

*It was the Spaniards who gave the world the notion that an aristocrat's blood is not red but blue...Sangre azul, blue blood, was thus a euphemism for being a white man, Spain's own particular reminder that the refined footsteps of the aristocracy through history carry the rather less refined spoor of racism.*  
—Robert Lacey, *Aristocrats*

*Color is what sold and continues to sell modernity*  
—Michael Taussig, *What Color Is the Sacred?*

## **THE POLITICS OF COLOR (RE)SIGNIFICATIONS: CHROMOPHOBIA, CHROMO-EUGENICS, AND THE EPISTEMOLOGIES OF TASTE**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the genealogy of what I call the aesthetics of coloniality, the processes by which the West utilizes aesthetic theory to validate ethnic and racial oppression and segregation through discourses around taste, art methodology, and the deployment of color. This paper explores how mainstream aesthetic theory holds an innate tendency toward chromophobia, constituting a system of chromo-eugenics, through the naturalization of aesthetic categories of deviancy, social pathology, and correlations about uncivilized and unfit citizenship. It explores the trajectory of aesthetic and chromatic policing and exclusion, one that moves right through the Casta paintings of colonial Mexico, European Impressionism, and the Primitivism Art Movement to today. Through the reiteration of racial aesthetic myths, these discourses influence the way Latina/Chicana visual productions in the United States are contextualized, validated, exhibited, and collected today. Finally, through what I am calling a series of aesthetic movidas, Latina/Chicana artists fight against restricted notions of modernity by invoking a chromo-sovereignty that embraces a decolonial project of collective emancipatory resignification, re-centering their experiences, histories, and world of the imagination.

**Key Words:** chromophobia, aesthetics of coloniality, chromo-eugenics, Chicana/o Color Theory, chromo-sovereignty, epistemologies of taste, aesthetics and race

In the 1990s, a particular case of color regulation by the mainstream occurred when a well-known Chicana writer, Sandra Cisneros, painted her house a periwinkle purple in the San Antonio neighborhood of King William. What can be viewed as an utterly ordinary and everyday practice in most neighborhoods erupted into a national debate and a lawsuit over the rights of individual citizens, homeowner associations,

city historical designations, and the perpetuation of visual cultural hegemony. At that time, San Antonio preservation officials deemed the Cisneros house color as historically incorrect and unsuitable for the Victorian neighborhood, and wanted it changed. Her response was simple, “Depends on whose history you are talking about...this is San Antonio, not St. Anthony” (1997, 10). After a long battle, multiple interviews, and protests, Cisneros won her case. The house has since become a tourist attraction. In the end, ironically, the searing Texas sun faded its color and the purple has become a dark blue, but as she said during an interview:

The issue is bigger than my house. The issue is about historical inclusion. I want to paint my house a traditional color...I thought I had painted my house a historic color. Purple is historic to us. It only goes back a thousand years or so to the pyramids. It is present in the Nahua codices, book of the Aztecs, as is turquoise, the color I used for my house trim; the former color signifying royalty, the latter, water and rain. (Cisneros 1997, 7)

It is clear in Cisneros’s arguments that color represents a visible link with her ancient ancestral past; color allows her to retell her story based upon her people’s history from their own perspective. Furthermore, Cisneros argues that color represents a tool to reclaim ownership of a history of struggle, a story that has been deleted from canonical history books. The use of terms like ‘traditional’ and ‘historical’ represents a strategic maneuver to build a case of egalitarian inclusion, with the tools used by the mainstream. Furthermore, she explains,

Color is a story. It tells the history of a people. We [Chicanas/os Latinas/os] don’t have beautiful showcase houses that tell the story of the class of people I come from. But our inheritance is our sense of color. It has withstood conquests, plagues, genocide, hatred, defeat. Our colors have survived. (Cisneros 1997, 11)

For Cisneros, colors constitute repositories of collective histories, or expressions of borderland aesthetic epistemologies, about their enduring experience of survival. For her, color holds the quality to perpetuate cultural values, and enables the transmission of those values over generations, in a way that is almost clandestine. She introduces an adroit intellectual move by pairing the reading of color with speech/written language. In so doing, she accomplishes two crucial objectives. First, her approach recognizes that Chicana/o Latinas/os have a unique relation to color and a visual language from that of the Anglo-dominated mainstream. Second, she ties the problem she confronted with her house to a larger issue: diversity exclusion in United States society in the process of policing people of color’s aesthetics.

As she explains, it is not sufficient to recognize that Chicanas/os have a relationship to color; it requires recognizing their color language as equally valuable in society. In her view, the inclusion of color language diversity includes the issues of ethnical/racial inclusion, visual hegemony, and the value of people's own visual histories. In her words,

Color is a language. In essence, I am being asked to translate this language. For some who enter my home, these colors need no translation. However, why am I translating to the historical professionals? If they're not visually bilingual, what are they doing holding a historical post in a city with San Antonio's demographics? (Cisneros 1997, 10)

Clearly, Cisneros is not satisfied with only recognizing the historical value of purple; she further calls for a serious reevaluation of the institutional process of the validation of color and aesthetics, both socially and locally. As she argues, the unique characteristics of the border require a unique set of epistemic and theoretical tools that recognize its inherent diversity and heterogenic composition.

Therein lies the dilemma about whose aesthetics and visual visibility is exalted, validated, and reproduced, and who claims the primacy of continuity within physical space; in other words, the hegemonic politics of color and aesthetics. This case is important not only because of the validity of a specific color as a Latina/o element or the legal recognition of a chromatic palette precedence or by the discourse created around historicity, but because it draws attention to the processes of regulation of color in public space and its intersections with race and class. The Cisneros case is about the politics of aesthetics and the struggle over cultural survivorship. In this case, color is an instrument to negotiate a broader issue, the recognition of Latina/o Chicana/o aesthetics rights. This case is not the first instance where aesthetics, color, and the politics of race and inclusion intersect; on the contrary, mainstream discourses around color and aesthetics feed off an ethos around segregation, exoticism, and American exceptionalism. The issues of heteronormativity, homophobia, citizenship, patriarchy, and racism are central to the construction of today's epistemic discourses around aesthetics, taste, and chromatic substantiation. Yet, how do these discourses intersect and work together? How have they developed over time, and how do they shape our aesthetic notions of taste today? How powerful and damaging can these aesthetics and chromatic discourses be?

Color is certainly a complex and loaded term. On one hand, from an aesthetic point of view, it refers to the physical and emotional qualities of our visual world and of the objects that surround us. On the other hand, the same term is also full of deep social meanings tied to the politics of ethnic, class, and national differentiation. In these instances, color refers to socially-generated differences related to skin pigmentation, culture, race, and consequently, to the power disparities manifested by the implementation of those differentiations. For the most part, because of our socialization, we tend to believe that those two meanings—aesthetic and racial—exist as two separate entities in two different worlds. On the contrary, both significations are intrinsically interconnected.

In this paper, I am not interested in discussing the politics behind the study of the origins and physics of color. Rather, I am concerned with exploring four main elements. First, how race and ethnicity have been tied to discourses around the use of color and color preferences in order to create categories of otherness. Second, how these discourses around color have been used to legitimize and validate the oppression of racial and ethnic groups by creating assumptions about aesthetic deviancy, color pathology, and taste. Third, I am interested in understanding how these same discourses around color and taste have been used as tools to regulate and police color and aesthetics in our society. Finally, I will explore how Chicanas/os, by their vernacular productions and aesthetic color interventions, have enacted a set of aesthetic movidas designed to fight the toxic effects of modernity. I argue that these movidas are part of a sophisticated aesthetic system, meant to materialize vernacular border knowledge and promote self-valorization and emancipation.

