“CONTINUOUS RUPTURE:” IDENTITY AND POSTCOLONIALISM IN DR. LAKRA’S TATTOOED PIN-UPS

by

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(Under the Direction of Isabelle Loring Wallace)

ABSTRACT

Commonly associated with the art of tattooing, Dr. Lakra (Jerónimo López Ramírez) has also worked in the “fine” arts for over twenty years. Drawing on various levels of pornography, popular-culture, ethnography, and found objects from numerous countries around the world along with tattoo culture, Lakra uses sexualized, subversive, and grotesque bodies to explore base human instincts, fusing these elements together in order to express the complexities of identity, nationalism, and postcolonial globalization. Moreover, Lakra uses this visual material to represent rupture and hybridity – ideas inherent not only to contemporary Mexican subjectivity, but to all human subjects in cosmopolitan societies that maintain imperialistic structures similar to historically colonized nations. Isolating works on paper that make use of found images of vintage female pin-ups, my thesis will address imagery and themes operative within Lakra’s entire oeuvre, while also considering their relationship to the issue of identity in the face of globalization.

INDEX WORDS: Dr. Lakra, Jerónimo López Ramírez, Contemporary Art, Tattoos, Pin-up, Mexico, Postcolonialism, Nationalism, Globalization

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BA, The College of Wooster, 1999

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2012

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DEDICATION

To: Dee Dee Delirious

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Isabelle Loring Wallace for her inspirational mentoring over my entire Master's program to see contemporary art in new and thought provoking ways, her guidance in pushing me further – emboldening me to do so more skillfully – than ever before, and her patient help in completing this thesis project. I would also like to thank Nicolas Morrissey and Nell Andrew for their encouragement and graceful charisma, motivating me to pursue unorthodox paths of scholarship. Thanks are due to Alisa Luxenberg and Richard Mann, as well, for their kind support in my pursuit of graduate studies. In the end, recognition needs to be paid in-full to my gorgeous husband for championing each day right along with me (even from thousands of miles away), and, of course, my parents for their tireless advocacy and faith in my abilities.

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INTRODUCTION

> "Wisdom lies neither in fixity nor in change, but in the dialectic between the two."[1] – Octavio Paz
>
> "… the border is not an abyss that will have to save us from threatening otherness, but a place where the so-called otherness yields, becomes us, and therefore becomes comprehensible."[2] – Guillermo Gómez-Peña
>
> "Society is always trying to bury the part of the human condition that is explored in porn and tattoo." – Dr. Lakra on *Twitter.com* (2009)

Dr. Lakra crosses the line. As a contemporary Mexican artist, Dr. Lakra (Jerónimo López Ramírez, b. 1972) has spent the past twenty years exploring forbidden zones of culture. Put up a border and Lakra's work will find a way to cross it – more often than not in a shocking way that makes the viewer cognizant of borderlines of which they were previously unaware. To name a few, Lakra crosses the line between sacred and profane: the artwork tattooed on Lakra's chest is a head of Christ surrounded by demons who dance around him and urinate on his face.[3] Likewise, he crosses the line between nations and ethnicities: in works made since 2000, Lakra makes use of New Zealand Māori facial tattoos, which are administered only to fierce warriors and tribal leaders who, over the course of many years, have endured highly ritualized and painful rites of passage. In their native context, these tattoos are indications of family lineage

[1] "Octavio Paz," *Poemhunter.com*, in *London Times* (June 8, 1989), accessed June 1, 2012, http://www.poemhunter.com/octavio-paz/quotations/page-3/.
[2] Samira Kawash, "Interactivity and Vulnerability," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 21, no. 1 (1999): 47. Kawash is quoting Gómez-Peña.
[3] Greg Cook, "Cheap Thrills: The inky delights of Dr. Lakra," *The Phoenix* (Boston, MA), Apr. 21, 2010, accessed December 30, 2011, http://the phoenix.com/Boston/arts/100871-cheap-thrills/. Dr. Lakra and Don Ed Hardy collaborated on this tattoo. So, Lakra is only partially responsible for its construction.

