

# **A Note on Chicano-Mexicano Cultural Capital: African-American Icons and Symbols in Chicano Art**

*Amelia Malagamba Ansótegui\**

## **Abstract**

This article forms part of a longer research project in progress. It argues that the “transportation” of “cultural capital” by the migrants found fertile ground among the Mexican-American population already established in the border states between Mexico and the United States. Cultural capital is understood as the historical bag-gage and daily practices and production of symbolic goods that legitimate and give coherence to a community. This cultural capital has undergone a process of transformation in the Mexican-American communities. Many of the early symbolic practices have been adapted to new circumstances. The use by several Chicano artists of icons and symbols of African-Mexican heritage on the one hand, and of social and political issues from an African-American cultural location on the other, have become part of the cultural capital of Mexican-American communities. To understand the translation and interpretation of the use of these symbolic goods key aspects of history must be highlighted.

## **Resumen**

Este artículo forma parte de un proyecto de investigación más amplio en proceso. En él se argumenta que la “transportación” de “capital cultural” por los migrantes encontró tierra fértil entre la población mexicanoestadunidense ya establecida en los estados fronterizos entre México y Estados Unidos. Se entiende como capital cultural el bagaje histórico, las costumbres y la producción de bienes simbólicos diarios que legitimizan y dan coherencia a una comunidad. Este capital cultural ha pasado por un proceso de transformación en las comunidades méxicoestadunidenses. Muchas de las costumbres simbólicas tempranas han sido adaptadas a circunstancias nuevas. El uso de iconos y símbolos de herencia afrocomexicana por artistas chicanos, por un lado, y las discusiones sociales y políticas de una localidad cultural afroestadunidense, por otro, se han convertido en parte del capital cultural de las comunidades méxicoestadunidenses. Para entender la traducción y la interpretación del uso de estos bienes simbólicos, deben rescatarse algunos aspectos históricos claves.

\*Investigadora de la Universidad de Texas en Austin. E-mail: mella@mail.utexas.edu.

Muchas gracias Deanna,  
 Víctor and Gil

The cultural presence of people of African descent in Mexico has been a permanent feature of Mexican society since colonial times and one that has been mostly overlooked. This presence began with the institutionalization of slavery in New Spain, extended into the Mexican Revolution and was finally re-established through the migration of black Cuban artists in the nineteen forties and nineteen fifties.

Although this African presence has been continuous, it is difficult to understand why it has been so resilient, considering that the number of African-Mexicans in Mexico has been relatively small. This contrasts with other Latin American countries where large numbers of Africans were brought to their shores by the system of slavery. The impact of slavery in the Caribbean and in countries such as Peru and Brazil in the southern continent fashioned their cultures in distinct ways across time. Despite their limited number, African-Mexicans have contributed to Mexican culture in areas ranging from music to healing, and this influence is most noticeable in popular culture.<sup>1</sup> This African-Mexican cultural contribution to society at large has been “transported” as part of the cultural capital brought by Mexicans in their migration to the United States during the past 150 years.

This article forms part of a longer research project in progress. It argues that this “transportation” of “cultural capital” by the migrants found fertile ground among the Mexican-American population already established in the border states between Mexico and the United States. Cultural capital is understood as the historical baggage and daily practices and production of symbolic goods that legitimate and give coherence to a community.<sup>2</sup> This cultural capital has undergone a process of transformation in the Mexican-American communities. Many of the early symbolic practices have been adapted to new circumstances.<sup>3</sup> The use by several Chicano artists of icons and symbols of African-Mexican heritage on the one hand, and of social and political issues from an African-American cultural location on the other, have become part of the cultural capital of Mexican-American communities. To understand the translation and interpretation of the use of these symbolic goods, key aspects of these histories must be highlighted.<sup>4</sup>

In discussing the cultural capital of Chicano artists who integrate aspects of the African-American experience into their iconographies, one must first address key features of the historical experiences of

1 Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Medicina y magia. El proceso de aculturación en la estructura colonial*, Instituto Nacional Indigenista, Secretaría de Educación Pública, Colección SEP/INI, México, 1980.

2 Bourdieu defines “symbolic capital” as; economic and political capital that is disavowed, misrecognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate. He further argues that symbolic capital is a “credit” which under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees “economic profits”. Cultural and symbolic capital have been the sources of strength in the every day lives of the Mexican and Mexican-American communities in the United States. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 171-183.

3 In an exploration of a mythical figure of a healer in the South of Texas, some of these cultural practices that mix the knowledge of the African-Mexicans and Mexicans in South Texas still can be seen. See Amelia Malagamba, “Don Pedrito Jaramillo, una leyenda mexicana en el sur de Texas”, in José Manuel Valenzuela (comp.), *Entre la magia y la historia*, Programa Cultural de las Fronteras/El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1992, pp. 63-73.

4 Some of the most obvious sources of continued cultural presence of people of African descent in Mexico in recent times are the strong diplomatic relationship between governments and the direct relations among the peoples of Mexico and Cuba-

Mexican slavery. The continued presence of the African-Mexicans and the social and cultural issues they shared with the other marginalized people that participated in the Mexican Revolution is key. This will be explored visually by reference to works produced by the master printer José Guadalupe Posada.

