwestern states before Spanish colonization forced them farther south into *Tenochtitlan*, which is modern-day Mexico City (Arrizon 23). This contested land has been re-imagined (and perhaps romanticized) by many Chicana/os as *Aztlán*, a lost homeland that "represents the spiritual power of unity among a people who see in their common pre-Hispanic heritage and indigenous past a source of cultural affirmation in the present [which] . . . helps combat racism and exploitation (23). Emerging from a sense of cultural dislocation, this hybrid identity has been strategically invoked and complicated by artists of color to think through more nuanced and resistant notions of identity and to inspire self-determination and political consciousness.⁸

Performance artist and cultural critic Guillermo Gomez-Peña explains that because Latina/o identity in the United States is inherently mired in contradiction⁹, it becomes an obsession. "We play with it. We question it, expose it, subvert it, and push it to the limits, in hopes of developing more open and inclusive notions of the self" (Gomez-Peña 115). The hybrid "expropriates elements from all sides to create more open and fluid systems" (112). The hybrid's monstrous amalgam of cultural, political, aesthetic, and sexual identities is able to thrive on symbolic and literal borders to wage guerilla interventions and level explosive critiques. Invoking forgotten or erased histories through syncretic pop cultural appropriations, this

against the city, alleging violation of the first and fourteenth amendments of the U.S. constitution and the Texas Open Meetings Act. This case was the first in U.S. history addressing issues of race and ethnicity in public arts funding. In May 2001, the city was found to have violated Esperanza's rights and finally agreed to pay monetary damages.

⁸ Groundbreaking Chicana feminists like Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga led the way in problematizing essentialist and patriarchal assumptions upheld within more unitary and fixed definitions of "Chicano."

⁹ See Arizona's immigration bill #1070 which requires that police question suspected illegal immigrants in order to determine if they have proof of registration or citizenship. This new law legalizes racial profiling by essentially criminalizing all people who look Latina/o as potential illegal immigrants.

multiply split figure helps to envision utopian communities without collapsing multiple identity markers into one point of identification.¹⁰

Citlali's hybridity is demonstrated visually, linguistically, and thematically. Within the form of the comic strip, Vasquez layers punchy comic book drawings with actual family photos, traditional and highly detailed images of ancient Aztecs, and crudely cartoonish representations of white men in power as identical, runt-like ghosts. She strategically "expropriates" the political comic strip, a "low" pop culture art form predominately created by white male artists, to level sharp critique at a colonizing culture. Citlali's language also reveals her hybrid identity; she speaks in both English and Spanish without translation and uses Aztec words from the indigenous language *Nahuatl*. This linguistic and visual shape-shifting reflects Chicana/os' and Latina/os' daily cultural negotiations and forces English-only speakers to experience the discomfort of cultural dislocation through a marginalized point of view. Thematically, Citlali addresses a wide range of both local and national sociopolitical issues, providing context for and timely insights into the daily struggles of Chicana/os occupying the neocolonial landscape of Texas and North America more generally. For example, Citlali has recently addressed the Iraq war, immigrant rights, and escalating violence along the U.S/Mexico border.



Fig. 2. "*Ningun Ser Humano Es Ilegal*." By Deborah K. Vasquez. The Chicana/o National Biennial (sponsored by MACLA). June 5-August 15, 2009.

¹⁰ See also Donna Haraway's idea of "cyborg" subject positions and her use of Trinh T. Minh's "inappropriate/d other" in "The Promise of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics of Inappropriate/d Others" (p. 299-301).