and tribal rank.[4] For a non-Māori to wear these tattoos without having earned them would be the ultimate insult.[5] Thus, Lakra's works are deliberately provocative, as they effectively collapse distinctions *between* cultures, while also calling into question the reliability of such divisions in *any* context. Lakra is equally committed to crossing the line between opposed states of consciousness: Lakra's murals for museum walls since 2009 combine reality-based images with hallucinogenic images that could manifest only in disturbed fantasies. For example, one mural depicts a woman's face as she exhales a thick puff of smoke, her mouth agape in a manner suggestive of hard-core pornography; yet, this smoke fantastically forms an image of a perhaps disfigured and/or sweaty man's face whose hair melds and grows into what looks like liquid asphalt oozing from a sneaker. These faces are juxtaposed with a reclining, orifice-centric nude, whose hand parts her own ass-cheeks to release yet another massive puff of smoke and/or gas that then becomes a cartoony cloud (Fig. 1). Finally, the artist can be seen to the cross line between propriety and obscenity. In a work from 2005, Lakra paints over a nudist magazine from the 1950s, depicting a large emaciated lizard-type creature who ejaculates

[4] "Tattoo Designs," *nz-maori.com*, accessed May 13, 2012, http://nz-maori.com/maori-tattoo-designs.html. Also: Du Troit, Laura, "Maori Tattoo Designs – Think Before You Ink," *Hubpages.com* (2010), accessed May 13, 2012, http://lauradutoit.hubpages.com/hub/Maori-Tattoo-Designs-Think-Before-You-Ink. Women also have facial tattoos but usually only to show womanhood, lineage/name, and to augment the lips and mouth to enhance the beauty of facial features. Facial tattoos were also accompanied by ridges to enhance the designs. Lines were cut into the skin outlining the tattoos and the scarring formed the ridges.

[5] Hudson, Karen L., "Ta Moko Maori Tattoo: When Imitation is the Sincerest Form of Insult," *About.com*, accessed May 13, 2012, http://tattoo.about.com/cs/articles/a/maori_tamoko.htm. Essentially, copying a Māori design is the same as copying their name and individuality. As this article attests, Māori tattoo designs have become popular in contemporary culture as "tribal" in the general populations of Europe and America to be a sign of machismo (read: "bad-ass") but are actually crossing serious cultural lines of respect into a mockery of ancient and deeply spiritual beliefs of the Māori (a tribe with a long history of violent persecution, including being beheaded and collected by the British as ethnographic curious specimens, but above all else survived through steadfast and vicious resistance and a commitment to their own traditions). So too, as Lakra's work encourages, the Māori designs can be a respectful tribute to the identity of the person they ascribe – intending to depict historical figures, celebrities, etc. as "warriors" of their own time.

while sodomizing a woman with a sunny-disposition who is innocently frolicking on a sand dune (Fig. 2).

Figure 1: Dr. Lakra, mural from The Drawing Center (NYC), 2011 and
Figure 2: Dr. Lakra, *Untitled (June cover girl)*, 2005

Although limited and largely journalistic, responses to Dr. Lakra's artwork affirm that he disturbs his viewers by crossing the kinds of lines described above.[6] One curator,

[6] Before turning to a consideration of contributions made by Lakra's biography, it is useful to briefly address the limited existent literature on Lakra. Although Lakra has been increasingly visible within international art circles since 2004, only a modest amount of research has been dedicated to this emerging, yet essentially mid-career, artist. The inclusion of Lakra in the Tate Modern exhibit *Pin-up* in 2004 as well as the traveling exhibit *Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City* starting in 2006 (MCA Chicago, 2006, and Nasher Museum, 2009), broke ground for his artworks to be seen by a wider audience in the U.S. and Europe. The extent of published scholarly material amounts to less than a dozen sources – the amount of which has doubled since his shows at the ICA in Boston in 2010 and The Drawing Center in New York in 2011. Since the success of his solo show at Boston's ICA, sponsored by Converse (a company associated with "hipster" and punk youth culture), more attention has been paid to Lakra's unique contributions. Most of the articles which exist on Lakra are from journalistic or web-based media which are not academic based or peer-reviewed sources. They tend to be broadly conceived and filled with brief observations on the unorthodox and complex images included in Lakra's work. The few articles that have started to unravel and look closer at Lakra's work were from *The Boston Phoenix*, *NY Times*, *Chilango* (an entertainment magazine out of Mexico City), *SkinInk* (a tattoo magazine), and *Deutsch Bank Art Magazine*. While the essays from exhibition catalogues have been the most adventurous and useful, they still fall short for any in-depth treatment of Lakra's work. By far the most compelling and useful contributors to a more serious discussion of Dr. Lakra are the essays written by Abraham Cruzvillegas in the *Health and Efficiency* catalogue as well as the essay by Eduardo Abaroa in the catalogue from the ICA Boston show entitled "Dr. Lakra and the Ship of Monsters." Cruzvillegas and Abaroa dared to begin interpreting and provisionally link Lakra's treatments to power structures and erotics. However, these essays still do not make specific connections over the entire body of Lakra's work. In certain respects,

for example, categorized his work as "bizarre" and an exploration of "the barbaric … decadence, heresy," while an art world blogger called the work "more than just controversial," adding it can be "repugnant, vulgar, and way out there … you should only see this if you're 18+."[7] Reactions to Lakra's work are riddled with words that suggest his dissonant treatment of imagery – a clash that has everything to do with the crossing of borders that are attended everywhere by seemingly congenial rules, regulations, and assurances.