Another important factor present in Chicano cultural capital is the influence that African-Cuban music and art has had this century on Mexican culture. The presence of Afro-Cuban culture in Mexico has contributed in strengthening an African-Mexican presence in the country; “transported” later by immigrants into Chicano communities in the United States. African-Mexican culture has been adapted and adopted, translated and forged to such a degree that it has become an intrinsic component and referent of Mexican-American popular cultures.

Migration from Mexico to the United States has been constant since the late nineteenth century. When the *gente de carne y hueso*, people in the flesh, cross the Mexico-United States border, not only do they bring their bodies across but also their cultural capital, particularly rich aspects of their popular culture. Mexicans influence, transform and reinforce the cultures of the Mexican-American communities in the United States. Tomás Ibarra-Frausto, a Chicano cultural critic and historian discusses as a defining characteristic of the Chicano aesthetic its process of tradition and innovation.<sup>5</sup> Memory has played a crucial role, it makes possible for traditions to continue and innovations to be “archived”, which in some cases with time become part of the tradition. Immigrants have an important role in the development of this aesthetic process in direct or indirect manners and to greater or lesser degrees.

### **The Early Days**

The institutionalization of African slavery in Mexico in the early years of the colonial period was undertaken at almost the same time that the Spaniards were institutionalizing slavery among pre-Hispanic cultures. Africans were brought to Mexico because the native population was decimated due to the trauma of the conquest, labor conditions, and illness brought to the Americas by the Europeans. The *Conquistadores* did not have enough hands for the hard and forced labor destined for the Indigenous population. Native populations were dying by the hundreds of thousands. Spaniards who wanted to establish the sugar economy in New Spain sought to solve the labor shortage by the implementation in Mexico of the model of Black slavery, already underway in other parts of the Americas. The most important regions in Colonial Mexico for the importation of African slaves were the present-day states of Veracruz, Guerrero and Yucatán. Other Mexican regions, including the present-day states of Michoacan, and Tabasco utilized African slaves though they were fewer in number. Nonetheless it is significant that slavery as a system was directed first towards the “Indians” who were regarded as the primary source of slave labor before the importation of Africans.<sup>6</sup>

5 For a detailed discussion of the Rascuache aesthetic, a concept developed by Ibarra-Frausto, see “Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility”, in C.A.R.A. Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation. An Interpretive Exhibition of the Chicano Art Movement, 1965-1985, UCLA, Wight Art Gallery, Los Angeles, 1991, and “The Chicano Movement/The Movement of Chicano Art”, in Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, ed. by Ivan Karp and Steven J. Lavine, The Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1991, p.p. 128-150.

6 Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Población negra de México, segunda edición, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1972.

Africans and Indians alike were subjected to and suffered under the slavery system. When the Indian population rebounded through the development of a natural immunization process to European illnesses, the importation of black slaves decreased until it finally stopped. However, the demographic process did not happen homogeneously. In the present-day state of Veracruz, African slavery ended first in the cities of Jalapa, Veracruz and Coatepec. Whereas in other cities such as Córdoba and Orizaba, where the elite refused to cease the slavery system even though it had become unprofitable, it did not end until much later.<sup>7</sup> Rebellions from Africans, Mulattos and Indians took place in this region until the system was ultimately abandoned. As Carrol observes:

Afro-Veracruzanos social ties with other groups varied over different points in time... These patterns persisted into the early eighteenth century. Negroes displayed the greatest shift by moving away from social links with whites and toward associations with Indians. ...By 1715, the proportion of slaves within the Negro population diminished, and whites cared less about controlling the lives of the few slaves that remained.<sup>8</sup>

The Independence Movement which began in the first decade of the 1800s was composed mainly of non-White agricultural labor. Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, one of the most important leaders in the Independence Movement “appealed to the masses of Indians, and Blacks, (to the *castas*) He abolished the yearly head tax and called for an end to slavery.”<sup>9</sup> When José María Morelos y Pavón took over leadership of the movement he “went beyond Hidalgo’s program of colonial reform. After 1813, Morelos whose own family was of African-Mexican descent, called for independence and among other things, reiterated Hidalgo’s abolition of slavery.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The Mexican Revolution**

During the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz from 1877 until he was ousted in 1911, the Mexican elite turned their eyes once again to European cultures. As in the colonial period before the Independence Movement, when only Europe was considered cultured and civilized, this new elite gave the Europeans, particularly the French, the status of “high cultures”. It was believed that Mexico had to emulate the Europeans in order to become a “modern” country. This situation was translated to a demeaning and highly exploitative treatment of those who did not belong to the elite. Those most negatively affected were the non-white populations, mainly Indians, *Pardos* and Blacks: “las clases bajas” —the lower classes—. Among other atrocities committed against the native populations, Díaz implemented the killing of thousands of Yaqui Indians, with his plan to bring them to the Parque Nacional, on the Southern Peninsula of the Yucatán to work in slavery-like conditions. The situation was no better for African-Mexicans.

In a speech read by Alberto M. Carreño at the Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística, on April 28, 1910, titled “El peligro negro”, he addressed Porfirio Díaz:

7 Patrick J. Carrol, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz, Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1991.

