

# Kalfou

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kal 'fü—a Haitian Kreyòl word meaning “crossroads”

*“To get anywhere in life you have to follow a road . . .  
To make anything happen, you have to walk through  
the crossroads.”*

—MORIS MORISET

*“This means that one must cultivate the art of recognizing  
significant communications, knowing what is truth and  
what is falsehood, or else the lessons of the crossroads—  
the point where doors open or close, where persons have to  
make decisions that may forever affect their lives—  
will be lost.”*

—ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON

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## ART AND SOCIAL ACTION

### *Cultura Panamericana*

*Toward a Hemispheric Imaginary*

Anthony Macías

I am writing this analytical appreciation of *cultura panamericana*, or pan-American culture, to propose a wider recognition of how its historical linkages and contemporary manifestations confront colonialism, honor indigenous roots, and reflect multiple, mixed-race identities. Although often mediated by transnational pop-culture industries, expressive cultural forms such as art and music articulate resonant themes that connect US Latinos and Latinas to Latin Americans, pointing the way toward a hemispheric imaginary. In US murals, for example, whether in the Chicago neighborhood of Pilsen or the Los Angeles neighborhood of Highland Park, pan-American expressive culture offers alternative representations by embracing indigeneity, and it creates a sense of place by tropicalizing urban spaces.

In 1891, José Martí published what Donald Pease calls an “anti-imperialist manifesto”—“Nuestra América”—advancing, as B. V. Olguín says, a “Pan-Americanist paradigm” in his “polemical” essay. As Martí wrote, “The pressing need of Our America is to show itself as it is, one in spirit and intent.”<sup>1</sup> In 1974, the San Francisco collective Las Mujeres Muralistas painted a mural called *Lati-noamérica* in the Mission District. As Cary Cordova argues, to “prevent” their own “dehumanization,” these Latina activist artists drew parallels between “the peasant and Indian classes in Latin America and the inner city poor in America,” visualizing *maguay* (agave) and *maíz* (corn), as well as imagery from Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela, Guatemala, and Mexico. Their mural has also been called *Pan-america*, which “suggests . . . a hemispheric unity, encompassing North and South America,” as does their 1991 mural *500 Años de Resistencia India/500 Years of Native Survival, 1492–1992*.<sup>2</sup>

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Yet to think hemispherically, Americanized *pochos* like me must shift our paradigm, as in the 1943 drawing *América Invertida*: Joaquín Torres-García, an artist from Uruguay, expressed “a uniquely Latin American perspective and aesthetic” when he “irreverently flipped a map of South America on its head.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the political “packaging” of Latin America for “North American consumption,” we can still imagine pan-Latino “hemispheric unity.”<sup>4</sup> Overcoming linguistic and cultural differences, Latinos and Latinas have found much inspiration in Latin America. Indeed, Latinx art “is often influenced by Latin American history and iconography.” As the Los Angeles Chicana painter Judith Hernández notes, US Latino-Latina art is “fueled by the cultural spirit of Latin America.”<sup>5</sup> I am also inspired by Paquito D’Rivera’s 2010 live album *Panamericana Suite*, on which he synthesizes Afro-Cuban spirituality with opera, classical music, European waltzes, and Venezuelan *joropo*.<sup>6</sup> In 2010, the Puerto Rican alternative hip-hop duo Calle 13 recorded “Latinoamérica,” a Grammy-winning Record of the Year song that promotes political unity; praises historical knowledge; critiques the US government; champions the arts, culture, and strength of Latin Americans; and declares that natural resources cannot be bought.<sup>7</sup>

As Kirsten Silva Gruesz contends, by considering “the United States as it belongs to the Americas,” as well as hemispheric “patterns of migration, diaspora, and exile,” we can visualize a trans-American cultural history.<sup>8</sup> Regarding *nuestra América*, I argue, as Vicki Ruiz does, that “our America is American history.”<sup>9</sup> This history incorporates Chicana singers whose music transcends borders, such as Lydia Mendoza, Adelina García, Selena Quintanilla, and Lila Downs; it links Mexican borderland ballads to Colombian *corridos prohibidos*.<sup>10</sup> The terms *Latina*, *Latino*, or *Latinx* evoke a hemispheric imaginary of cross-cultural communication, interconnection, and reconnection, yet we should not reify the Eurocentric, Hispanic aspects of Latin America. Rather, we must respectfully acknowledge the pre-Columbian indigenous cosmologies, astronomies, technologies, mathematics, engineering, and *flor y canto* poetics of *las Américas*. We must not forget California Indians like Toyupurina and Estanislao, who fought for their independence, or present-day southwestern US tribes who still fight for their water, land, treaty, and religious rights.