But Dr. Lakra is not all about shock. With further scrutiny, his engagement with visual culture can be read as an act of open defiance, an insistence that these borders, which have been constructed throughout human history, are due for a major overhaul. "I'm always trying to deal with the basic primal urge … Primitive instincts like sex, violence, graffiti are all innate in human beings and not tied to one culture."[8] Perhaps, by this statement, Lakra suggests that fundamental human impulses – having been repressed throughout history – should be explored in order to shore-up the universal truths of human existence, as if an antidote to comparatively superficial cultural differences. My contention in this project is that Dr. Lakra's images do more than merely mix elements pulled from pop-cultural or Mexican nationalistic sources. And, they do more than

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these texts make compelling comparisons between Lakra and other artists and filmmakers (José Guadalupe Posada, Marcel Duchamp, eclectic Italian film director Marco Ferreri, and many others), yet they fail to offer a deep analysis of those correlations. Consequently, the analyses of most authors remain limited to an oversimplified point-and-name strategy, which is often accompanied by an equally inhibiting mélange of scattered personal connections to Lakra's work. Building on this minimal groundwork, my own research thus aims to deepen the discussion of this artist through a sustained examination of one particular body of work: the tattooed pin-up.

[7] First quote: Edan Corkhill, "Current Shows: 'Goth: Reality of the Departed World,'" *Frieze Magazine.com* (February 7, 2008), accessed February 8, 2008, http://www.frieze.com/shows/review/goth_reality_of_the_departed_world/. Second quote: Frank Freeman, "A little about Dr. Lakra," *Frank Freeman at Wordpress.com* (August 31, 2011), accessed October 2, 2011, http://mrfrankfreeman.wordpress.com/2011/08/31/a-little-about-dr-lakra/.

[8] Greg Cook, "Cheap Thrills: The inky delights of Dr. Lakra," *The Phoenix* (Boston, MA), Apr. 21, 2010, accessed December 30, 2011, http://the phoenix.com/Boston/arts/100871-cheap-thrills/.

indicate cultures that exist in-between the lines or on the periphery, although Lakra surely depicts elements of various world cultures as well as subcultures in his work. In addition, Lakra's work can be read as attempt to portray what exists beyond (or, as he might put it, beneath) these conflict-ridden boundaries. As the body is the surface on which culture is written – literally in the case of tattoos – and simultaneously the foundation that subtends it, Lakra's unwavering emphasis on the body in his work seems especially significant.

Because they engage most directly with the themes of the eroticism and transgression, Lakra's tattooed, vintage pin-ups – by far the artist's most well known and largest body of work – will be the focus of this project and will be explored in more depth in the pages that follow.[9] But, first, by way of explaining penchant for tattooed pin-ups, I offer some additional background on the artist, which will locate his work within a generation influenced by active punk-politics, graffiti, and criminal subcultures. As we shall see, Lakra has a long history of rejecting normative identity and societal standards and is well-positioned, by virtue of his age, nationality, and history of sustained sub-

[9] It is important to note, I am using the term "pin-up" as an image which adheres to a specific set of representations in mass media as defined by the historic "low-art" phenomenon in Maria Elena Buszek's cultural study: *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) and from my own additional research (see bibliography). It is also important to note, the visual material covered in my discussion of tattooing comes from my part-and-parcel experiences and research of the genre. The formal visual analysis of tattoos, considering its enduring existence and perpetual changes since ancient times, is virtually non-existent. Only in the past ten years have "fine" art institutions and art academic writers been starting to discuss this material with continued resolve, and still not in a way which has centered on its visual cultural attributes. The tattoo is still very much steeped in its anthropological and stigmatized sociological past. This is only partially a sweeping generalization on my part (there have been a few very well written and researched books and academic journal articles which look at the aesthetics of tattooing), but certainly only in a very confined view of a huge body of multi-cultural and multi-epoch spanning material. Essentially, there has been no definitive resource or continued discourse surrounding either pin-up or tattooing in the discipline of art history. It is also important to note I will get into the details much more when un-packing the visual material of Lakra's works.