Comics As Mass Medium: Invading Masculine Territories and Mythologies

Comic strips and comic books have historically been devalued as a low, cheap, even subliterate form of pop culture that corrupts young minds and compromises the values of art deemed more salutary (Inness 139; Reynolds 7). However, with the rise of indie (independent) comics, “wimmin’s comix,” and the growing popularity of graphic novels, comic-styled representations are being taken much more seriously today. As Emad claims in *Reading Wonder Woman’s Body*, “comics... constitute a rich arena for exploring cultural meanings about America as a nation and the mythologies of national identity pervasive during specific historical moments” (954). Comics potentially conjure utopic visions of social change and offer realms “where writers, artists, and readers gather to speculate about the past, the present, and the future...” (956). This revaluing of graphics has led to the appearance of more characters of color and more women in independent as well as mainstream comics produced by large corporations such as DC and Marvel Comics (Gustines 25). Muñoz notes: “Only now is cultural studies beginning to address the tremendous impact of super heroes, cartoons, and comic books in contemporary culture . . . [and] the persistence and centrality of these characters in the cultural imaginary” (Muñoz 39). Vasquez employs the comic strip form precisely because the Western art world has mostly ignored this work as serious art (personal interview). Citlali responds: “Hey *Cabrones!*. . . If you knew anything about Chicano art you’d know that Chicanos negate the forced aesthetics of Western Culture.”¹¹ As a visual artist, Vasquez recognizes that not everyone has the privilege or inclination to go into an art gallery or museum, but through comics’ “marginalized channel of communication” (Reynolds 7), her work can speak not only to an audience of elites or fellow artists but also to “*la gente*,” working class Chicana/os.

Citlali’s identity must be contextualized within a recent history of comic book super heroes in order to unpack her insurgent performance. Jeffrey Brown states in his 2001 study of black super heroes: “. . . the comic book industry is a medium very clearly dominated by some of modern popular culture’s most quintessential images of heroism [and] . . . most obvious examples of unequal representation” (Brown 2). He goes on to note that most iconic comic book super heroes have historically been white and male: “For decades young readers have encountered a defining and idealized image of heroism that was explicitly honest, law abiding, chaste, excessively masculine, and above all, white” (3). When people of color appeared in comics, they were “almost exclusively depicted . . . as villains, indistinguishable petty criminals, screaming savages, and occasionally as comic relief sidekicks” (5). Aldama agrees in his book on Latino comics: “There has been a long tradition of representing women and people of color in derogatory and denigrating ways in comics (*Your Brain* 11).

¹¹ deborah kuetzpalin vasquez, “Citlali, La Chicana Superhero,” Comic strip, *La Voz de Esperanza* [San Antonio] (Feb. 2002): 8-9.

After the Great Depression, Reynolds notes that “a new kind of popular hero had emerged: the self-reliant individualist who stands aloof from any of the humdrum concerns of society...” (18). Lone [white] super heroes like Superman, Batman, and Captain America are clearly “marked out from society” but “typically loyal and patriotic to the state” while also being “above the law” when necessary (Reynolds 16). These super heroes, still celebrated today, have also been read as fascistic and anti-democratic in their vigilante-styled crusades to save helpless victims from dark and evil forces (Lawrence and Jewett). As notions of “Truth” and “the American way” have been challenged as racist, colonialist, and patriarchal, more complex and diverse images of women and people of color have slowly started to appear in comics. In fact, New York Times writer George Gustines optimistically proclaimed in 2006 that “At DC and Marvel Comics, new heroes are gay, black, Asian, and Hispanic. Get used to it” (25). Some mainstream examples of this rise in diversity are seen in Jamie Hernandez’s high profile run of his “Maggie La Loca” strip in The New York Times Magazine (2006), DC’s new *Tejano* “Blue Beetle” character, and Cartoon Network’s series “Minoriteam,” which piloted in 2005 and ran through 2006 (Gustines 25). A precursor to Citlali can be seen in Laura Molino’s independently published Chicana Superhero “Jaguar,” who first appeared in 1996 as a response to California’s Proposition 187 (Aldama “Discontinuous Review...”; Perez).

While most iconic super heroes have been white and male, Muñoz notes that a number of the early creators of comics were Jewish; their heroes were transfigured during World War II into anti-Semitic warriors resisting the xenophobic actions of the original Superman (Munoz 40).¹² In more contemporary art, Muñoz argues that deceased African American visual artist Jean-Michel Basquiat’s use of super hero iconography in his paintings seized upon this kernel of resistance embedded in comic books as a “powerful reworking and reimagining” of a phobic image to create a “new model of identity and a newly available site of identification” (40-41). This double-voiced articulation of recycling and transfiguring an object “already invested with powerful energy” is what Muñoz calls “disidentification” for the minority subject (39). Vasquez approaches this same disidentificatory reimagining of stereotypes of Latinas as passive sex objects by endowing Citlali with culturally and community-specific super hero powers.