We ought to also remember the Black African presence in Spanish colonial *castas*, which has been whitewashed out of modern *mestizaje*, from Afro-Argentines to the Bahia region of Brazil; from Panama to the Garifuna of Honduras, Belize, and Guatemala; from the people of the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba to Veracruz, where the rebel slave Gaspar Yanga led a Mexican maroon (*cimarrón*) colony.<sup>11</sup> This Black Atlantic produced Machito and His Afro-Cubans, as well as the Mexico City mambos of *Afro-Cubanos* Pérez Prado and Beny Moré.<sup>12</sup> The *son jarocho*, which Micaela Díaz-Sánchez and Alejandro Hernández call “Afro-Mexican resistance music,” has traveled, along with its corresponding *fandango* dance, from Veracruz to Los Angeles to Seattle,

with bands like Quetzal, among others, helping to keep this practice alive.<sup>13</sup> In addition, Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas traces the African roots of not only *son jarocho* but also *mariachi*, while Theresa Delgadillo charts the musical route taken by the song “Angelitos Negros” from Venezuela to Mexico.<sup>14</sup>

The history of ideas in Latin American cultural studies includes José Vasconcelos theorizing *mestizaje*; Ángel Rama elaborating Fernando Ortiz’s transculturation to mean a complex, two-way process of negotiation; Antonio Cornejo-Polar analyzing heterogeneity; Jesús Martín-Barbero studying mass-media mediations of cultural identities; and Néstor García Canclini interpreting cultural hybridity as arising from globalization and modernization.<sup>15</sup> Latin American popular culture enables increased communication, “dismantl[es] old forms of marginalization and domination, and mak[es] new forms of democratization and . . . multiplicity imaginable.”<sup>16</sup> Juan Flores has argued that out of “colonial relations of hemispheric inequality” and “a history of conquest and subordination” emerged a “Latino imaginary” with “an alternative ethos” and “a deep sense of autonomy.” As Flores concludes, “the search for Latino identity” across “a diasporic community” articulates “a pan-ethnic and transnational imaginary.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike terms such as *folk*, *mass*, or *pop* culture, *expressive* culture encompasses a broader range of artistic forms. Moreover, if persistence is the precondition for resistance, then Latin American and Latinx expressive cultures springing forth from the bottom up, such as *la nueva canción*, Chicano low riders, and Mexico City punk rock, are potentially political.<sup>18</sup>

In the United States, from the late 1960s social movements burst a more militantly politicized, indigenous-identified Chicana-Chicano expressive culture as communal self-determination, in dialogue with Boricuas. For instance, the unofficial flag of Chicano-Chicana America features three faces in one, representing *mestizaje*; this shows one self-definition of *la raza*. As Frances Aparicio explains, the Puerto Rican and Chicano Movements used political art as a “didactic [tool] for creating consciousness and . . . empowerment” and galvanizing mass mobilization.<sup>19</sup> The bilingual cultural renaissance in art, music, theater, and literature offered “alternative narratives” and “images to counteract negative, exoticized, stereotyped” portrayals in the “dominant media” and in the “popular imagination” of “both Latino and non-Latino audiences.”<sup>20</sup> Latinx expressive culture stands for physically “appropriating public spaces” in neighborhoods, metaphorically “claiming space” in the national American imaginary, and staking a claim for the “presence of Latino cultures” in the larger narrative of US history.<sup>21</sup> Latinx expressive culture is about a pan-ethnic *Latinidad* negotiating a sense of belonging while resisting full integration, mainstreaming, and institutionalization; about agency and “oppositonality,” not co-optation and commodification; about choosing “difference” over “absorption.”<sup>22</sup> Aparicio concludes: “It is imperative that we increase the public knowledge about Latino expressive cultures in a manner that gives voice to Latinos’ own collective self-

conceptualizations, rather than representations that objectify their lives and silence their voices.”<sup>23</sup>