cultural status (Lakra is a graffiti and tattoo artist as well as heavily tattooed himself) to tackle the borderlines of contemporary global identity.[10]

[10] This thesis is *building* toward showing the specificities of Lakra's work as "global." Not simply a term referring to capitalist influence, "global" is an erasure of borders that increasingly relates to identity formation in contemporary culture. Though these terms appear throughout this text, "globalization" and "global" will be expanded in Chapter 5 to encompass other cultural arenas and forms in conjunction with Lakra's latest works and the ideologies of Arjun Apparundai. Until then, it is only necessary to consider these terms generally as evidencing a contemporary move toward worldwide cultural integration and development that ultimately is changing the way identities are conceived.

CHAPTER 1

INTO FOCUS: LAKRA, PIN-UP, TATTOO, AND POSTCOLONIAL MEXICO

Figure 3: Dr. Lakra, as featured in *The New York Times* (2011)

Jerónimo López Ramírez (Fig. 3), known as Dr. Lakra/Doktor Lakra/Dr. Lacra (he has signed his work with all three of these monikers), is originally from the comparatively quieter, more traditional city of Oaxaca, but moved to Mexico City when he was five years old.[11] He is the son of Mexico's celebrated graphic artist Francisco Toledo and the poet Elisa Ramírez Castañeda. Although his father is a trained, well-known artist, Lakra is mainly self-taught due partly to his unsteady relationship with his

[11] Mike Vialetto, "The Colours of the Road: Dr. Lakra & Tono Mamunos," *Tattoo Planet* 24 (September 1999): 40.

father.[12] In regards to the origins of the name, Dr. Lakra, he tells this story: "… when I first started doing tattooing I used to carry around a black briefcase like the ones doctors used. And I was wearing gloves, with all these jars of ink and alcohol, so people just started calling me doctor."[13] Notably, the etymology of the word "lakra" derives from a Spanish colloquialism meaning "scumbag," or "joker."[14] So, befitting his sometimes self-deprecating and lewd sense of humor, his preferred mark can be translated as "doctor scumbag." Less literally, more metaphorically, one might say that Lakra is a doctor-artist who diagnoses the illnesses of culture and attends, via his craft, to the expressive capacity of the human body. As he lacks the ability to heal the perennially riven bodies that he has caused, I argue that Lakra diagnoses the condition of global subjectivity, but is not in control of its outcomes. His alias is also a play on "lacra," which refers to a "blemish," "scar," or laceration, and sometimes a "delinquent."[15] This is, of course, directly related to his role as a tattoo artist who artistically scars the skin, as well as his artwork, which he often signs boldly and invasively as if part of the graffiti-like markings he administers to his found objects.[16]

Until the year 2000, Lakra worked primarily as a tattoo artist. However, he practiced his craft in unconventional ways all along, tattooing his own legs, stippling old magazines, dolls, and other objects since the late 1980s. By the end of that decade, Lakra

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[12] The details of this father-son relationship are not clear in the sources available, but through reading various interviews with the Dr. Lakra, this is the impression of the author of this text. Suffice to say, Lakra chose to follow a different path than his father, perhaps partially as a challenge to authority.

[13] Matt Hussey, "Dr. Lakra," *Pimp*, accessed: February 7, 2008, http://www.pimpguides.com/Art/DrLakra_PIMP.htm.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Rachel Liebowitz, *Drawing Papers 97: Dr. Lakra* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2011), 14.

[16] This is worth mentioning, as his assumed alias of Dr. Lakra is yet another way he creates an identity which rejects the established normative ways of cultural expectations. To be fair, this is not unusual in the world of tattooing. Often artists take on a version of a "pen name." Some popular tattoo artists of recent history with monikers include: Sailor Jerry (Norman Keith Collins) and Mister Cartoon (Mark Muchado). This is an over-generalization, for Lakra's work is not always found objects, and his murals do not usually have his name as a central feature.