### **Chromo-Eugenics: Constructing the Aesthetic Other**

*The natives are spirited, agile, strong...they swim like fish; but they are naturally lazy, savage, and revengeful. They paint their faces with different colors, are idolatrous, and very superstitious—except those under European rule.*  
—Diccionario geographico (1750)

In order to understand our current racialized chromatic ethos and build a genealogy of how the discourses of taste work to create aesthetic oppression, particularly about people of color, it is imperative,

to look back in time. We must particularly look to that period following the Conquest, or the modernist re-encounter of the Other by Europe. I am referring to the period when European imperialism during colonial times intersects with the Enlightenment as a unified project of aesthetic conquering. A period when a unique set of aesthetic ethos about the Other are simultaneously manufactured and enacted, in order to secure the epistemic perpetuity of European economic, religious, and aesthetic dominance. The conjunction of that set of ethos will, over time, constitute the raw material for the development of our modernist myth of nation-states' unified aesthetics.

As Magali M. Carrera (2003) explains in her book, *Imagining Identity in New Spain*, the process of surveillance and aesthetic policing of the public and private "social body" (5) of individuals was a central component in the construction and "engineering" (43) of imperial identities in New Spain during colonial times. Furthermore, she argues that beyond the present day, notions of phenotype racial appearance, an intricate set of associations, were used to define people's relationship with the empire. In other words, the system of castas that ruled social mobility and access in the Spanish Empire depended heavily upon a hierarchal and dynamic system of "social meanings and values" (xvi) that differentiated people between Spaniards or "españoles limpios de toda mala raza" (2) and those of mixed-blood known as "color quebrado"(2), or broken color people. According to Carrera, the Spanish Empire utilized a dynamic omnipresent gaze to judge individual external social characteristics and extrapolate them in order to categorize and determine a person's character, morality, and ultimate lineage. This process, known as physiognomics, helped organize the power structure in New Spain. Furthermore, this process allowed Spain to deal with the issue of miscegenation (9) in the Americas.

The moral and character of individuals reflected in the concepts of *calidad*, or status and lineage, according to Carrera, differ from our current understanding of race. Nevertheless, this complex classification system allowed the empire to organize, construct, and inscribe people's bodies as conquered colonial territories for productivity (xvii). The status and lineage of a person was not only about their ancestry or physical body, but rather was constructed by the person's clothing patterns and color preferences, jewelry choices, and criminal record, as well as their type of employment, wealth, church participation/affiliation, friendships, ornamentation, and even hairstyles. It also includes elements of urban

location, mobility within the city, language proficiency, manners, and their judgment for making decisions commensurate to their status (Carrera 6). Carrera argues that this hyper vigilance of body aesthetics was motivated by the desire to avoid ambiguity and mimicry. In other words, it was the need to create fixed imaginary class categories, or the prevention of miscegenation—particularly between Spaniards and those of African descendents (13).

This self-perpetuating system qualified a person's lineage and character by deploying a network of imaginary metaphors that were represented in the real world by a series of commissioned pictures, or *casta* paintings, meant to represent the elaborate social hierarchical system in place in New Spain. These paintings illustrate the position and rank of each person in the colonial grid of power. The *casta* paintings were meant to perpetuate a set of premises, social assumptions, and judgments about a person's intellect, integrity, honor, labor access, suitability for self-governance, political access, and social status. As Carrera explains, the color, material, and textures of clothes, as well as the urban settings around where the individuals lived, their gestures, and the surrounding objects are not random. On the contrary, it is a very intentional selection of items, meant to represent but also to construct "the very object of its observation," (Carrera xvii) and of those observing these items. In this case, the *casta* model indoctrinates the colonial ruler by defining the colonized. In this system, Carrera illustrates, the colonizer and colonized are interwoven and both exist in relationship to one another. Furthermore, Ilona Katzew (2004) in her book, *Casta Painting*, illustrates how the *casta* paintings helped the colonizer to visually create "a particular self-image," (Katzew 1) one that is linked with the colonized-Other. In other words, *casta* paintings work as inverted projections of the colonizer-self.

As Katzew and Carrera illustrate, aesthetic preferences and perceptions of taste were linked to the concepts of purity of blood and *raza*, as social identifiers, during the colonial times in New Spain. Consequently, it is no coincidence, that chromatic terms and references were used to create the differentiating categories between *peninsulares* and *criollos*, as people of pure lineage, and those of "mala sangre" and "mala raza," or mixed blood (Katzew 60, Carrera 2). For example, Carrera explains, how those of mixed blood were registered in "el libro de color quebrado" (2) or the book of people of broken color.

Furthermore, Katzew gives us access to an array of chromatic terms used during the colonial period. These terms exemplify the common practice in the judicial, medical, and inquisition documents of that time, to qualify people based on pigmentation references, or by associating them to the color of fruits or animals. Some of these terms with chromatic citations are “mano prietas” (Katzew 43) and “color champurrado” (44) to designate mestizos. The term “marones” (maroons) identified runaway slaves (41) while the term “cafres de pasa” (44) alluded to the color of pasas (raisins) in order to qualify Africans. Other chromatic terms were “pardo” and “loro,” as well as “lobos” and “coyotes,” linking people to animals (47). Jack D. Forbes (1993), in his book, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*, provides us with a rich nomenclature of the evolution of many of these chromatic terms used to designate slaves and mixed-race people. He also showed us the multiplicity of variations and combinations of terms.

By the end of the colonial era, the system of castas became obsolete, in part because of social mobility, visual ambiguity, and issues related to status mimicry, particularly by criollos. The independence movements in the colonies tied aesthetic discourses to nationalist discourses of origin and authenticity through the construction of an idealized past (Forbes 144). These independence movements used aesthetics, according to Forbes, as one of the “strategies for focusing on national identity as well as explicating and maintaining control of the new nation” (145). In this case, national identity coalesced around discourses of mexicanidad, as exemplified in Mexico by the *Costumbrista* movement, which utilized the world of the visual (including in their chromatic choices) to create an imaginary collective citizen. Yet, they failed to distance themselves from colonial discourses of civility and modernity as found in the creation of distinctions between *Bellas artes* (Fine Arts) and *Artes populares* or *artesanías* (Art and Crafts) in the new nation state.

This ideology affected the allocation of funds and resources, as well as the implementation and creation of art school curriculums, perpetuating racial and ethnic segregation. For example, Fine Arts received full government funding and support. It became part of the nation project institutionalized around the creation of academies, such as the Academy of San Carlos and became part of a state-required education system and curricula (Forbes 145). On the other hand, *artesanías* became linked to low-class

practices, mainly associated with indigenous productions. In this case, the discourses were not around purity of blood or lineage, but rather about modernity and civility. Nevertheless, the legacy of aesthetic and chromatic colonial ethos did not disappear; many of them remain in place today or have become the raw material for modern applications of a racial ethos.