Like Chela Sandoval’s notion of differential consciousness and Emma Pérez’s “decolonial imaginary,” creative cultural expressions can be “a theoretical tool for uncovering the hidden voices of Chicanas” and recovering previously obscured Chicana agency.<sup>24</sup> By heeding Central American studies critiques of Mexican state-based *mestizaje*, American Indian critiques of Aztlán-based nationalism, and Chicana feminist critiques of patriarchy-based *Chicanismo*, expressive cultures can provide diverse platforms from which to raise our consciousness. For instance, in *Libertad*, a 1976 etching by Ester Hernández, a dark-haired Chicana sculptor on scaffolding wields a chisel and hammers away at the Statue of Liberty. Beginning with a recarved foundation that is now inscribed “Aztlán,” the sculptor gives Lady Liberty a decolonial makeover that literally transforms the classical European robed figure into an intricately detailed indigenous Mayan woman warrior.<sup>25</sup> Hernández thus reorients our national symbol from the East Coast to the Southwest and down to Central America.

Created in response to America’s bicentennial, the artwork reveals “a deep and profound presence of indigenous peoples” while highlighting, as Maylei Blackwell claims, “the power of women to reimagine” our relationship to the United States as a “settler nation.”<sup>26</sup> *Libertad*, in Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano’s estimation, “relies on the familiarity of the cultural icon to subvert it . . . demanding recognition” and rejecting “the European façade as the essence of ‘America.’”<sup>27</sup> According to Laura Pérez, this piece “insists upon the fulfillment of the United States’ democratic ideals”: by picturing “spaces of potential female empowerment,” it embodies “freedom for both Chicanos and Chicanas.”<sup>28</sup>

US Latinos and Latinas approach American culture from a new perspective with deep historical antecedents and contiguous, contemporary connections. Drawing on a complicated heritage, they reimagine Americana by tilting US history onto a North/South axis. Theirs is a countercultural political history that refutes the East-West Manifest Destiny of American exceptionalism, with its teleological time and settler-colonial logic. In a more humorous take on this vexed relationship, Francisco Delgado’s 1998 painting, also called *Libertad*, depicts “a Mexican *luchador* wrestling . . . into submission” the Statue of Liberty, who drops her Border Patrol book—and is about to lose a *chancla* (sandal). As Carlos Francisco Jackson contends, by taking explicitly political stances like “attacking America’s contradictory immigration policy,” as in this example, Chicana and Chicano art becomes “ProtestArte.”<sup>29</sup>

In a pan-American imaginary, hemispheric artistic expressions humanize people who have been dehumanized, and they also make statements about being free. In this manner, Latinx and Latin American expressive cultures represent freedom of expression, from the *rumba* to the *bolero*; from the Mexican *grito* to Pérez Prado’s signature grunt; from the tango and the samba to *bomba y plena*;

and from Chelo Silva to Celia Cruz. This inviting, liberatory release can be heard in Latin boogaloo’s Black-and-Brown party shouts and in Alice Bag’s *ranchera*-inspired punk rock primal screams.<sup>30</sup> As street murals from Buenos Aires to the Bronx illustrate, expressive culture creates not only the physical places in which Latinos and Latinas can recognize their own power but also the liminal spaces in which everyone can find their own self-worth and inner strength. Or, as George Lipsitz writes, “a place where everybody is somebody.”<sup>31</sup>

Accordingly, for my final example of US Latinx expressive culture inspired by a pan-American spirit, consider the Los Angeles band Chicano Batman, whose members wear “retro ruffled-tuxedo shirts” to honor “their favorite Latin American soul groups of the 1970s.” Their eclectic sound mixes soul music, Brazilian *Tropicália*, Colombian *cumbia*, Afro-beat, psychedelia, and garage rock. Their 2017 album *Freedom Is Free* is “about maintaining inner strength” and “radiating love.” A Spanish-language song, “La Jura,” criticizes “the institutionalization of police brutality,” while the title track reinforces the belief that “freedom is a birthright.”<sup>32</sup> This message is popular throughout *Latinoamérica*, as suggested by YouTube fan comments from Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Chile.<sup>33</sup> According to guitarist, keyboardist, lead singer, and main lyricist Bardo Martinez, “Minds can’t be changed by force or colonized by fear. We all have our own freedom inside of us.”<sup>34</sup>