had begun showing these pieces in galleries and museums in Mexico City and now works in various media internationally while continuing to keep his hand in tattooing. Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, Lakra was a part of the "street" scene and hung out habitually at the Tianguis del Chopo (an underground flea market in an Anarcho-punk neighborhood of Mexico City). He graffitied buildings and spent his academic classes drawing, rebelling against the education that he claims "bored" him.[17] He looked to magazines, comic books, paperback serials, movies, wrestling and boxing posters, Mad Magazine, and other mass-produced pop-culture media for inspiration and is basically a "self-taught illustrator and tattoo artist."[18] Dropping out of school at a fairly young age, he began attending a workshop with Gabriel Orozco and painting full-time. He started to develop his style during the 1980s in the context of the Mexican punk scene, fashioning a tattoo gun out of a walkman motor, a sharpened guitar string, and a penholder. In 1990, Lakra moved briefly to Berlin (ostensibly wanting to take advantage of the burgeoning contemporary art scene that followed one of the most dramatic border demolitions of the twentieth century: the fall of The Berlin Wall), and while squatting and selling books he had stolen, he continued to practice tattooing, now under the influence of Dada and Surrealism.[19] At the same time, Lakra remained indebted to the social realism and mural

[17] Abeyami Ortega, "The Chilango Whims of Doktor Lakra," *SkinInk* (November 2004), accessed: April 8, 2008, http://www.skinink.com/archives/1104/feature.html. Ortega is quoting Lakra.
[18] Greg Cook, "Cheap Thrills: The Inky Delights of Dr. Lakra," *The Boston Phoenix* (21 April 2010), accessed: December 30, 2011, http://www.thephoenix.com/Boston/arts/100871-cheap-thrills/. Cook is quoting Lakra.
[19] Some of the existent art world literature has likened (peripherally) Dr. Lakra's methods to Dada as well as Marcel Duchamp (his work with gender and sexuality, in addition to "fine" art "graffiti" as in *L.H.O.O.Q*). I believe Lakra also can be linked to Surrealist Max Ernst, who over-painted scientific and technical manuals into sexualized anthropomorphic images (though Ernst was more actively considering modernity with a machine-aesthetic).

movement work of Gabriel Orozco and to his Friday workshops.[20] In 1999, he came to the United States and spent time in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York. In this period, Lakra continued tattooing partially in the "Chilango" style – a Mexico City style that combines Aztec imagery, images of The Virgin of Guadalupe, and Mexican Revolution political imagery.[21] During his time in California, Lakra also took a brief job working with inmates in the prison system. Certainly, as he was interacting with a concentrated "Hispanic" population of heavily tattooed prisoners, this job had to have been a contributing influence to Lakra's tattoo iconography. Gradually, over the course of 1999, he began to incorporate a continued interest in Chicano prison and gang iconography as well as "Old School" tattooing.[22] Lakra speaks fondly of his time in the United States, and considers it pivotal to his career:

> Although I lived only for a short time in L.A., that's when I started tattooing in the Chicano style, as well as gang stuff. Lettering, names, Virgins and Christs … lots of black-and-gray and fine line work. I even did a couple backpieces, an Aztec calendar and a helguera. It was in San Francisco that my interest for tattooing was defined.[23]

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[20] Gabriel Orozco, Dr. Lakra, Eduardo Abaroa, and Pedro Alonzo, *Dr. Lakra* (Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2010), 30 – 35. These workshops were the multi-media and open-forum breeding ground for many of the Mexican contemporary artists coming out of the NAFTA generation.

[21] Ortega, and: Janie Diaz, "Mexican Tattoos," *lovetoknow tattoos.com*, accessed May 15, 2012, http://tattoos.lovetoknow.com/Mexican_Tattoos, as well as: "Aztec and Mexican Tattoo Art – 7," *blogspot.com* (March 12, 2008), accessed May 15, 2012, http://designhistory2008.blogspot.com/2008/03/aztec-mexican-tattoo-art-7.html. These sources only cover the tip of the iceberg of what is considered "Chilango." Generally, "Chilango" refers to cultural material and people of Mexico City. Some say it is Aztec based imagery that has to do with the eagle and snake, maps of Mexico, and deities. Some make a specific distinction that "Chilango" represents the *Mexica* indigenous culture that is separate from Aztec, but mistakenly grouped together by Occidental history. Still others say it includes the Mexican Catholic religious imagery that is considered nationalistic. Mostly based in black ink, but again some say colorful designs are also worn. "Chilango" also refers to Mexico City dwellers, long characterized as different from the rest of Mexico. They were described as selfish, dishonest, corrupt, racist, manipulative and treacherous. The people of Mexico City have been known to embrace this term and reclaim it as a badge of honor showing their resilience, fortitude, and urban savvy in the face of a pejorative term.

[22] Dr. Lakra picked up his continued interest in Chicano and "Old School" style tattooing in his time in California – he met up with Don Ed Hardy in San Francisco and had a job with the prison system in L.A.