The influx of resources, raw materials, and population growth catapulted the Industrial Revolution. Europe left mercantilism behind to embrace a new economic experiment through the capitalist competition that established modern economic growth patterns. Simultaneously, during this period, the colonies started to resist and revolt, resulting in the emergence of new independence movements and the transcolonial mobility of bodies, which presented a challenge for Europe, one that required the formulation of ideological justifications to categorize and identify the colonizer in relation to the colonized. Europe, through the Enlightenment, embarked on an ideological project of “positive selfdefinition[s]” (Forbes 16) meant to reinforce their perceived epistemic and geopolitical superiority in terms of center and periphery relationships. In the centuries before, between the 1200s and the 1400s, Europe had categorized people both by geographic/regional origins (Russians, Turks, etc.), and by their slave/free status, but also predominantly by their religion or conversion status (Forbes 103).

By 1810, as New Spain independence movements became more prominent, the German philosopher, theorist, and poet of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, published his book, *Theory of Colours*, considered as his most relevant work on aesthetics. He argued that “men in a state of nature...[as well as] uncivilized nations and children, have a great fondness for colours in their utmost brightness” (55). Here, Goethe expresses a long established Western sentiment about the relationship between color preferences, the constructions of civilization, and reason. Goethe’s notion of color must also be analyzed within the context of Europe grappling with the aesthetic and cultural sensibilities of the colonies. Keeping in mind that by the time of *Theory of Colours’* publication, the Age of Discovery had recently ended, and Europe had already expansively settled its political, cultural, and economic dominion in the new territories of America, Asia, Oceania, and Africa.

It is in this context that Goethe defined a colored triptych of beings, comprised of “men in a state of nature,” “uncivilized nations” and “civilized men,” (where logically Goethe positioned himself), referring to



the colonized, the new independent colonies as nations, and the civilized/tasteful nations of the industrial world (55). The creation of these 'natural' categories during this period proved to be imperative for Europe in the establishment of hierarchical rules meant to justify the inequities perpetuated within the new socioeconomic system as part of a natural human order. Color became a visual and readily identifiable venue to solidify those inequities and a way to avoid aesthetic miscegenation. For Goethe, color preferences are an expression of a misfit social body.

Goethe's observations ratified and consolidated an imaginary geo-chromatic world, where bright colors exemplify the deviant, or the savage nature of non-Western subjects. As Michael Taussig (2009), the late twentieth-century anthropologist explains in his book, *What Color Is the Sacred?*, "Western fantasies about non-Western people, [are] fantasies that effectively divided the world into chromophobes and chromophiliacs.... Color for the West became attached to colored people or their equivalents" (16). In this case, otherness could be constructed by the managing of color. Therefore, color austerity could be associated with the civilized and the human, as a signifier of the progression of humanity.

Goethe employs the term 'children' to refer to particular types of beings that have not yet, in his opinion, achieved full reason; more like protohumans than humans. This category of the undeveloped human saturated the relationship that northern and central Europe developed in relation to their Mediterranean neighbors such as Italy and Spain, which were not, coincidentally, predominantly Catholic states. By the time of the publication of Goethe's book, Germany had already experienced over 300 years of Lutheran and Calvinist reform. This produced a particular intellectual trajectory that took a set of conservative Protestant ethical values (heavily rooted in the concepts of redemption by self-mortification, efficient hard work, and austerity) and formulated them into particular aesthetic ideals. Daniel T. Jenkins describes this as an aesthetic defined by "the virtues of simplicity, sobriety and measure" (Jenkins 1988, 153). These are the roots of the austere modernist "chromophobia" (Taussig 12), wherein bright colors are generally construed as superfluous, inherently suspicious, deceptive, "polluting and transgressive," and, consequently, spiritually unacceptable. This chromo morality promotes discourses on primitivism and otherness that affected not just architecture and ornamentation, but the aesthetics of music as well (Thiessen 128).

Certainly, otherness is not constructed merely by discourses of color. Yet, Enlightenment thinkers not only acknowledged color differences, but also created a set of valorizations based on them, defining some groups as aesthetically superior to others in order to reinforce otherness and subjugation. These color-based assumptions about the Other as a chromo-savage are not limited to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They continue to the present day in the ways in which Chicanas/os, Latinas/os, and other subjugated communities are represented, characterized, stereotyped, judged, and eroticized. Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch (2003), in their edited anthology, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, provide us with a rich genealogical evolution of how the West (first in Europe and later in the United States) confronted the issue of the Other under the categories of Primitivism, Primitive Art, and even Tribal Art. As they explain, these art categories are part of a larger project of constructing the Other within racial provisions, inscribed on the basis of “unequal political, economic, and technological power...used to justify military, [cultural] and political conquest” (8). As they explain, the designation of Primitive Art, as an aesthetic category, worked as a reductionist project meant to “classify the art of various dark-skinned people under a single category” (8). More importantly, this category was used not only for organizing the cultural productions of those outside Europe, specifically from Africa and Oceania independently of their diversity, as it was presented but rather it was used as a way to formalize racialized “relations between cultures” (8).

As Flam and Deutch (2003), explain Primitive Art, reflected and reproduced condescending, and racist aesthetic approaches against idealized “dark-skinned people of the tropical colonies” (8), and promoted false assumptions about the aesthetic inferiority of the Other and the superiority of Europe. These racial biases created a culture of institutional and academic resistance for aesthetic inclusion and integration, that served to validate the exploitation suffered by those communities in the art world: by the power of art managing, by the definition and access to exhibitions, the process of art exchange policies, and even the justification of art burglary or art destruction. It is not coincidental, as Flam and Deutch report, that the first exhibition dedicated to colonized communities at the Louvre Museum in France did not take place until the 2000, and only after long debates and resistance by the administrators and curators. This is

the same kind of colonial resistance experienced by the art collective ASCO in the 1980s went the Los Angeles Modern Art Museum (LACMA) refused to exhibit their work.

As Flam and Deutch explain, the construction of Primitive Art as a category was built around specific ideological justifications and methodologies of coloniality. For example, artistic history of those communities of color has been erased, and the art exhibited tends to be historical, creating a sense that their productions are frozen in time. The absence of an art history behind these artistic productions not only presents them as part of a romanticized past, as somehow pure, uncorrupted, and raw, but also positions the European art experience at the forefront of human aesthetic evolution (3). These Eurocentric notions reinforce the “immutability and universality” (4) of European Art as opposed to all other groups’ artistic expressions. For example, one hundred years after Goethe, in his book, *African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art* (1916), Marius de Zayas argues that the Africans, regarding art linger “in a mental state very similar to that of the children of the white race” (Qtd. in Flam and Deutch 94). Furthermore, he uses these racist arguments to present art as an evolving human project that “follows an uninterrupted chain, beginning with...Negro art and ending in the... art of the European” (Qtd. in Flam and Deutch 98). Clearly, art and aesthetics are central grounds of colonial domination.

Here, Europe, is not only the source of the most developed art, but also is presented as the one that provides the tools to understand the Other. Certainly, as Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1987/1991) explains in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “Ethnocentrism is the tyranny of Western aesthetics” (91), as it manifests a core aesthetic system with predatory tendencies, one centered on the European experience, as the only point of reference and validity for the visual production of the Other. Moreover, because art productions of the colonies are presented as disassociated from these communities’ quotidian life, they are reduced to a dichotomy that perceives them only as utilitarian, or as spiritual artifacts, created by instinct and always outside the realms of fine art. Furthermore, the art pieces from these communities, as ‘unrefined’ products become ‘raw’ products for European consumption, part of a cultural and economic expansionist and imperial project of progress.