8 Patrick J. Carrol, *ibid.*, p. 88.

9 Patrick J. Carrol, *ibid.*, p. 99.

10 Patrick J. Carrol, *ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

...Hemos de confesar que tuvimos vacilaciones respecto de cuál tema podría ser más apropiado, tanto para la fiesta que celebramos, como para los fines de nuestro instituto. ...Nos referimos a lo que pudiéramos llamar el *peligro negro*, esto es, a la inmigración de hombres de ese color que, al decir de la prensa de estos últimos días, pretenden venir a establecerse en México.<sup>11</sup>

We do not know which migration Carreño was referring to, but his speech certainly reflects the racism prevalent at the time among the elite. He proposes to “analyze” the United States and Cuban situation with respect to Blacks, referring to the slavery system in the United States where the slaves were “transportados para trabajar”. He continues by describing the problems of the United States government with African slaves and the country’s “good nature” in bringing about the abolition of slavery. In doing so he asks:

¿Pero la libertad que alcanzó (el Afro-Americano) y la igualdad que las leyes le dieron respecto de los demás ciudadanos americanos elevaron sensiblemente el muy bajo nivel del negro? De ninguna manera, y esto es lo que nos lleva a estudiar si el fenómeno se debe a inferioridad de la raza y a su imposibilidad de luchar con éxito con los hombres blancos.

Further on he adds that no puede negarse la inferioridad de la raza negra... Bastante arduo es ya el problema indígena que México tiene que resolver, y respecto del cual nos hemos ocupado más de una vez en esta misma tribuna, para que lo compliquemos con la peor de las complicaciones.<sup>12</sup>

This ideology was widespread among the Mexican elite that aspired to be White and European. But for the poor and non-White population that is, what was left of the *castas* system, *los indios*, those *mestizos* with dark skin or poor or even worse, those who happened to be poor with dark skin, and *mulatos*, this ideology was oppressive. In many circles of these marginal communities political work was underway to try to change the situation. The revolutionary winds were spreading. While the non-Whites and poor were not invited to the table of the elites to celebrate, they were having their own party through the prints of José Guadalupe Posada.

José Guadalupe Posada, whose art work addressed the masses, produced images that expressed the social and political conflicts during Díaz dictatorship. He achieved this through *rolantes*, small broadsides sold at very low prices in the poor *barrios* in Mexico City. Among the several themes addressing the social conditions in the country that his work depicted, is the corruption of the elite including the government, and the exploitation of the masses.

11 Alberto M. Carreño, “El peligro negro”, discurso, Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística, April 28, 1910, México, p. 1. “...We have to confess that we had doubts about which theme could be the most appropriate to discuss in today’s celebration, and to the end objectives of our institute. ...We are referring here to what we can denominate the black threat, that is, the immigration of men with that skin color who want to come to establish themselves in Mexico, as reported by the press of the last few days.”

12 Ibid. “But was the gained freedom (by the African-Americans) and the equality of the laws given to them with respect to the rest of the American citizens any help in elevating the very low standard of living of the Negro? Definitely not, and that forces us to consider if the phenomenon is caused by the inferiority of that race and their impossibility to struggle with success with the White race.” Later in his speech he asserts that “the inferiority of the Black race cannot be denied. It is hard enough to have to take care of the Indian problem, which Mexico needs to resolve, and which we have addressed before in this same forum, to have to complicate ourselves with the worst of complications.”

In the *Calavera de Don Folías y el Negrito* (nd), Posada uses one of his most popular images, *la calavera* (see plate 1). In this particular print he depicts an African-Mexican *calavera* couple in a posture that can be read as demanding or protesting, while the figures of two white elite *calaveras*—don Folías and his wife, are presented with a gesture of hatred. Posada usually depicted the figures of the powerful *patrón* and the worker in a humorous but conflicting situation. In this particular *calavera*, don Folías is the *patrón*, and *el negrito* the worker. In the middle of the scene is a tomb surrounded by skulls, and a pair of *calaveras* are found laying at the tomb's side in a position of despair. One can read this Posada scene as a confrontation between the poor and exploited, and the elite. In this case, *el negrito* represents the despair of the population that is surrounded by hunger and pain, while don Folías represents the rich and powerful elite.

On the song book cover of *Colección de Canciones para 1, No. 2* (1900), Posada depicts another African-Mexican couple (see plate 2). Posada produced several book covers for A. Venegas Arroyo, the publisher with whom the artist worked many years.<sup>13</sup> In the case of this particular genre, a book was published every year, with a selected compilation of the popular songs of the year. These humble books, produced in cheap paper were destined for the consumption of the popular classes. The African-American couple is portrayed in working class attire and surrounded by palm trees that make reference to the Mexican tropics such as the coasts of Veracruz and Guerrero. Posada chose to depict the couple dancing framing the content of the book. For Posada, the wide spectrum of his subject matter not only included national events, politics, disasters and social commentary but he also gave much attention to popular entertainment. He understood well the importance these celebratory cultural practices had for the people. The African-Mexican couple dancing is a lively image, a celebration of popular culture.