[23] Abeyami Ortega, "The Chilango Whims of Doktor Lakra," *Skinink* (November 2004), accessed April 8, 2008, http://www.skinink.com/archives/1104/feature.html. When Lakra speaks of "helguera," I assume he is referring to the rich history of Jesús Helguera's paintings (first starting to produce his iconic images after

Returning to Mexico City in 2003, he started his own professional tattoo studio with several other artists: Dermafilia. Capitalizing on the success of this group and his developing "fine" art career, he has lived briefly in London and Tokyo (2006) before again returning in 2008 to live in Oaxaca.[24] Traveling extensively and migrating from place-to-place, seemingly unanchored to any particular territory, Lakra is himself a global subject in the most straightforward sense. Indeed, as we shall see, it is the fact of Lakra's global identity and Mexican heritage (and the enormously complicated question of what *being* Mexican is) that is situated beneath the core of his practice.

Identity in a Postcolonial Globalized Mexico

History books tell us the Mexican War of Independence (1810 – 1821) was fought in order to remove colonial masters from Mexico. Despite an eventual victory, unrest followed and culminated in extreme bloodshed and a succession of multiple ruling parties leading up to and following The Mexican Revolution (1910 – 1929). This unremitting turmoil proved these goals to be much more elusive than initially expected. In addition, the United States involvement in Mexico ever-since its liberation from Spain has made the idea of a truly independent Mexico suspect.[25] Perhaps, as some commentators have

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the Mexican Revolution in 1910) being used as a source for Mexican calendar and mural art often featured in homes and businesses in Mexico and abroad which features Aztec gods/warriors and inert sacred virgins/Aztec princesses. For more information see: Alicia Gaspar De Alba, ed., *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture and Chicano/a Sexualities* (New York: Palgrave, 200), 295 – 310.

[24] This seems to be the best continuous narrative of Lakra's whereabouts that I can piece together from the many inadequate paragraph-long biographies, brief interviews in journalistic magazines and exhibition catalogues, and his C.V. from Kurimanzutto.

[25] The United States had been involved in helping Mexico through war-torn poverty, homelessness, and unemployment, but the U.S. also ended up owning 27% of the land in Mexico by the turn of the 20th century and had continued interests in industry.

suggested, the country has just traded one colonial "master" for another.[26] Much of the discourse surrounding Mexican postcoloniality refers to the period after the revolution as "neocolonial."[27] Due to a 70 year legacy of censorship by the PRI, the upheaval of NAFTA, and the violent repercussions of the PAN's "War on Drugs," Mexico has remained staunchly repressed and fractured.[28] Octavio Paz, a Mexican Nobel Prize winning writer, surrealist poet, and diplomat, maintains that Mexicans are condemned to a state of "orphanhood and denial in which the nation can only live history under the sign of continuous rupture."[29] Indeed, "continuous rupture" is an accurate literal and figurative characterization of the postcolonial subject in Lakra's work.

Paz is especially useful in providing a first-person perspective of the heritage that informs Lakra's visual representations. After all, Paz is not only a 1990 Nobel prize-winner for Literature, but his volume *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) is "one of the most enduring and powerful works ever created on Mexico and its people."[30] As a "modern classic," it seems to be the most translated, published, and quoted text engaged

[26] Lucy Ann Havard, "Frida Kahlo, Mexicanidad and Máscaras: The Search for Identity in Postcolonial Mexico," *Romance Studies* 24, no. 3 (November 2006): 247. Havard suggests that the U.S. remains a remote imperial colonizer of Mexico.

[27] See Gruzisnski's *The Mestizo Mind*, Mallon's *Peasant and Nation*, and Haber's "The Worst of Both Worlds: A New Cultural History of Mexico."

[28] Poverty and disorder still continue to plague Mexico, and for the last 70 years art has been censored by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), a state-run regime in Mexico, casting out all subject matter perceived controversial. This censorship ended in 2000 with election of Vincente Fox of National Action Party (PAN). However, due to the historic domination of PRI and the subsequent insurrection involved in NAFTA as well as Fox's "War on Drugs" (which has resulted in tens of thousands of murders in Mexico since the initiative), the nation remains splintered and dominated by regimes and lack of leadership in unifying the diversity present in Mexico. This is by no means the whole story of why Mexico can be characterized in this way, more examples will be addressed later in this thesis, but beyond that, this is a complex and wide-ranging topic of inquiry into Mexican history which is outside the confines of this project.