It is precisely this idealized pure character of the Other art productions that fuels European nostalgic desire to possess or return through aesthetics to an uncorrupted past. An anxiety that I attribute,

in modern times, to the transition from artisan production to mass production after the Industrial Revolution, as it is manifested by William Morris's nostalgic call in the Art and Crafts Art Movement in the late 1800s. The rejection of bright colors in Europe creates an internal conflict, a tension, a crisis between what is morally acceptable and the exotic Other. The irresistibility of color sets in motion a process of both rejecting and desiring the Other. The policing of color launched a European color conquest—a safari for color that required non-Westerners to be simultaneously rejected and idealized and exoticized.

Possessing or conquering the Other means also to control their aesthetics and therefore acquire their color palette. Bright colors became commodified and fetishized; these palettes become signifiers of an almost primal desire for the pure and untouchable spirit of those people “in a state of nature.” As Flam and Deutch explain, this aesthetic conquering begins to formalize in the avantgarde art movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as modernity matures. It was manifested in the approaches of artists such as Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso, Paul Cezanne, and Vincent van Gogh, among others (4). It is this European desire to conquer the Other that moves Anzaldúa to claim that, “Modern Western painters have ‘borrowed,’ copied, or otherwise extrapolated the art of tribal cultures and called [it] cubism, surrealism, symbolism” (90). This possessing/conquering the aesthetic Other represents a form of colonial violence. These chromatic appropriations, without acknowledging their origins, represent another form of European imperialism, one that is based on aesthetic extraction, commoditization, and exploitation. This is what is behind Van Gogh's desire, as he said, to master the “savage combination of incongruous tones” (Van Gogh 1888, par. 11), of non-Europeans, as well as in the development of the International Style.

The construction and perpetuation of ideological, epistemic, and aesthetic myths about the Other as one that is undeveloped, naïve, absent from a history, wild, exotic, and meant for consumption, has been recognized by several scholars of color in many areas of research. Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman (1997), in their edited book, *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*, discuss how all these “particular discursive strategies” (8) become part of a larger fictional Western project, in what they called “hegemonic tropicalization” (8). As they explain, this process of tropicalization relates to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, as its Latina/o counterpart. In this case, this set of ideological fictions contextualizes Latinas/os' existence, representation, and interpretation of their cultural productions as

subaltern subjects in the United States. For Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, the tropicalization of Latinas/os works as a dynamic meta-system that privileges the European American experience and perpetuates their hegemonic dominium, and is in part nurtured by dominant “projections of fear” (8) about the Other. As they illustrated, these distorting strategies exist within the context of an undemocratic power distribution and top-down state gaze (9).

The creation of aesthetic otherness, as an epistemic category, works and follows four main trajectories to: (1) reinforce and perpetuate the West’s unequal system of visual hegemony; (2) position the European experience as the only valid epistemic visual system; (3) constitute the West as the only point of reference to understand and make sense of all other visual systems, and (4) naturalize a system for aesthetic subjugation. As Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2004) explains, in terms of the construction of knowledge, and therefore aesthetic knowledge, European logic is based on the notion of “thinking about epistemology only in reference to the achievements of the Western world” (35). In other words, the validation of visual knowledge is contextualized only as a Western product—one that is always in reference to the Western experience, and always posed in positivist terms. As Walter D. Mignolo (2000) explains, it is because of the nature of the colonial project that the West rejects epistemic alternatives, while simultaneously insuring the imposition of the colonizer’s singular basis of knowledge as the only valid point of departure, and as the sole cohesive element (Sousa 2006; 2007). In the West, aesthetic cohesion, for the most part, is visualized by the implementation of an imaginative homogeneous aesthetic system, one that is presented as good for all.

Consequently, the policing and regulation of aesthetics must be interpreted as part of a system meant to ensure Eurocentric colonial control. Aesthetics represents one of those knowledges that were purposely subjugated (Foucault 7). The policing of visual knowledge and aesthetics became an essential part of the project of colonial domination. As long as there is an imagined set of colors on a fixed palette and one aesthetic taste that is perceived as more civilized than others, a system of aesthetic inequity takes shape. Once the colonizer’s taste system has been normalized and its self-anointed superiority internalized, bright colors and the aesthetics of the Other are categorized as inferior. In many cases, these cultural productions from the periphery are controlled by the use of categories such as kitsch, or as curiosities, as

sources of nostalgic primal beauty, or as examples of the exotic. These ideologies continue to the present day, in the way that Chicana/o Latinas/os and other subjugated communities are represented, characterized, stereotyped, judged, and/or erotized.

### **The Case of Chromophobia Today**

On July 11, 1988, *Time* magazine released a special issue titled, “Magnífico: Hispanic Culture Breaks Out of the Barrio.” Here, *Time* explores the developments of the Latina/o Hispanic community in the United States as a growing force emerging from the barrio. Without delving into the rhetoric utilized at that time in reference to the term ‘Hispanic’ and the implications of deviancy found in the issue’s title, the magazine referred to color as an intrinsic element of Chicanas/os/Latinas/os’ historical identity. In their writer’s words, “Latin colors and shapes in clothing and design, with their origins deep in the Moorish curves of Spain or the ancient cultures of Central and South America, are now so thoroughly mixed into the [American] mainstream that their source is often forgotten” (Gibbs 68). In this occurrence, color exemplifies historical ties, a “merge from a variety of separated traditions” (Gibbs 69). However, the magazine polarizes its color analysis when it suggests a romantic and nostalgic recounting of history—an overt example of Orientalism. In this case, the exotic Others are exemplified by their “vivid color[s]” (Gibbs 69). The problem is that an argument as crucial as the historicity of color becomes conflated with rhetoric tinged by nostalgic language in service of distinct racial projects.

Gibbs, in the article, suggests a “vibrant” palette of colors that exemplifies this community consisting of “jewel colors of ruby, emerald, luscious purples, used with black or mixed together” (70). The article uses the presence and statements of a Los Angeles fashion designer, Ofelia Montejano, to authenticate the indigenous origins of color in a decidedly romantic version of history and poverty. Montejano states that “using bright colors this way draws on my heritage...when I was a girl in Michoacán, Mexico, I admired the way even the poorest people made use of color. They take raw color and use it in a very honest way” (Gibbs 70). Once again, the argument of color is validated by assumptions surrounding the purity of the primitive Other—in a manner similar to Goethe’s concept of humans “in a state of nature,”

poor people use color in a “raw” state and in a “very honest way” in opposition to the corrupted ways of the present.

The assumption here is that by reproducing the color palette of poor people, civilized people can achieve some of the purity and honesty vanquished by modern society. Ironically, one may conclude that Montejano’s arguments position her as a civilized being on the other side of the spectrum given that she, as a Mexican herself, provides this color-based assessment about poor people from Michoacán. However, within this defined view of color, she can be ensnared in the game and cannot escape her exotic status as a Mexican woman of color. Further, in this article, Montejano is depicted in a picture holding a maraca in one hand and a Chihuahua dog in the other. Her image is accompanied in the picture by two models wearing colorful matador-style dresses, all played against a busy background of piñatas and Spanish colonial ceramics. She reproduces the allegory of the folk Mexican, tied with the vivid colors of her creations. Seemingly, she is, in the end, reduced to a personification of the exotic, the vivid color of the poor, and the Other.