The Mexican Revolution which was fought mostly by the exploited and marginal social classes included the urban poor, the *campesinos* and the African-Mexicans. In a photo from the *Archivo Casasola*, a young African-Mexican *soldadera* (nd) testifies to this fact (see plate 3). We do not know how many African-Mexicans participated but this is a strong statement of their presence in the *Movimiento Revolucionario*. Furthermore, Elizabeth Salas' work on the *soldaderas*, the women who participated as soldiers in the Revolution, addresses the presence of African-Mexican *soldaderas*.<sup>14</sup> She discusses the work of Francisco Rojas González *La Negra Angustias*.<sup>15</sup> Salas reads this novel as

...a psychological study of a female revolutionary. The central figure, Angustias Farrera, is a mulatta whose mother died early and whose father went to prison. She and her father join the Zapatistas in the state of Guerrero.<sup>16</sup>

13 See José Guadalupe Posada. *Messenger of Morality*, ed. by Julian Rothenstein, Moyer Bell Limited, N.Y., 1989; Posada's Popular Mexican Prints. 273 Cuts by José Guadalupe Posada, Selected and edited by Roberto Berdecio and Stanley Appelbaum, Dover Publications, New York, 1972; Edward Larocque Tinker, *Corridos & Calaveras*, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, 1961; *México en el Arte*, No. 5, INBA, November 1948; *Las obras de José Guadalupe Posada*, Grabador Mexicano, with introduction by Diego Rivera, Mexican Folkways, Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, Mexico City, 1930.

14 See Elizabeth Salas, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military. Myth and History*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1990.

15 See Francisco Rojas González, *La Negra Angustias*, Ibero-Americana de Publicaciones, Mexico, 1944.

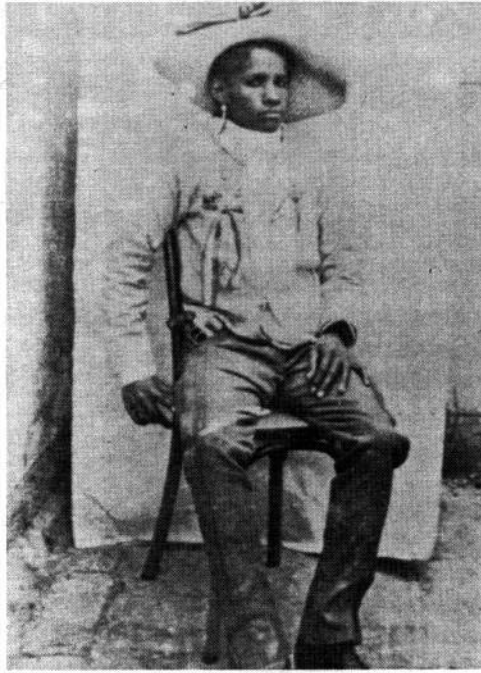
16 Salas, op. cit., p. 87.



1. José Guadalupe Posada, *Calavera de Don Folias y el Negrito* (*Calavera of Don Folias and the Negro*) (engraving, reproduced in *Ilustrador*, nd).



2. José Guadalupe Posada, *Colección de canciones para 1, no. 2, La Cubanita* (engraving, reproduced in *Ilustrador*, 1900).



3. Fondo Casasola, *Afro-Mexican Woman Revolutionary from Michoacán*  
(Fototeca del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Pachuca, Hidalgo, nd).



4. Manuel Covarrubias, *Caribbean Dance, the Malecón, Havana, Cuba* (gouache,  
Harry Ramson Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas, Austin, 1928).



The fact that a mulatta *soldadera* is the novel's main protagonist speaks both to the importance of the African-Mexicans in the Revolution as well as the importance they had in the historical memory of people like Rojas, who's novel was published in 1944.

### After the Revolution

A strong *Mexicanista* movement took place after the Revolution. The need to create a new ideology that reflected the ideals of the armed movement was developed. The arts, particularly the visual arts, helped achieve this *Mexicanismo* that had begun its development long before the *lucha armada*. Saturnino Herran and Dr. Atl were the precursors of this artistic movement. After the Revolution, artists such as José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Frida Kahlo, María Izquierdo and others created a new *Mexicanista* aesthetic language.

In the 1920s and 30s, the Mexican artist Manuel Covarrubias created a series of works depicting different aspects of the African influence in the Caribbean, as well as life in Harlem. His gouache *Caribbean Dance, the Malecón, Habana Cuba*, from 1928 recreates popular dance in Cuba (see plate 4). When Covarrubias decided to do a portrait of a Cuban women, he chose an Afro Cuban as his model for *Cuban Women*, a gouache from the same year (see plate 5). His oeuvre on Afro Cubans reflects the interest he had on the Afro-Latino Culture, but at the same time it also reflects the continuum of cultural capital in Mexican culture of Afro-Latino and African-Mexican cultures. This is also true when Covarrubias creates the *Harlem Series* in the 1920s and early 1930s. When he arrived in New York in 1924, he found that...

It was not an entirely unfamiliar world: Harlem was a had grown up. Both were gathering places for intellectual, artists, and personalities of the day, and during the period in which Manuel knew them, both were center for a renaissance of first cousin to Mexico City's bohemian section, where Miguel's spirit that had to do with cultural rediscovery, with a search for elemental self.<sup>17</sup>

During the 1940s and 1950s an important influence in the popular cultural scene was felt both from the Afro-Cuban artists who came to Mexico, and from Mexican artists like Roberto Montenegro who continued the tradition of working with the African presence in Mexico. His *Tres Hombres y una Mujer*(nd) is a good example.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the Afro-Cuban influence was most relevant in the expressive culture of the *culturas populares*. The music of Celia Cruz, Pérez Prado, Bienvenido Granda, Beny Moré and the big band orchestras, such as that of Jorrín, and la Sonora Matancera, were embraced in the poor *barrios* of Mexico. Famous popular singer, Toña la Negra sang the work of Andrés Eloy Blanco and Maciste, *Angelitos Negros*. This song became one of the most popular songs of its time, and through the years is now considered part of the Golden Age of Bolero music in Mexico. The words of this song made direct reference to those visual artists with a European influence. The words of the song are a denunciation