The expressive culture conjured by musicians, artists, and poets ensures that freedom of expression and freedom of speech will thrive; that subordinated, disadvantaged people can speak truth and talk back. Ultimately, expressive culture can help undo the legacy of colonialism and subvert its logic. Latino and Latina cultural production, in all of its forms, can inspire each of us to create a more just, safe, and sustainable hemisphere for future generations. Through creative expression and political struggle, we can put our dreams into action, but as Robin Kelley reminds us in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, we need to “have the space to imagine, and a vision of what it means fully to realize our humanity.”<sup>35</sup> Fortunately, artists and scholars have presented a vision for us to reflect on the ties that bind us together, helping us fathom what connects us, *sin fronteras*, without borders. Let us embrace that which we share. In an ever-shrinking world of dwindling resources, we cannot allow dehumanizing structural forces, justified by racialized ideology, to degrade and divide us. To resist, with expressive culture as both window and mirror, we must recognize our common humanity.

## NOTES

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2. Cary Cordova, *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 138–140, 135.
3. Carribbean Fragoza, "What Is Latin American Art? It's Complicated," *LA Weekly*, September 15–21, 2017, 12.
4. Julianne Burton, "Don (Juanito) Duck and the Imperial-Patriarchal Unconscious: Disney Studios, the Good Neighbor Policy, and the Packaging of Latin America," in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Routledge, 1992), 38, 35.
5. Carolina A. Miranda, "What Finally Broke the 'No Chicanos' Rule at the Reemerge Museum of Latin American Art," *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-chicano-artists-finally-show-at-molaa-20151006-column.html>, quoting Judith Hernández. In 1974, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) became the first major art museum to exhibit Chicano artists when it presented work by the collective Los Four. In 2011, LACMA hosted the exhibition "ASCO: Elite of the Obscure, A Retrospective, 1972–1987," and in 2017, LACMA displayed a solo retrospective exhibition of East Los Angeles Chicano artist Carlos Almaraz's vibrant, tragic paintings. In 2017–2018, the Getty Museum, in collaboration with Pilar Tompkins Rivas, the director of the Vincent Price Museum, launched "Pacific Standard Time: Latin American and Latino Art in LA," "a far-reaching and ambitious exploration of Latin American and Latino art in dialogue with Los Angeles." See <http://www.pacificstandardtime.org/lala/index.html>.
6. Raul da Gama, "Paquito D'Rivera—Panamericana Suite (MCG Jazz-2010)," *Latin Jazz Network*, May 28, 2011, <https://latinjazznet.com/reviews/cds/paquito-d-rivera-panamericana-suite/>.
7. Calle 13, *Entren Los Que Quieran* (Sony Music Latin, 2010). See also Cruz Medina, *Reclaiming Poch@ Pop: Examining the Rhetoric of Cultural Deficiency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
8. Kirsten Silva Gruesz, "The Occluded History of Transamerican Literature," in *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*, ed. Juan Poblete (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 121–137, as quoted in Theresa Delgado, "Singing 'Angelitos Negros': African Diaspora Meets Mestizaje in the Americas," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2006): 424–425.
9. Vicki L. Ruiz, "Nuestra América: Latino History as United States History," *Journal of American History* 93, no. 3 (2006): 672.
10. Patricia Vergara, "'It Arrived by Train!' From Carrilera to Corridos Prohibidos: Mexicanness, Mass Media, and Musical Identities in Colombia," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 14, 2014.
11. In the 1760s, an elaborate racial classification system developed, known as the *Régimen de Castas*, or Society of Castes, which hierarchically ranked all children of New World interracial unions by putative degrees of blood mixture. Status was ascribed on the basis of skin color and phenotype, with Spaniards of European origin at the top of the social order; *castas*, or people of mixed ancestry, in between; and dark-skinned Indians and Africans at the bottom.
12. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, reissue ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
13. Micaela Díaz-Sánchez and Alexandro D. Hernández, "The *Son Jarocho* as Afro-Mexican Resistance Music," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 187–209; Steven Loza, "From Veracruz to Los Angeles: The Reinterpretation of the 'Son Jarocho,'" *Latin American Music Review* 13, no. 2 (1992): 179–194.
14. Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, *African Mexicans and the Discourse on Modern Nation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 42–45, as quoted in Pancho McFarland, "Chicano Rap Roots: Black-Brown Cultural Exchange and the Making of a Genre," *Callaloo* 29, no. 3 (2006), 942; Delgado, "Singing 'Angelitos Negros.'"
15. José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race/La Raza Cósmica* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Ángel Rama, *Writing across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Antonio Cornejo-Polar, "Mestizaje, Transculturación, Heterogeneidad," *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 20, no. 40 (1994): 368–371; Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture, and Hegemony: From Media to Mediations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1993); Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
16. Lisa Shaw and Stephanie Dennison, *Pop Culture Latin America! Media, Arts, and Lifestyle* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 1–5; William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1991), 1, as quoted in *ibid.*, 2.
17. Juan Flores, "The Latino Imaginary: Meanings of Community and Identity," in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Ana Del Sarto, Alicia Ríos, and Abril Trigo (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 614, 615, 616, 618.
18. La Nueva Canción (The new song) is a musical movement that emerged in Argentina and Chile in the late 1950s and early 1960s, then spread throughout Latin America by the early 1970s. This protest music blended indigenous musical traditions with other styles to transcend class distinctions, and its poetic lyrics contested social injustices and political dictatorships.
19. Frances Aparicio, "U.S. Latino Expressive Cultures," in *The Columbia History of Latinos in the United States since 1960*, ed. David Gutiérrez (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 366.
20. *Ibid.*, 357, 360, 362.
21. *Ibid.*, 365, 366, 357.
22. *Ibid.*, 383, 379, 378, 368–369, 367.
23. *Ibid.*, 388.
24. Chela Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," *Gender* 10 (Spring 1991): 1–24; Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), xvi.
25. "Ester Hernández: Libertad, 1975, 15" x 12," *Imagine: International Chicano Poetry Journal* 1–2 (Summer–Winter 1986): 115.
26. Maylei Blackwell, "Women Who Make Their Own Worlds: The Life and Work of Ester Hernández," in *Chicanas Movidas: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Era*, ed. Dionne Espinoza, María Eugenia Cotera, and Maylei Blackwell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 144, 145.
27. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "Turning It Around," *Crossroads: Contemporary Political Analysis and Left Dialogue* 31 (May 1993): 15.
28. Laura Pérez, "El Desorden, Nationalism, and Chicana/o Aesthetics," in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, ed. Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Minoq Moallem (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 29.
29. Carlos Francisco Delgado, *Chicana and Chicano Art: ProtestArte* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 104.
30. See Juan Flores, "'Cha-Cha with a Backbeat': Songs and Stories of Latin Boogaloo," in *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 78–112; Michelle Habell-Pallán, "'Death to Racism and Punk Revisionism': Alice Bag's Vexing Voice and the Unspeakable Influence of *Canción Ranchera* on Hollywood Punk," in *Pop When the World Falls Apart: Music in the Shadow of Doubt*, ed. Eric Weisbard (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 247–270.
31. George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 238–239.

32. Chris Kissei, "Esta Tierra Es Para Chicano Batman: They'll Always Be L.A.'s Unofficial House Band, but with Their New Album, the Soulful Quartet Are Ready to Conquer America," *LA Weekly*, March 3–9, 2017, 9; Erik Himmelsbach-Weinstein, "Chicano Batman's Musical Stew: Latin, Psychedelia and Garage Rock Collide to Make a Unique but Underappreciated Sound," *Journal of Alta California* 5 (Winter 2019): 61.

33. Chicano Batman, "Chicano Batman—Freedom Is Free (Official Video)," YouTube video, September 19, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkEmnrUzFFE>.

34. Kissei, "Esta Tierra Es Para Chicano Batman," 11.

35. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 198.