Contrasted in the article is fashion designer Carolina Herrera. The text about Herrera and her image are presented antithetically to the colorful and flamboyant mexicanidad of Montejano. Herrera as a modernized, acculturated Latina is pictured monochromatically and alone, without facial expressions, against an empty background. She is blonde and is wearing all white clothes. Her depiction represents the mainstream status of the civilized and acculturated. For her, “taste is universal...you either have it or you do not” (Gibbs 68). In this perception, color becomes part of the universal discourse, and differentiation through color is valid only when used, as she says “elegantly” and as an “expression of good taste” (Gibbs 69). The problem is that taste is not universal—it is imposed as universal, and as synonymous with civility. In the article, Herrera exemplifies the strong modernist approach of a universal style, which elevates individuals (who embrace this style) to a higher level of taste. However, I argue that this particular interpretation of taste is presented as valid because it signifies the preference for solely adhering to a Eurocentric aesthetic. In the best case, the bright colors often associated with a Latina/o Mexican style are authenticated only when they are presented as background to glorify mainstream Eurocentric perceptions about style. For example, the picture of Montejano is accompanied by the text, “[She] weaves the jewel

tones of her Mexican heritage into her fabrics,” while Herrera’s picture quote reads, “clothes with romance sewn into the seams” (Gibbs 69). Here, the presentation of these two Latina designers is markedly different: one based on her ethnic/national background with allusions to indigenous/artisanal qualities of weaving and textiles as the Other, while Herrera’s nationality and ethnic ancestry are omitted and her qualities are romanticized.

I believe that the *Time* magazine piece as a whole narrative, the graphics and the text, work together to exemplify a contemporary version of colonial Casta paintings, as an infantilized caricature of the complexity of Latina/o presence in the United States. As Magali Carrera explained when referring to Casta paintings, those colonial vignettes, were not so much “about the social reality as much as they are about a social engineering that was being carefully put into place...as they attempted to construct, control, and maintain colonial bodies and the spaces they occupied” (43). In other words, these visual allegories were meant to construct a false mimicry that educates and delimitates not just the colonized but also the colonizer. It is clear that these paintings, as expressed in the *Time* article, are as much about the center as they are about the periphery. The color of their clothes, gestures, and spaces constructed around Herrera and Montejano are not random. The *Time* article teaches how to read the brown-Other-aesthetics as social aesthetic-bodies, but also helps those at the center, to learn how to read and to police their own chromatic behavior, reinforcing the gaze power structure in place.

Montejano and Herrera, as portrayed in this *Time* magazine article, exemplified two central vignettes or modern Casta representations used in the American mainstream to analyze and interpret Latina/o Chicana/o communities’ use of color. It frames them within a reductionist binary between the exotic and/or the romantic. In this case, contrasting Herrera and Montejano fulfills an ideological purpose of tropicalization, using Aparicio’s and Chávez-Silverman’s concept. In this case, one of these representations exemplifies an aesthetic of assimilation while the other manifests an aesthetic of exoticism. They are presented as the only venues to visualize the insertion of Latina/o/Chicana/o chromatic expressions within the current system of chromatic domination. Both of these vignettes come with specific epistemic valorizations and social consequences, as they clearly reduce and misrepresent the complex variety and diversity of their expressions.



In order to unravel these contemporary aesthetic Casta vignettes, it is important to analyze how Chicanas/os and Latina/os in the United States have been racialized. Jonathan Inda (2000), in his article, "Performativity, Materiality, and Racial Body," provides us with a detailed and sharp chronology of how race—particularly the racialization of the Mexican bodies—has taken place. This process happens by linking particular significations to their 'brown' bodies, or as he says, by the 'naturalization' of race. With the assistance of Derrida (1988, 1981) and Judith Butler (1993, 1997), Inda explains how race is a social fiction naturalized through social discourses (74). Simply put, this fictitious "racial body is not an effect of biological truths, but a historically contingent, socially constructed category of knowledge" (83). As Inda details, this racialized and "naturally inferior body" (75) inscribed on non-whites "becomes meaningful and thus materialized...through a heterogeneous ensemble of texts (languages), disciplines, and institutions" (92) that is consistently repeated and reinforced in our society. This is particularly important for us because this process of racial naturalization also involves the realm of aesthetics, aesthetic knowledge, and the discourses around taste.

The normalization of the unnatural fiction of race fulfills the mission to validate the establishment and perpetuate economic and social disparity and exploitation, in what Inda calls the "economies of meaning" (82). Furthermore, the construction and naturalization of these inferior bodies never happens only once; on the contrary, the fixation of racial meaning is made possible by "the reiterative power of discourse" and its "never-ending string of performances" that gains authority by repeating and constructing what it tries to regulate (Inda 87). Therefore, the racialized body is produced and reproduced over and over as these discourses are repeated. Race turns natural by consistent reiteration of discourses. Moreover, for Inda, it is precisely because of the fictitious and ephemeral nature of these racialized discourses that they are unstable, and therefore reiterations break open within those discourses, allowing for the insertion of new significations. Since meanings of race are not fixed, the racial body can be resignified (Inda 75).

In this process of racial-naturalization of bodies, aesthetics as a site where racial knowledge is enacted, validated, and justified plays an important role. As Jenifer A. González (2008) has stated in her book, *Subject to Display*, referring to the tied connections between race and the discourses on art, art validity, and the process of institutionalized art exhibition, "[T]he meaning of race... has continued as

intensified struggle, familiar in the arts, over the politics of representation. Race discourse is the politics of representation...that insists on presenting people as ‘racialized’ subjects” (3). Aesthetics, the theory of aesthetics in the West, has been complicit in the process of constructing racialized bodies. Aesthetics and the reiteration of racial epistemologies of taste continue to construct and create racialized bodies as inferior, primitive, unsophisticated, unintelligent, excessive, and inappropriate. Furthermore, González argues,

Race discourse produces an economy of visibility—and simultaneously invisibility...[the] elements of race discourse can be best understood as a visual technology comprising a complex web of intertextual mechanisms that tie the present to the past through familiar representations tropes (6).

The aesthetic racialized body is constructed by the creation and perpetuation of aesthetic discourses, in this case around the use/preference of color by Latinas/os and Chicanas/os in the United States. These fictitious discourses, like the ones used by *Time* magazine when contrasting Herrera and Montejano, follow a long trajectory that continues today. In the next section I discuss and explore the ways in which Chicanas/os have been producing and circulating new chromatic knowledge that reinscribe new discourse significations for their aesthetic productions.

As shown earlier, the construction of inferior aesthetic racialized bodies from Mexicans, Mexican descendents, and Chicanas/os and Latinas/os has a long trajectory; its genesis can be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the colonial encounters of Europe with the Other, particularly by the implementation of discourses about religious differentiations and economic-governmental qualifications. In the twentieth century, the discourses about the ‘Mexican problem’ in the years after WWI were populated with xenophobic and nativist sentiments. During the 1930s, the emergence and circulation of pseudo-scientific knowledge about the Mexicans’ inability (and resistance) to assimilate into the United States’ mainstream were used to validate economic exploitation and limit social access, as well as contributing to urban segregation. Let us remember that the myth of the American melting pot includes aesthetic components.