17 In Adriana Williams, Covarrubias, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1994, p. 37.

18 Lithograph, not dated. This piece is part of the collection of El Museo Nacional de la Estampa, in Mexico City.

of racism in “high art”. The song addresses the foreign brush in the hands of those artists:

Angelitos negros  
 Pintor nacido en mi tierra, con el pincel extranjero,  
 pintor que sigues el rumbo de tantos pintores viejos,  
 aunque la Virgen sea blanca, píntame angelitos negros;  
 que también se van al cielo, todos los negritos buenos.  
 Pintor si pintas con amor, por qué desprecias su color,  
 si sabes que en el cielo también los quiere Dios.  
 Pintor de santos de alcoba, si tienes alma en el cuerpo,  
 ¿por qué al pintar en tus cuadros, te olvidaste de los negros?  
 Siempre que pintas iglesias pintas angelitos  
 bellos,  
 pero nunca te acordaste de pintar un ángel  
 negro.<sup>19</sup>

The African-Cuban presence also made its mark in the popular films of this time. Such is the case of *Mulata*, directed by Martínez Solares. Another film from 1959 was *Cuba Baila*, directed by Julio García Espinoza, co-produced by the Mexican Manuel Barbachano.<sup>20</sup> These and other films were an important contribution to the expressive popular culture (see plate 6).

In Mexico, African culture remained active and very much alive mostly among those of the lower classes, “los de abajo”. Popular culture expressions along with the Black presence was considered part of the culture of *los pelados*.<sup>21</sup> The designation of African-Mexican to the culture of *los pelados* by the elite was not an accident. By and large, African-Mexicans, were part of the army of the marginal and unwanted but necessary populations. They belonged to the vast underprivileged sectors of the populations: the *campesino*, the *indio*, the *obrero*, and *el pelado*. The presence of culture of *los de abajo*, in the fine arts and in the popular art forms during this period in the Mexican history can be conceptualized as part of an uninterrupted class struggle from the oppressor and the oppressed.<sup>22</sup> This struggle is some times obvious yet at other times not so visible.

### **The Mexican Migrant and The Chicano. The transportation of Cultural Capital**

While some *Mexicanos* were made second class citizens by force with the *Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo* of 1848 in the United States, others came to the United States at the beginning of this century fleeing from

19 The translation of the song Angelitos Negros: “You, painter born in my land, with the foreign brush, you, painter that follows the path of so many old painters. Even if the Virgin is white, paint me little black angels. Because all good blacks also go to heaven. You, painter, if you paint with love, why do you despise their color, if you know that in heaven also God loves them? You, painter of bedroom saints, if you have soul in your body, why did you forget blacks when you painted your art? When you paint churches you always paint beautiful little angels, but you never remember to paint a black angel”.

20 In Manuel González Casanova, “El cine en el Caribe”, in *Cultura del Caribe III*, Memorias del 2do. Festival Internacional de Culturas del Caribe, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Programa Cultural de las Fronteras, México, 1989, pp. 393-400.

21 Term given to the lower classes by the elite. A despective term that literally means the peeled ones, those naked, without skin, in the castas paintings Indians were depicted with their heads shaved

22 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious, Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1991, p. 20,



6. Dámaso Pérez Prado, *Al son del mambo* (film, Chano Urueta, dir., 1980).



7. Malaquías Montoya, *En el Libro tu Libertad/In Knowledge There is Liberation* (mural, Oakland, 1979, 1980).



8. Malaquías Montoya and Students, *CCAC Mural*, Oakland, 1981.

the terrors of the Mexican Revolution. Later, Mexicans continued migrating as a result of severe socio-economic conditions prevalent in Mexico.

Historically, for the majority of the immigrants, the conditions in the United States have been difficult. For some, such as those who were here before this territory became part of the US, the new imposed culture forced them to use their cultural capital in new and creative ways. This was necessary in order to keep it and maintain some sense of community coherence. Those that followed brought with them their cultural capital, adding to the already existing cultural capital of the Mexican-American experience.

This cultural capital included first hand knowledge of social inequalities, racism, and a lack of opportunities. It also included among other qualities the dignity of their cultural practices, their family values, and a sense of pride no matter what they had been through. The experience of exploitation that made the African-Mexican *Soldadera* join the Mexican Revolution was also shared by the Mexicans who found themselves as “territorial minorities” in the United States.

How did the situation differ for Mexicans in the United States, before and after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo? A culture of segregation in the United States became the status quo for those who did not belong to the Anglo community. Discussing this culture of segregation in Texas in the 1830's and 1840's, David Montejano states:

The bitter aftermath of the Texas Revolution was felt most directly by the Mexican settlements along the Guadalupe and San Antonio rivers. Here the Mexican communities were subjugated and in many cases expelled.<sup>23</sup>

This historian also quotes from an interview carried on by Taylor of an Anglo almost one century later in 1930. When questioned if skin color made equality possible between the Mexican and the White Anglo, whether educated or not, he quotes a Nueces County professional man:

Not as a rule, you can't give them social equality. Any other dark-skinned, off-color race is not equal to us. I may be wrong ...but I feel, and the general public here, feels the way. They are not so good as Americans.<sup>24</sup>