Citlali’s appropriation of white male super hero status also reflects a history of radical “womyn’s” or “wimmin’s comix” that exploded in the 1970s with the rise of second wave feminism. These comics, created by and for women, typically explore issues of race, gender, and sexuality from a woman’s point of view. One of the most visible examples of women’s entrée into comics is the well-known artist Lynda J. Barry, a Filipina whom the Village Voice hailed as “one of the greatest cartoonists in the world” and who is credited with helping develop alternative and “wimmin’s” comics traditions (de Jesus 1). The re-spelling of “comix” also points to twenty-first

¹² See Michael Chabon’s 2000 Pulitzer prize winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* for a fascinating history of Jewish superheroes and their Jewish creators.

century work that goes beyond entertainment and broad stereotypes to explore autobiographical storytelling and feminist perspectives (de Jesus 2). This trend continues today with highly transgressive and intensely personal grrrlz' comix and graphic novels, which are often quite explicit and serious in tone.¹³ While Citlali is not sexually graphic in the same way many "womyn's" and "grrrl's" comix are, she is very serious and graphic in terms of content and physical aggression. Citlali episodes are also inspired by many of Vasquez's deeply personal experiences and struggles as a Chicana.

For example, while Vasquez was mourning the death of her mother and reflecting on how women do so much work that goes unrecognized, she realized that Citlali as an action-oriented super hero needed to be "grounded in some place." She created an episode where Citlali dreams of herself as a little girl in Texas (which is where Vasquez grew up), sitting at her kitchen table with her mother, who patiently urges her to eat her cornbread and vegetables. Growing and eating "traditional" foods becomes a way for Citlali to honor her mother, her culture, her body, and the earth.¹⁴ In another episode, a young Citlali eats while remembering her grandmothers, aunts, and mother, who all instilled in her a "great desire to learn of my ancestors, my *raíces indígenas*, and my *raza*. . ." These women are represented in a Citlali episode via a collage of actual photos of women in Vasquez's family.¹⁵ In this way, Citlali becomes an autobiographical vehicle for Vasquez to publicly acknowledge and address a community of strong women and their often-invisible labor within a patriarchal Latino imaginary.

In contrast to a history of "comix" created by women for women are the mainstream "bad girl" comics like *Lady Justice*¹⁶ or the salaciously depicted *Lady Death*¹⁷ comics, typically drawn by men for men and boys. The super hero women in these conventional comics are mostly portrayed as hypersexual, and their strength is usually compromised by romantic involvements and feminized displays of emotion. Brown notes that the Bad Girl trend, which contrasts with the "good girl" comics from the 1940s and 50s, refers to the currently popular practice of depicting extremely large-breasted "superheroines" in skintight costumes and sexually suggestive poses" (56). Sherrie Inness, examining highly popular female super heroes like Wonder Woman, notes that these tough women are almost always undermined by their heterofemininity (150). In "Frustrating Female Heroism," Magoulik argues that even strong women warriors like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Nikita, and Xena get their

¹³ See Trina Robbin's chapters 3 and 4 on "womyn's" and "grrrlz' commix" in *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women's Comics*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999.

¹⁴ *La Voz* Sept. 2002. While Citlali perhaps romanticizes the notions of an "authentic" culture, I would argue that her yearnings for her "roots" in a context of cultural dislocation becomes a form of survival and empowerment.

¹⁵ Deborah Kuetzpalin Vasquez, "Citlali, La Chicana Superhero," Comic strip, *La Voz de Esperanza* [San Antonio] March 2002: 8-9.

¹⁶ Created by Neil Gaiman in 1995 and published by Tekno Comix.

¹⁷ Created by Brian Pulido in the early 1990s.

strength from men who “help them to channel whatever power they have, and are always lurking, either as potential lovers, as controlling father figures or bosses, as potential threats, or sometimes all three at once” (735). Within the context of these dominant (mostly white) representations, Citlali, La Chicana Super Hero, offers something different, a macha femme version of Chicana feminism.