In the 1940s, Chicana/o use of color and aesthetic fashion became a central discourse in the construction of criminal bodies, as exemplified in the Sleepy Lagoon case in Los Angeles. As Mauricio Mazón

(1988) and Stuart Cosgrove (1984) explain, the combination of racial prejudice and the notions of what was perceived as inappropriate in attire style and color in times of austerity during WWII created the conditions for pronounced cultural dissonance and the violence that erupted into the Zoot Suit Riots (Mazón 60). As Mazón explains, racial prejudices about Mexicans and Mexican Americans polluted mainstream media and were used to create aesthetic discourses for exclusion and criminality by promoting the falsehood that, as bloodthirsty Aztec descendants, savagery was innate to Chicana/o juveniles. In addition, the implementation of limitations in the quantity of yardage available for civilians, in order to secure fabric supplies for military consumption—such as the implementation of the War Production Board in March 1942 of the General Limitation Order L-85— allowed for the creation of illegalities over style for Zoot Suiters and Pachucos. Consequently, the use of material by Zoot Suits was perceived as unpatriotic and anti-American (Cosgrove 1984, 82). The attempt to control Chicana/o youth aesthetics became synonymous with regulating a criminal body.

Today, those racialized aesthetic discourses are still in place, as in the colonial era and during the Enlightenment, and they are manufactured around elements of *calidad* (or ethnic quality), character, class, judgment, and morality. These chromo-based theories have been deployed against the artistic productions of and by Chicanas/os. They encompass not only the visual but also the totality of the subject, including smell, taste, and sound. For example, writer Sandow Birk (2003) states, in the *Best Places Southern California Guide*,

As you travel through Southwest California, notice the exaggerated sense of color to be found in Hispanic neighborhoods.... Hear the soft cadences of Spanish spoken in the streets, smell the scents of Latin American cooking and marvel at the wildly decorated lowrider cars on the roads beside you. (14)

Here the use of the word *exaggerated* implies a binary between proper and improper. Its usage signals a dichotomy in the use of color; on one side, there is the common sense and on the other side there is the exaggerated (or deviant) one, located outside the norm. Clearly in this binary, as Jacques Derrida (1981) has explained, a “violent hierarchy” (41) of power is deployed, and in a binary, “one of the two terms governs the other” (41), in this case, exaggerated Chicana/o status is subordinated while the tacit chromatic standards of the mainstream are hyper-valorized. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that color is

further associated with other cultural practices, such as food and language. Aesthetically based associations and all other subsequent related practices become exaggerated or deviant as well. In this occurrence, the non-normative use of color opens the door for the definition of the outcast, the exotic Other. The use of color is perceived as deviant and out of the norm. Lowriders here become categorized as wild, a term with savage connotations. With the acceptance of this value-specific mindset, food, language, smells, and car transformations become eroticized and fetishized as part of a larger racialized project of creating the Other. All these practices achieve the same purpose, that of exaggeration. What at first glance may look as an apparent positive element turns into a rhetorical tactic used to reinforce exotic otherness, and through this othering, the exclusion of Chicanas/os and Latinas/os acceptable aesthetic culture.

Jeanne Kopacz's (2004) book, *Color in Three-Dimensional Design*, helps us understand how chromatic discourses are used and how they are connected to other elements such as intelligence, civility, and class, to create the Other as an inferior body. She argues that as a "person becomes more educated, is exposed to more culture, and has greater financial resources...[m]ore colors become acceptable, and we appreciate a greater number of color combinations" (101). In this case, the discourses of color, education, and economic resources work together. Furthermore, it is interesting to note the manner in which Kopacz refers to herself (and the reader) by using the pronoun we as one of those with more culture, and therefore positioned to make an accurate assessment about the taste of others. The rhetoric here is one of meritocracy, where ascending in social class also implies the notion of improving one's civility and color sensibility. In this value-laden and constructed view, culture is a subject that is understood as a very particular and highly defined entity associated with High Culture—with Eurocentric values of beauty as its definitional underpinnings. Furthermore, she argues, the lower a group is ranked in the social stratification, "the more comfortable they are with simple colors" (102)—hence, locating them in distinct opposition to "more successful individuals [that] are more likely to choose darker values" (102) or complex color patterns.

Even more insidious, Kopacz argues that color preferences are not only linked to economic status, but also to the intelligence of the individual. As she adds, an individual "with less life experience or lower financial means may find fewer hues attractive than the individual with greater means, more education,

higher intelligence, and broader life experiences” (102). Kopacz explicitly connects color preferences to class and intelligence. The problem here is the assumption that an underprivileged individual not only has a constrained chromo-gallery from which to choose, but that s/he is incapable—due to limited intelligence—of ever achieving the taste of the upper classes, as if those privileged groups hold timeless aesthetic taste.

Moreover, these arguments imply that a person or a community of individuals located within such a stage of chromatic underdevelopment can only generate, deploy, and enjoy poor and unsophisticated chromatic productions. Here we are facing a type of chromo-eugenics through the elaborate development of a color theory that it is used to explain and justify visual oppression, as well as racial and class discrimination. The development of a color theory that links these social constructs with intelligence not only fulfills the task of explaining and justifying visual oppression but also the naturalization of the current social order. Since class and taste are deemed natural, it justifies the withholding of money and resources for minority education and disenfranchised communities, as well as researching or recognizing the validity of their aesthetic work. This represents the next step in a sophisticated process that is first contextualized by chromophobia that will expand the notions of good taste and will be used to discredit many of the Other’s cultural productions.

Just as with Goethe, these assumption-laden constructs about color pave the way to the notion that some aesthetics are, by their nature, bad—or at least carry negative elements. Kopacz connects, erroneously, bright colors with primitivism. The supposition here is that the use of primary colors signifies decreased visual sophistication and, therefore, the more complex a color becomes, the more intelligence is required in order to understand, recognize, appreciate, and decode its meaning. This is another way to establish race and class as natural categories, and to validate the dismissal of the cultural productions of these communities based on style, method, color, and subject matter. Chromo-eugenics and chromophobia have worked together as constitutive elements in the promotion of nativist sentiments as a way of naturalizing the ideal of a homogeneous chromatic society, as well as tools for rejecting, devaluing, and exoticizing the other. Chromophobia and chromo-eugenics have been used to define communities of color in the United States. As I have shown, color choice differences have been used to naturalize social inequity or to validate the creation of multiple aesthetic categories that depict some humans as innately more

civilized, sophisticated, intelligent—i.e., better—than others. The aesthetics of taste and color theory are intrinsically tied to the politics of skin color, race, and class, as well as to assumptions about civility and intelligence. Yet, Chicana/o communities have not been passive objects of these practices, but rather they have actively engaged in creating change.

As Inda indicated, fictitious racial meanings are never completely fixed; on the contrary, new significations can be inscribed. Communities of color, including Chicanas/os, have developed very sophisticated epistemic interventions around color in order to fight back, resist, and create new aesthetics discourses for emancipation and self-valorization. Chicanas/os have actively engaged in creating change by re-signifying new sets of aesthetic knowledge about themselves and their cultural productions.