[29] Harvard: 246. She is referring to an idea central to Paz, Mexico's perpetual "la tradición de la ruptura" described in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* and further detailed in his book *Itinerary: An Intellectual Journey* (1999, finished before his death and published posthumously).

[30] This is a quote from the back cover on the Grove Press 1991 edition of *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

with the subaltern mindset of modern Mexico.[31] In this book, Paz describes Mexican identity as abused and bastardized, calling it "la Chingada" – a Spanish word for "the forcibly opened, violated" mother or female.[32] Paz goes on to trace multiple meanings for the root "chingar" in many Spanish influenced countries. Despite its multiplicity of meanings, the word, as used in Mexico, he asserts, always implies a sexualized form of aggression – whether the "simple act of molesting, pricking or censuring, or the violent act of wounding … the verb denotes violence, an emergence from oneself to penetrate another by force … The idea of breaking or ripping open. The word has sexual connotations ..."[33] Accordingly, the root verb "chingar" is also a Mexican slang word for "fuck," an intonation and meaning ostensibly indicated by Paz's descriptions involving violence and sex.[34]

Although the slang connotations of "chingar" are well established, translations of Paz's words have been sterilized since their initiation into the English language in 1961. Paz's original wording from *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) is:

> *La palabra chingar, con todas estas multiples significaciones, define gran parte nuestra vida y califica nuestras relaciones con el resto de nuestros amigos y compatroitas. Para el mexicano la vida es una posibilidad de chingar o de ser chingado ... En cierto sentido todos somos, por el solo hecho de nacer de mujer, hijos de la Chingada ...*[35]

Here is the 1961 translation by Lysander Kemp, which was re-published under Kemp's authority in 1985:

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[31] *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is included in the Penguin Modern Classics series.
[32] Octavio Paz , *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, translated by Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 79.
[33] Ibid., 76.
[34] Harvard: 246. Havard describes chingar as "a vulgarism for intercourse." Also: "Chingar," *Language Realm*, accessed March 25, 2012, http://www.languagerealm.com/spanish/ chingar.php. And: "¡Ay! Definition: a glossary para ustedas," *Phoenix New Times.com* (June 8, 2006), accessed June 5, 2012, http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/2006-06-08/news/ay-definition/.
[35] Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soleda* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1950), 71 – 72.

> If we take into account all of its various meanings, the word defines a great part of our life and qualifies our relationships with our friends and compatriots. To the Mexican there are only two possibilities in life: either he suffers them himself or at the hands of others … In certain sense all of us, by the simple fact of being born of woman, are *hijos de la Chingada*, sons of Eve.[36]

Perhaps this translation is "pulling a few punches," especially considering Paz's previous explication around the meaning of "la Chingada" and the verb form itself as excessively aggressive and sexual. Kemp seems to skirt making "chingar" hit hard. He refers to this complex word indirectly calling it: "the word" (causing "chingar" to be obscured and diminished) and then restricts its meaning to "suffering," which he then links to Christianity and Eve, religious connotations more likely the result of the Western-influenced translator.[37] Perhaps it is worthwhile to translate this text again in order to embrace the vulgarity and seeming directness which attends the trauma characteristic to contemporary Mexican culture – a culture characterized as brazen and boisterous with visible scars not only in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* but in the hands of Dr. Lakra as well. While Lakra is a generation removed from Paz, both make work that entangles pleasure and pain – like the very practice of tattooing; it is a pain Paz and others locate at the root

[36] Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. by Lysander Kemp, 78 – 80. Therefore, to make a new translation presently, we must take into account that there could be a loss in translation, and perhaps a result of orthodox niceties in the 1980s (not to mention the Christian inclinations present in this construction) when the 1961 translation by Kemp was maintained under his jurisdiction in 1985. There were other translators listed in the new edition but little can be known about how these others effected the translation.

[37] It seems necessary to mention here that Kemp and Paz were friends and did collaborate on the translation of this text, however, the restrictions and censorship on literature in 1961 is quite different than today. To give some perspective, both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Catcher in the Rye* had been banned in the U.S. in separate incidents in the year 1960 – only a year previous to the English translation of *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Ostensibly, the publishers and translations could have been affected by this atmosphere.

of postcolonial Mexico.[38] The circumscribed Christian and whitewashed curve of his only English translation, when revised, bring Paz's words new clarity:

> The word fuck, with all its *multiple meanings*, defines much of our lives and qualifies our relations with the rest of our friends and compatriots. For the Mexican, life is a chance to *fuck* or *be fucked* ... In a sense we are all, by the mere fact of being born of woman, sons of a fucked mother...[39]

Now purposely shocking, Paz's comments seemingly tap openly and deliberately into a Mexican worldview characterized by dark humor tinged with prideful rebellion. The words, meant to reflect the convictions of Mexicans in the 1940s and 1950s, acknowledge the extreme hardships of existing in a postcolonial Mexico, at the same time that they try to negotiate identity in this environment of "multiple meanings."