Reading Citlali as a Dis/identificatory Agent of Change

Vasquez consciously constructed Citlali to be tough, angry, and even violent while also being caring, emotionally demonstrative, articulate, and reflective. These qualities capture certain oppositional cultural norms of masculinity and femininity, which Vasquez tries to revalue and integrate within one body. In a comic strip episode critiquing San Antonio’s “Fiesta” week, Citlali is shown in one panel dismissing “Fiesta” celebrations as a multicultural touristic sham as she sneeringly points a gun at the viewer and threatens to blow up the revered Alamo as a “symbol of war against our own *raza*.”¹⁸ Next to this panel, Citlali is shown crying because of the proposed tearing down of an historic Chicano meeting place [“La Gloria”] while the Alamo still stands. In this episode, Citlali is left to reflect on her own *Tejano* community’s complicity in celebrating Fiesta and how Chicanos “do not have power in a city in which they make up the majority.” She concludes angrily that Fiesta as a neocolonial “smokescreen” better known as “Let’s *Chingar La Raza* Week” (“Let’s f_ _k the Chicanos week”).¹⁹

Vasquez observes that strong women are often stereotyped as unfeeling, dismissed as merely men in drag, or criminalized as monstrous. “A strong woman of color with a weapon in her hand provokes tremendous fear in our culture” (personal interview). Vasquez teases out the evocative power of this image by adding that “strong women feel deeply—this is why we’re so angry and passionate” (personal interview). In an art exhibit panel, as Citlali pulls out her bow and arrow to shoot at a dwarfish white figure stepping on an Aztec warrior’s head (the white figure’s groin is marked with a bull’s eye), she warns: “*Si chingan con mi raza chingan conmigo*” (“If you f_ _k with my race you f_ _k with me”). While this symbolic violence aimed at a caricature of white male power mostly functions as a mythic and cathartic reversal of attack, it could also be critiqued as coming dangerously close to invoking the same kind of racialized violence and post World War II nationalist propaganda that Citlali battles against. However, unlike most mythic super heroes whose generic characteristics include, according to Reynolds, an invulnerability to average humans and a commitment to saving innocent (helpless) victims (16) over supporting larger

¹⁸ deborah kuetzpalin vasquez, “Citlali, La Chicana Superhero,” Comic strip, *La Voz de Esperanza* [San Antonio] (Feb. 2002): 8-9.

¹⁹ deborah kuetzpalin vasquez, “Citlali, La Chicana Superhero,” Comic strip, *La Voz de Esperanza* [San Antonio] April 2002: 8-9.

social movements, Citlali's mythic activism subverts hegemonic power structures via rhetorical agitprop and performative praxis.

In another installation panel Citlali wields a wicked looking knife to cut down indigenous bodies being lynched for the entertainment of a crowd of runty looking white figures and to leap, hypermuscular legs spread wide apart, out of a distorted graffiti-marked map of Texas. One installation panel portrays Citlali with a wild look in her eyes as she shoots bolts of electricity out her fingertips. In the February 2002 *La Voz* comic strip critiquing the press's lack of knowledge about Chicano art, Citlali is drawn in mid-air with one leg extended, delivering a powerful boot kick to the jaw of the signature cartoonish white figure as journalist. In the next panel, the white figure lies on the ground, eyes closed and tongue hanging out of his mouth. With her boot on his arm, she sneers at the viewer, yelling "Next!!!" Images of Citlali in violent confrontations with media makers, art critics, neocolonizers, etcetera, serve as a kind of rhetorical culture jamming by powerfully literalizing both the sustained violence of neocolonialist practices and the specter of oppressed peoples rising up to fight back. These images also flaunt the macha femme's monstrous power and graphically challenge representations of women, and especially Latinas, as the "weaker" sex. Instead of feeling alienated because of her super hero status, Citlali exploits this energy and her potential to envision and enact social change.



Fig. 3. Citlali with bow and arrow. By Deborah K. Vasquez. "Ya Vine Pa'tras" (Kitchen installation and "Citlali" art exhibit). Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, San Antonio, Texas. December-January 2002.