Montejano refers to the culture of segregation in the period between 1920-1940:

In the Winter Garden, observed an approving official, the Mexicans were considered almost as trashy as the Negroes and the white boys are quick to knock their block off they —the Mexicans— get obstreperous. The white child looks on the Mexicans as on the Negro before the war, to be cuffed about and as an inferior people.<sup>25</sup>

He than adds that:

There was no constitutionally sanctioned 'separated but equal' provision for Mexicans as there was for blacks. According to the prevailing jurisprudence, Mexicans were 'Caucasian'. But in political and sociological terms, blacks and Mexicans were basically seen as different aspects of the same race problem.<sup>26</sup>

In *500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*, the so-called “race problem” was

23 David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1989, p. 26.

24 David Montejano, *Ibid.*, p. 221.

25 David Montejano, *Ibid.*, p. 231.

26 David Montejano, *Ibid.*, p. 262.

presented in very different light. Elizabeth Martínez states:

Sometimes the native people enabled the invaders to survive life in the harsh Southwest; more often they fiercely. They and the *mestizos*, along with the mulattos, far outnumbered whites everywhere.<sup>27</sup>

We do not want to suggest that conflicts and contradictions did not exist among African-American and Mexican-American populations, but that they did share from each other's cultural capital. In the process of recognizing their similarities, solidarity came about, giving way to the uninterrupted, at times hidden, other times open class and race struggle from the oppressor and the oppressed.<sup>28</sup>

The word resistance started to have a sweet ring to Mexican-Americans during the social upheaval of the 1960s. Although protest movements existed in cultural and political practices of this community was in this decade that the term became part of its vocabulary.

Since then (referring to the early years of the Mexican-American communities), Raza resistance has never died. ...In the early 1960's we became part of a great wave of mass movements that swept the world, from Los Angeles to Paris to Tokyo. Here in the US great numbers of African Americans first took to the streets against the same enemies as ours. ...and Chicanos began a militant, new liberation movement, ...As in other movements, ours reached a high tide of self-affirmation: "I'm proud to be Chicano!" Con estos gritos, our minds were liberated from years of brain-washing, not knowing our own history and culture, hating ourselves and our language, wanting to be white.<sup>29</sup>

It is in this context of militancy that Chicano art was born. Although a great number of Chicano artists flourished during this period, this article focuses on works produced in the 1960s and 1970s by Bay Area artists Malaquías Montoya and Rupert García and from Los Angeles based artist Judy Baca. The pieces surveyed in this paper were selected for their depiction the icons and symbols drawn from the African-American experience.

Malaquías Montoya was one of the founding members of MALAF —Mexican American Liberation Art Front. Formed in the late 1960s, this collective considered themselves political artists. Some of the first political murals in the Bay Area date from 1968-1969, and Montoya was the most prolific muralist in this region.<sup>30</sup> The two murals (1979 and 1981), discussed in this work were executed in the Oakland area (see plates 7 and 8). Both murals address the importance of education and depict Mexicanos, Chicanos and African Americans as part of an inclusive community. Montoya's portraits are filled with pride, hope and *ganans*. To better understand this artist's work it is important to know his position in regards to his art:

I feel that my political beliefs and be an art of protest. The struggle of all people must become part of our being as artists, and we must

27 500 Años del Pueblo Chicano/500 Years of History in Pictures, Elizabeth Martínez, ed. Southwest Organizing Project (swop), Albuquerque, New Mexico, expanded ed. 1991, p. ii.

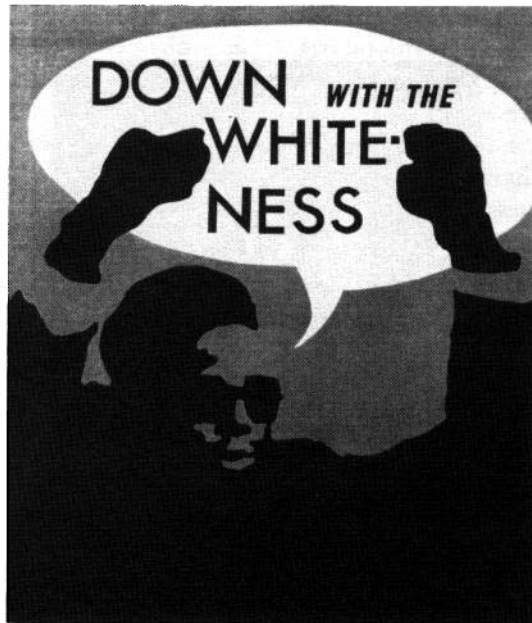
28 Fredric Jameson, op. cit., p. 20. Jameson does not include race and the experience that the struggle to overcome racism brings to this proposition. But together with social class, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity, race is a fundamental variable which has to be part of this statement, in order to understand the reasons why struggles some times are open and sometimes are hidden.

29 500 Años del Pueblo Chicano, p. iii.