### **A Case for Chromo-Sovereignty: Chicanas/os Are More Than Just Brown**

*Tan, tan Quién Es? [Who is it?]*  
*La vieja Inez Que quieres? [What do you want?]*  
*Quiero Colores [I want colors]*  
*Que color quieres? [What color you want?]*  
*Quiero... [I want...].*  
—Rafaela Castro, *Chicano Folklore*

The process of aesthetic re-signification has been an integral part of the Chicana/o Movement from its inception. Both *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (1969), as well as *El Plan de Santa Bárbara* (1969), validate Chicana/o's unique experiences and perceived art as an important venue for social change. *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* understood art as a revolutionary tool for change (Anaya and Lomeli 1991, 3). It makes an appeal to ensure the sustainment and consistent support of the production of cultural artifacts that reflect Chicana/o cultural values as a remedy to the effects of assimilation. *El Plan de Santa Bárbara* (1969), in their original document by La Causa Publications, more concretely argues for the introduction of Chicana/o Art as an essential and strategic element of Chicana/o identity formation and curricula, including not just art "critical analysis and appreciation" (46), following a trajectory from Mexico to the barrio. It also includes a holistic approach to cultural productions like performance arts, theater, and music, as well as poetry and writing composition (107). For the architects of *El Plan de Santa Bárbara*, Chicana/o Studies has

a mission to provide the necessary “intellectual tools” (40) to inform Chicana/o realities, specifically the struggle for self-valorization and the construction of new knowledges that center around their sociocultural and aesthetic experiences. *El Plan de Santa Bárbara* states, “the critical dialectics of Chicano Studies are the individual, and culture which produces identity and new culture.... Chicano Studies mean, in the final analysis, the rediscovery and the re-conquest of the self and of the community by Chicanos” (40). Clearly the reiteration of new social bodies with a new set of significations is a central component of the Chicana/o Studies project, as it is tied to the rediscovery and re-conquest of a new self, outside of the imposed reading created by racism.

This emancipatory project of re-signification is clearly described by novelist Tomás Rivera in 1971 when he contextualizes Chicano literature as one that “has a triple mission: to represent, and to conserve that aspect of life that the Mexican American holds as his own and at the same time [to] destroy the invention by others of his own life” (34). I will also add that this also applies to the project of Chicana/o aesthetics, since Chicana/o visual culture not only represents but also inscribes a new visual history and narrativity about what they are and what they do. Rivera calls attention to the imperative need to rewrite those misrepresentations or racial significations inscribed on Chicana/o bodies, and consequently in Chicana/o art and aesthetic productions. This emancipatory project, by default, questions the methods and types of knowledge used to define the validity of art.

One of the first and most significant new significations inscribed by Chicanas/os about their aesthetic productions can be found in the concepts of *rasquachismo* and *domesticana*. However, before I move into the description of these concepts, I believe it is of crucial importance to understand that this groundbreaking work should not be reduced to the introduction of a new category to analyze or compartmentalize Chicana/o cultural productions, but rather as the emergence of a new epistemic inscription, a new discursive language to comprehend Chicana/o aesthetics.

In a clear move that questions naturalized Eurocentric categories based on class and race for the validation of aesthetics, in 1991, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto introduced the term *rasquache*, as a style “rooted in Chicano structures of thinking, feeling, and aesthetic choice...that encode a comprehensive worldview” (1991a 155). For Ybarra-Frausto, *rasquachismo* is a worldview marked by the experience of subjugation and

the peripheral imposition of Chicana/o existence inside modernity, one that is complete. As an expression from “los de abajo,” or the underdogs, rasquachismo is highly ingrained with elements of adaptability, survivability, inventiveness, recycling, and ingenuity (156). Ybarra-Frausto explains rasquachismo as a collective aesthetic defined by class, an expression of a “have-not” existence (156), one that emerges in part as an answer to a unique reality and as a way to reclaim one’s humanity and by the discovery and use of the most appropriate resources available in order to survive (157).

Ybarra-Frausto argues that rasquachismo emerges as an “aesthetic call for ethnic redemption and social resurrection through the concepts of ‘fregado pero no jodido’ (down but not out)” (157). Therefore, Chicana/o artists have a clear understanding of the fregada racial significations imposed upon them and their work, but rather be jodida/o by them, rasquache aesthetics, Chicanas/os invert and subvert those oppressive forms of knowledge and hierarchies and create new significations about and around them, despite their reality. Since rasquachismo works also as a means of envisioning a “fantastic” future right here and now, even within the horrors of being “fregado” (157).

Consequently, rasquachismo as an aesthetic and epistemic move tends to privilege hybridization, juxtaposition, and the integration of multiple and apparently unsuitable and incommensurable styles and aesthetics all at once. In this sense, rasquachismo as a border production constructs a different timeline, one where history is not measured by linear chronology, but rather by a creative reconfiguring of temporality through ephemera and the lived experiences of the community. Therefore, this approach to temporality favors the intersection of multiple icons, images, and graphics from different historical periods and different social groups to coexist on one canvas without compromising their aesthetic value. This aesthetic multiplicity already questions the absolutist evolutionist linear model used by traditional art historians to construct categories of style purity and uniformity based solely upon the recurrence of brushstrokes, color use, or design composition elements. For example, as Ybarra-Frausto (1991b), explains in rasquachismo, “Bright color (chillantes) are preferred to sober, high intensity to low, the shimmering and sparkling over the muted and subdued” (134). Rasquachismo is not naïve, but rather a sophisticated movida with epistemic consequences, one that flips Eurocentric values about concepts such as taste, re-centers the Chicana/o experience, and inscribes new meanings. Rasquachismo, as Jenifer A. González



(2008) explains, rejects the notion of cultured taste as a system of oppression that is “inseparable from the process of education and breeding, discrimination and sensibility inherited within a context of cultural homogeneity and class hierarchy” (133), as it is manifested in the flipping of categories such as good, bad, or poor taste.

In her essay, “Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache,” Amalia Mesa-Bains (1999) explains how rasquachismo is more than just an aesthetic style created for the sake of beauty. Rasquachismo is a highly political concept, since it allows Chicanas/os to resist cultural assimilation at the same time that it lets them promote dignity and positive self-portrayal (5). In this case, rasquache aesthetic interventions and customizations, such as lowriders or corridos, cannot be disassociated from the economic, social, and political inequality experienced in the borderlands. Mesa-Bains claims rasquachismo allows Chicanas/os “the capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado” (5). For Mesa-Bains, rasquachismo is a modus operandi that involves a deep understanding of the Chicana/o reality of history and social life that manifests itself not only in the aesthetic work of art production, but also in the interpretations of space. Rasquachismo’s social use and reappropriation of objects presupposes a definition of what is perceived as useful and beautiful.

However, Amalia Mesa-Bains does something more than just validate rasquachismo. As González (2008) reflects, by conflating two terms, mexicana and doméstica (Mexican arts and crafts and domestic labor), Mesa-Bains not only creates a new term, but rather, as González argues, Mesa-Bains creates a new signification, a new meaning about the conflictive interstitial space created by the intersection of race, class, and gender. She opens a new aesthetic space that recognizes the unique experience of a racialized identity and gendered labor. Mesa-Bains constructs a new self by naming it. As González argues, domesticana, as a female rasquachismo, “transforms ‘female’ space from its traditional isolation under patriarchy into a public representation of a lived experience of Mexican American women” (132). What we experience here is multiple re-signification, where the mundanity of everyday things is transfigured.