In response to women's strength, Vasquez says that "men often want to save us, or society reviles us as mannish, queer, unnatural" (personal interview). Citlali speaks to this conundrum in an episode exploring how she came to be a super hero via her connection to Aztec female deities and the women in her family. She tells the reader, "As a woman, my strength does not supplant my sensuality. Chicana lips dark and full, cushioned to kiss away our children's tears, cushioned to ease my lover's anxiety, cushioned to accommodate my loving words, my angered (sic) words, my avenging words."²⁰ Citlali's toughness is not diminished or mitigated by a "softer" heterosexual ideal of femininity; rather, her sensuality (ambiguously marked) is an integral part of her strength as a community leader. Mainstream definitions of masculinity and femininity are thus disrupted by being positioned not as binaries but as integral and overlapping identifications. Importantly, no super hero men ever come to save Citlali in a pinch, there are no super hero romances to recuperate her into a heterosexual narrative, and while Citlali is attractive, she is so on her own terms rather than being positioned/drawn as a sexual object. As a confrontational, fearsome, and at times "monstrous" Chicana, Citlali smashes lingering stereotypes and offers a fierce female super hero of color in a heavily whitewashed and male-dominated comic book world.²¹

Through Citlali's resistance, Vasquez employs what Muñoz identifies as "disidentification": "the formation of counterpublics that contest the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere." This alternative and resistant public sphere "offers the minoritarian subject a space to situate [themselves] in history and thus seize social agency" (Muñoz 1). The person who must negotiate multiple intersecting marginalized identities [for instance, a woman who is of color, lesbian, and working class] often "works on and against dominant ideology" to transform cultural dictates from within (11). Muñoz's theory is helpful because a practice of disidentification not only resists the mainstream; it is also a fluid and flexible notion that can trouble feminist identifications solely around the female subject, which tend to ignore differences of race, class, and sexuality among women.²²

²⁰ Deborah Kuetzpalin Vasquez, "Citlali, La Chicana Superhero," Comic strip, *La Voz de Esperanza* [San Antonio] (Feb. 2002): 8-9.

²¹ In "Frustrating Female Heroism," Magoulick notes that while contemporary female heroes like Xena, Nikita, and Buffy have all been celebrated by feminists and fans alike as strong women warriors, they are "conceived of and written mostly by men in a still male-dominated world, present male fantasies and project the status quo more than they fulfill feminist hopes" (729). While these women are laudable for many reasons, they "are all controlled and formed by men. Men give them their strength, help them to channel whatever power they have, and are always lurking, either as potential lovers, as controlling father figures or bosses, as potential threats, or sometimes all three at once" (735).

²² Muñoz credits feminists of color like Norma Alarcón and Cherríe Moraga who first theorized disidentification as an alternative feminist model in the foundational anthology of writings by women of color, *This Bridge Called My Back*.²²

Using these “disidentificatory practices,” Citlali battles issues of representation, such as mainstream media’s stereotyping of people of color. In one postcard-sized art installation panel entitled “Puppets of the Media,” Citlali reaches into a TV screen to strangle the image of a brown-skinned man kissing a blond white woman as a brown-skinned maid mops in the background. In another panel, Citlali is shown sipping hot chocolate in front of an advertisement for Mexican hot chocolate billed as “the nectar of the gods.” Her reverent consumption of a substance that has been appropriated and exoticized to sell products offers ironic commentary on how capitalism profits from a history of colonization of indigenous peoples.

Citlali also turns her critique toward her own Chicano community’s complacency and its adoption of whitewashed standards of beauty. She takes on the Catholic church and its role in promoting the tradition of *Quinceañera*, an elaborate coming out party for 15-year-old Latinas which constructs them as “pure and chaste” debutantes who give their lives to God (and to men in marriage). She challenges Chicana/os on their lack of knowledge about their shared history. Finally, she mourns the fact that so many Chicana/os eat food that damages their bodies while supporting large agribusiness instead of local growers. She urges her readers to honor and take better care of their bodies in the name of indigenous struggles for social justice and environmental protection.²³