30 Timothy W. Drescher, San Francisco Murals, Community Creates its Muse, 1914-1990, Pogo Press, 1991, p. 52.



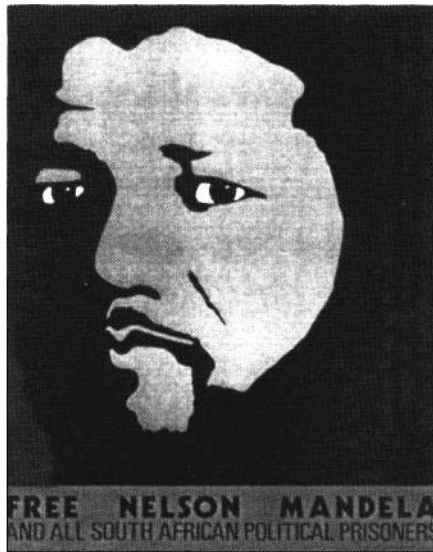
9. Rupert García, *No More o' This Shit* (color silkscreen on white wove paper, 1969).



10. Rupert García, *Down with the Whiteness* (color silkscreen on white wove paper, 1969).



11. Rupert García, *Libertad para los Prisioneros Políticos* (color silkscreen on white wove paper, 1971)



12. Rupert García, *Free Nelson Mandela and All South African Political Prisoners* (color offset lithograph on white wove paper, 1981).



express it in our work. I agree with Pedro Rodríguez, director of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center In San Antonio, Texas, That, “Fundamentally, artistic expression, or culture in general, reaches its highest level of creation when it reflects the most serious issues of a people, when it succeeds in expressing the deepest sentiments of a people, when it returns to the people their ideas and feelings translated in a clearer and creative way.” Through our images we are the creators of culture, and our images must reflect our times. Our images must speak of injustices and expose the creators of those injustices.<sup>31</sup>

Montoya has found in the words of Frederick Douglass a shared cultural capital. He describes Douglass as a Black fighter, a runaway slave from the 1840s, who ran North and established a newspaper in the culture of the underground railroad. Montoya pointed out that Douglas was an advocate for women’s right as well. When asked why he had chosen to use a poem by Douglass in several of his murals, Montoya replied that

it applies to our communities, because as long as we put up with injustices from the dominant culture, as long as we give them that right, Douglass words will have to be remembered.<sup>32</sup>

The poem was used by Montoya for the first time in a mural assisted by students in Oakland executed for the Black Child Care Center in 1981. This same poem was used later in several of his serigraphs, as well as a mural in Tijuana, Mexico, in 1987 which portrays the history of Tijuana.<sup>33</sup>

The Frederick Douglas poem reads:

The limit of tyrants  
are prescribed  
by the endurance  
of those  
whom they oppressed

Another artist who has used icons and symbols from the African-American experience widely in his work is Rupert García. In most of his prints and posters he addresses social issues. “García’s posters read like a history of the political events and causes that have marched through our lives from the sixties through the eighties.”<sup>34</sup> In *No More O’This Shit, and Down with the Whiteness*, both from 1969, García makes a clear statement against racism (see plates 9 and 10). In *No More O’This Shit*, he depicts an African-American in a stereotypical racialized occupation, that of a cook, and situates him in a format of well known cereal brand ad. Lippard interprets this piece as a rejection of whiteness.<sup>35</sup> I would argue that more than that, this piece criticizes the commercial use of racism. Thus, in an ironic twist the artist uses the images produced by the system that creates these racist image to give another meaning to them.

*Down with the whiteness* depicts an African-American with a raised fist used

31 In CARA, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, An Interpretive Exhibition of the Chicano Art Movement, 1965-1985*, Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, Index of Artists, p. 351, 1991.

32 Personal communication with the artist, April, 1993.

33 Amelia Malagamba Ansótegui and Gilberto Cárdenas, “Imágenes de la frontera”, in *Imágenes de la Frontera: Monotipia/Monoprint Images of the Border*, Festival Internacional de la Raza 1992, Tijuana, B. C., and Nuevo Laredo, Tamps., México, 1992.

34 Lucy R. Lippard, “Rupert García”, in *Rupert García, Prints and Posters/Grabados y Afiches, 1967-1990*, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo and Fundación Cultural Tele-visa, A. C., Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1991, p. 34.

35 Lippard, op. cit., p. 31.

often in the 1960s as a symbolic gesture of Black Power. In *¡Libertad Para los Prisioneros Políticos!* (1971), and *Free Nelson Mandela and All South African Political prisoners* (1981), García makes use of the most recognized militant leaders of the struggle against racism (see plates 11,12).

In *¡Libertad Para los Prisioneros Políticos!*, the entire space is covered with the face of Angela Davis, who at the time was in prison because of her association with Black Panthers. The twist that García gives to his call to freedom references the participation of women in the Civil Rights Movement and struggle of other African-American movements. He does this by taking advantage of the Spanish language, which contrary to the English language is gender specific. When referring to the *prisioneros* (male prisoners) and *políticas* (female for political) he is being inclusive of the female participation in the call to freedom. By doing this and utilizing the Spanish language, he includes the powerful image of an African-American militant, the Chicano presence, and the Latin American presence. This is a reminder of a common statement of freedom made by oppressed peoples of the Americas, and it in turn recognizes the powerful role of women in its political message. In *Free Nelson Mandela* García takes the plight of struggle of minorities in the United States, and universalizes it. He uses the image to go beyond the borders of the United States to a country in Africa which was living under a system of apartheid at that time.

In 1967 in Los Angeles, California, Judy Baca, a Chicana muralist, started an on-going mural project called *The Great Wall* (1967-1984). To date, the mural measures 2,500 feet long by 13 feet high. “Baca chose to portray the little-known ethnic history of Los Angeles and sought out historians to establish the themes of an era.” Her crews, which consisted mostly of teenagers “represented the

13. Judy Baca, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles. Forebearers of Civil Rights* (panel, mural, San Fernando Valley, Ca., 1967-1984).