It is this audacity of rasquachismo that leads Alicia Gaspar de Alba (1998) to describe it also in terms of sarcasm, irony, and mockery. She explains, in *Chicano Art: Inside Outside the Master’s House*, that the ironic capacity of rasquachismo derives from its quality of transforming “utilitarian articles into sacred

or aesthetic objects, highly metaphoric” and as tools for resistance and resiliency (11–12). Let us remember, that in order to be sarcastic and use mockery, the individual, in this case the artist must be familiar with the visual codes of the mainstream. Therefore, rasquachismo is not random but quite the opposite: It comes as a reflective process of self-crafting. Gaspar de Alba argues that hybridity, mestizaje, fights over space hegemony, self-history, and social inequity represent the major driving forces in Chicana/o borderland production. As she says,

Borderland citizens are dealing with a project of definition...our great challenger is to invent a new language capable of articulating our incredible circumstances... [the borderland is] a place where the so-called otherness yields, becomes us, and therefore becomes comprehensible. (34)

This new discursive language of re-signification, as an epistemological framework, provides the ground for creating and sustaining a distinctive cultural identity apart from the one proposed by the mainstream, and one simultaneously allowing for the enactment of sociopolitical emancipation. By its mere existence, this new aesthetic language rejects and questions dominant notions of what is proper and correct. It deploys an array of cultural technologies of resistance meant to validate oneself and the community as a whole. One of its aesthetic strategies is its ability to attach self-affirming meanings to historically oppressive symbols. As Ybarra-Frausto, Mesa-Bains, and Gaspar de Alba have argued, in this re-signifying language, the symbols used to oppress can be expropriated and re-contextualized in order to signify a distinct historical path. Therefore, as a vernacular aesthetic movement, it can be perceived as the border fighting back against elite impositions and universal standards proposed by modernity. It is within this new semiotic context that Gaspar de Alba explains how rasquachismo is “more than an oppositional form; it is a militant praxis of resistance to hegemonic standards in the art world” (12). As she observes, its innovative power comes from its unapologetic and bold move of turning upside down the ruling paradigms used in aesthetic and visual domination (12). By doing this, rasquachismo has the capacity to remap the lines of power and redirect them. For example, in the case of Mesa-Bains’ altares, this remapping and questioning of power happen simultaneously in such a way that intimate spaces within the home (such as the bathroom and the kitchen), practices (such as praying and cooking), as well as the objects that are

attached to those places and practices, are all exposed as active actors of subjugation. They are exposed as places and practices where racial and gender significations have been inscribed over time (González 16).

Therefore, rasquachismo achieves epistemological relevance by redefining canonical notions of what art is and what is validated as art. Through the implementation of rasquachismo as aesthetic activism, spheres of knowledge are newly redefined and new centers are drafted within border thinking, through what I call the border praxis of aesthetic re-significations. It is precisely this praxis toward social change that constitutes the basis for inquiring into the epistemological power of vernacular aesthetics, especially when these aesthetics are put into practice by subjugated/oppressed communities such as Chicanas/os, African Americans, and/or LGBTQ, in order to build a new world, to identify each other, and to create safe spaces for the performance of their identities. Chicana/o art history has a long trajectory of Chicana/o art collectives, and individual artists that have grounded their work on reinscribing new significations. From the collective work of The Royal Chicano Air Force, ASCO, and The Mujeres Muralistas, to individual artists such as Patssi Valdez, Yreina Cervántez, and Yolanda Lopez, each have fought for creating new emancipatory places. This is true of installations by Mesa-Bains, the digital work of Alma Lopez, and the murals of Judy Baca, as well as the emerging work of Favianna Rodríguez. Individually and collectively, such as in the case of Chicano Park in San Diego and many other community art projects, we see the creation of these emancipatory spaces. They recognize new places of departure around concepts such as locality, race, class, gender, space, time, citizenship, and sexual orientation that re-envision new collective and individual identities.

Laura E. Pérez (2007), in her book, *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetics Altarities*, provides us with an art analysis that guides the reader not only around the emergence of a Chicana Art consciousness, but also provides a nuanced reading about the healing powers of art. In this case, it reinscribes a new narration about racial bodies as just one of the steps of this emancipatory process. As Pérez explains, it is imperative to heal the effects of a long history of epistemic, economic, and psychological violence of which racialized bodies have been victims. She notes, many of these artists, as in the case of Yreina Cervántez, “reinscribes alternative and healing visions of reality that can further the making of face and soul for both ‘minority’ and dominate culture viewers” (37). What we see here is a

project of emancipation that has moved beyond Chicana/o terrain and has embraced the human collective. Chicana/o artists, as aesthetic activists, are embraced in a project of collective re-signification. Consequently, the intellectual fight engaged by Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros, in order to preserve and recognize the value of her periwinkle purple house, is truly bigger than her house. It is an epistemic *movida* about “historical inclusion” (Cisneros 1997, 7) recognition, visibility, and the aesthetic rights of being fully human.

The scope of this study has been to unveil the deep racialized roots behind the construction of mainstream aesthetics theory, particularly through the discourses of color. I have explored how Eurocentric philosophies have produced and perpetuated a patriarchal and Anglo-centered understanding of aesthetic history and theory, its interpretation and narration that explains visual productions only in terms of an intrinsic male-centric Western eye and aesthetic values, including chromophobia and chromo-eugenics. My arguments are meant to reveal an aesthetic emancipatory project that cannot depend on the promises of an aesthetic model “dedicated to the validation of itself” (Anzaldúa 90), which has forced many into invisibility and silence. Therefore, it is crucial to understand, first, that the existing system is limited and inadequate with deep racial, gender and imperialist limitations (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva 2008, 17). Second, and even more dangerous, is the assumption these current system possesses the capability to self-regulate and redirect itself to eliminate centuries of exclusive practices and principles. I conclude this paper by exploring how Chicana/o theories on aesthetics have developed new significations, meanings, and readings over their aesthetic bodies.

This is the beginning of a larger project about the aesthetics of (de)coloniality inspired by the work of scholars such as Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000) and Emma Pérez’s groundbreaking work as expressed in her 1999 book, *The Decolonial Imaginary*. I have envisioned this article as the first part of a series of research interventions focusing on Chicana/o aesthetic artists, activists, and scholars, their intellectual interventions, and epistemic *movidas* toward an inclusive and emancipatory aesthetic theory. I understand the aesthetic work of these Chicanas/os not in isolation, but rather as part of their grand decolonial project; in this case, meant to reinscribe new meanings outside of oppressive discourses of primitivism, exoticism, deviance, tastelessness, etc. This aesthetic decolonial project

embraces and re-centers their experiences, their her/histories, and the world of the imagination. I want to explore how artists of color are redefining spaces and places, by utilizing what Jenifer A. González calls, “radical or critical situational aesthetics” (9), a differential, or decolonial, aesthetic consciousness. I see this, for example, in how dreamers and undocuqueers (undocumented queer students) are re-signifying what it means to be an American, and simultaneously, how they are exposing the intersections between the politics of exclusion/inclusion, patriarchy, race, and class. I believe that envisioning of a new self, the inscription of new significations that are outside the colonial models, the thirst for justice, the recognition of diversity, and the efforts to highlight the beauty within ourselves and in our communities remains at the center of the decolonial Chicana/o aesthetic project.



**Figure 1.** Layout from the July 11, 1988, *Time* magazine, “Magnífico: Hispanic Culture Breaks Out of the Barrio.”

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