In these various depictions of her super hero powers and very human concerns, Citlali both identifies with and against super hero tropes and carves out a disidentificatory space in which to imagine change through a macha femme Chicana voice and body. While Citlali’s speech and thoughts are typically expressed as earnest, direct political agitprop in the style of many super hero comics, she is not the prototypical lone super hero and freak of nature. Citlali doesn’t have sidekicks like Robin or a team of super heroes to hang with; this is because she is of this world, deeply invested in her very real communities. Her power does not come from a sci-fi inspired accident, but rather from her female ancestors, both real and mythical. She honors the strong women in her family and seeks council from Aztec female deities such as *Coatlicue*, who teaches her of love, *Xochiquetzal*, goddess of flowers, art and beauty, *Coyolxauhqui*, goddess of the moon who illuminates Citlali’s path, and *Tonantzin*, mother of all women.²⁴ Significantly, Vasquez argues that Citlali’s strength is available to anyone courageous enough to imagine a better world. “We can make changes . . . we don’t allow our [selves] to dream big enough” (personal interview).

²³ deborah kuetzpalin vasquez, “Citlali, La Chicana Superhero,” Comic strip, *La Voz de Esperanza* [San Antonio] (Sept. 2002): 8-9.

²⁴ deborah kuetzpalin vasquez, “Citlali, La Chicana Superhero,” Comic strip, *La Voz de Esperanza* [San Antonio] March 2002: 8-9.

The Macha Femme's Chicana Feminist Call To Action

Struggling with culture shock as one of the few Chicana visual art students at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, Vasquez created Citlali to affirm other politicized young Chicanas who helped her survive a difficult period in a predominately white setting. Citlali reflects Vasquez's desire to build bridges within/beyond her own community and acknowledge a shared Chicana/o history of triumph and oppression. Through her Aztec female deities, Citlali draws power, compassion, and wisdom to help her people when they cannot help themselves. Vasquez says Chicana/os need empowerment to survive as artists and activists and must remember that "our indigeness . . . is how we've gotten through a lot of things... [It inspires] a consciousness for survival." More radically, Vasquez suggests that we are all connected in one way or another to an indigenous heritage, either as oppressors or as the oppressed (or somewhere in between). "We can't move forward without acknowledging our past" (personal interview). By rhetorically situating all citizens of the United States and Latin America within a shared history of post- and neo-colonization, diverse communities may imagine the possibility of working together across cultural differences while at the same time carving out a space of difference within a typically homogenizing white culture.

Admittedly, Vasquez's invocation of Aztlán as an image of cultural unity conjures cultural nationalisms from the 60s and 70s that have been critiqued as overly utopian and falsely homogenizing while silencing Chicana/os' internal struggles with sexism and homophobia (Marrero 132). However, Citlali reworks this cultural pride into a Chicanisma-centered consciousness grounded in ancestral mythology and U.S. third world feminism by women of color like Gloria Anzaldúa and Chéla Sandoval, who insist on drawing connections between racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia. Existing at the margins of pop culture and addressing contemporary social dilemmas as well as ancient, mythical forms of power, Citlali exemplifies a border aesthetic. As Homi Bhabha says,

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present (3).

Within Citlali's macha femme realm of activism, she becomes what Alicia Arrizón calls a "mestizaje," a body both native and colonized, a figure that is a "product of transcultural processes at work on Chicano subjectivity" (Arrizón 27).

While Citlali employs and renews Aztlán as a mythical space of postcolonial and female-centered resistance, her visibility within the very real physical space of an embattled Chicana/o community center (San Antonio's Esperanza Peace and Justice Center) offers another means of cultural affirmation, support, and activist inspiration within hostile environments. Aldama argues that Latina/o comic author-artists

creatively choose to imagine and inhabit particular worlds (3) and notes a very real need for more complex Latina/o super heroes to resist crippling stereotypes of brown-skinned men and women (*Your Brain* 22). Citlali's politics provide a "moral and ethical compass" as she moves through her graphically real and mythological landscapes. Citlali's grassroots macha femme performance takes her activism to the streets, jumping out of the frame of a symbolic, aesthetic representation to inspire critical consciousness, offer historical context to local and national issues, and model the passion and rage required to create real change. Her message to young Chicana/os is especially powerful: "Choose your mentors carefully...nourish your soul...question those you follow and the institutions within which you walk. *De todo corazón* (with all my heart), Citlali."

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