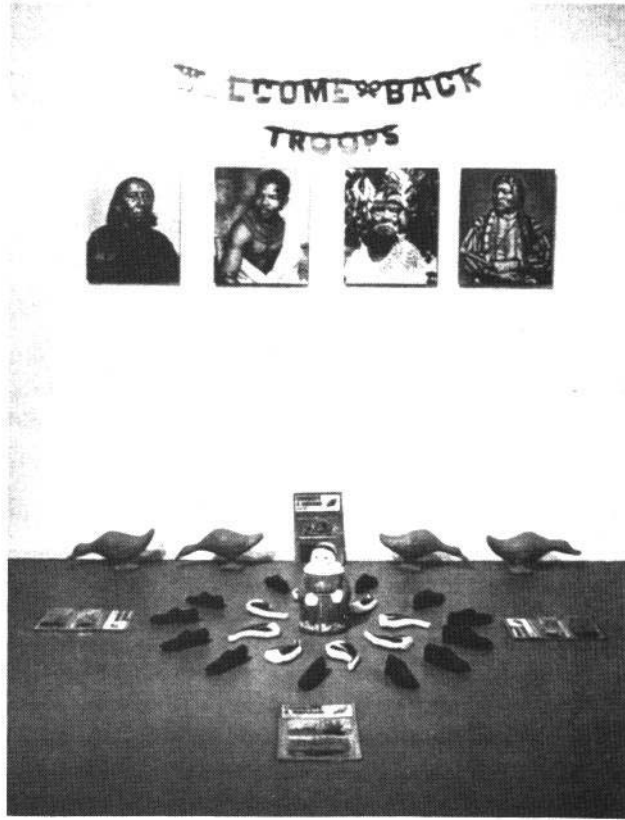
13. Judy Baca, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles. Forebearers of Civil Rights* (panel, mural, San Fernando Valley, Ca., 1967-1984).



14. David Avalos, Louis Hock, Elizabeth Sisco, *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation* (silkscreen, 1988).



15. Roberto (Tito) Delgado, *A Blues Musician and Singer*  
(mural, Inner City Cultural Center, Los Angeles, nd).



16. James Luna, *What Goes Around, Comes Around* (installation: Photography with mixed media, 1991).

LA population.”<sup>36</sup> She dedicated one of the panels to *Forbearers of dril Rights* (see plate 13). In it, she depicts Paul Robeson in the front of a bus, and sitting in the back, is Rosa Parks. One of the bus panel reads:

“My father was a slave, my people died to build this country, I am going to stay here, and have a part of it.” As the mural suggests, the forbearers of the civil rights movement are declaring this, but the artist who is behind the brush by the act of painting it, is also articulating it as well.

In recent years, works such as the collaboration of Elizabeth Sisco, Luis Hock and David Avalos in *Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation* of 1988 (see plate 14), or Tito Delgado's mural in East Los Angeles *Musician and singer in the inner City* (nd, see plate 15), make use of the imagery and expressive culture of the African-American. When Sisco, Hock and Avalos decided to make a relationship between the working hands of the undocumented immigrant in California with the concept of the plantation, the foremost image of African-American slavery, they are directly addressing both the African-American experience and present day

36 Melba Levick and Stanley Youns, *Murals of Los Angeles, The Big Picture*, A New York Graphic Society Book, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 1988, pp. 86-87.

practices of exploitation suffered by Mexican immigrants in the United States. This image clearly presents the triangulation of Mexican, African-Mexican -Chicano-African-American aspect of Chicano cultural capital. These are examples that testify to a continuous and permanent presence of the African-American symbols and icons in the narrative produced by the Chicano artist.

Other artists like the Native American artist, James Luna, brings the image of Nelson Mandela to his work in *What Goes Around Comes Around*, from 1991 (see plate 16). He shares his Native American cultural capital with Mexican, Chicanos, African- American in this particular piece. He further uses this work to criticize the Gulf War, questioning the ideology of Manifest Destiny and the peoples who suffer because of its implementation. In his work he suggests that this policy results in aggression against peoples of other countries and reinforces the policies condoning blunt and silent systems of apartheid.

This narrative by Chicano artists speak of the injustices produced by the system as well as the struggle of African-American and other minorities in the United States. The use of African-American icons and symbols allow the Chicano artists to unveil the sometimes hidden and some times *in your face* narrative of racism in the United States.

Chicano artists carry in their cultural capital the traditions from their ancestors, as well as the traditions and cultural capital from the different migratory waves of *Mexicanos*. This transference also includes those cultural elements still present from the African-Mexican experience. This Chicano cultural capital also includes their own experiences, the knowledge of social inequalities, racism, lack of opportunities, as well as the will to fight for dignity. An undercurrent theme which includes the struggles of African-Americans in the United States are also part of this cultural capital. This is apparent although briefly seen in this essay.

Without this cumulative cultural capital which includes the historical experiences of the various groups such as the African-Mexican, the Afro-Cuban, the Mexican migrant and the Mexican-American community in the United States, the use of symbols and icons of African-Americans would not be depicted by the Chicano artist. It would not make any sense. But it does, it touches the hearts of both Chicanos and African-Americans. In doing so, this narrative has great meaning for both minorities.