In retrospect, the sanitization of Paz's remarks can be seen as evidence of seeing Mexico through the translator's lens. It seems the questions in translating Paz's text are a rehearsal for larger issues of conversion within a postcolonial globalized context. The history of Mexican colonization includes efforts to purify and Christianize the Mexican subject. Alongside these modifications, Mexican culture has absorbed imperialist and subaltern cultural constructs into their own sense of self. In essence, to be Mexican is to bear the traces of indigenous, European, and U.S. cultures as well as other global systems.

Lakra's work, especially the overtly sexual pin-up images for which he is known, reflects these dispositions as well. The violence evident in his images and the resolute (if

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[38] See: Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, "Humor, Literacy and Trauma in Chicano Culture," *Comparative Literature Studies* 40, no. 2 (2003): 112. This text links Chicano culture into its Mexican roots, describing the sense of humor and fragmentation present in contemporary Chicano identity in a postcolonial context.

[39] Author's translation. An alternate translation for "*hijos de la Chingada*" could be "sons of a fucked woman" which alludes to being the progeny of a repeatedly sexually violated woman, or a prostitute. This would offer a slightly different slant to Paz's words; Mexico then is seen as a nation "bastardized" with un-locatable heritage due to being born into such a situation.

compromised) agency of the subjects he depicts likewise evidences an inner struggle between resilience and collapse. Moreover, Lakra's insistence on sexual imagery – as if a metaphor for his own condition as one who is both "fucked by" and "fucking" the system – speaks to an acute fissure within the Mexican postcolonial self. Lakra's complexity, initial opacity, and sheer volume of imagery have led to partial and somewhat cursory understandings, at best, and to stereotypical, shallow, or ignorant reactions at the other end of the spectrum. Since the traditions involved in tattooing, pornography/erotica, and Mexican culture all remain marginal and obscure (yet ever-present) in English-speaking and other international populations, Lakra uses this unfamiliarity as a key component of his work.

Moreover, Paz's words coincide with a vein I believe to be present in Lakra's work – to "let it all hang out." This approach to identity for a contemporary postcolonial nation, continuously wracked by negotiating the tumultuous threshold between survival and dissolution, is potentially extremely impenetrable. Yet, by loosening the restraints and embracing both fantasy and reality into identity constructs, Paz and Lakra seem to ease some of the anxious realities that it is impossible to separate the colonial "master" from all things Mexican. Somehow, it seems that the primary agenda is no longer separation and fortification, as it seemed to have been in a nineteenth and twentieth century revolutionary Mexico. Rather, a determination to reveal forgotten and covered layers of meaning through a new acknowledgement of a hybrid self on the margins between two romanticized, yet authentic selves: the oppressive imperialistic one and the fractured subaltern one. Each of these identities carries with it connotations of dominator and submissive, respectively, while in reality Mexican identity is reducible to neither of

these positions. Instead, as perhaps Paz and Lakra would acknowledge, it is both, always already, an interplay of domination and being dominated – of "fucking" and "being fucked."

But, what does this kind of rupture, liminality, and hybridity look like? As noted, Lakra's art is not an exercise in stability, but rather an exercise in letting go of stable borders. He welcomes new and old, inside and outside, inclusive and exclusive, to picture a state of transition which is continuously liminal, hybrid, and global.[40] Traditional binaries are continuously collapsing, oscillating, and merging into new cultural constructs. As such, the invasive nature of the colonizer and the colonized's resistance to that incursion, are represented in this overall encounter with rupture and hybridity. The vast ethnic and cultural diversity present in Mexico, and the current global systems grown out of ever-flowing information meeting and dissolving again, has also made uniting under one regime to unravel colonial influences problematic. By a complex process of exceeding and violating past borders, Lakra's representations directly reflect the process of negotiating postcolonial identity – endlessly giving and receiving penetration. Given the sexual subtext of postcolonialism, Lakra's choice of pornographic material is especially apposite. The pin-up is the embodiment of sexual availability – a single isolated figure in a picture plane – and, as we shall see, an image associated with sexual agency.

Another important aspect of Dr. Lakra's artwork – one central to his ambition to depict rupture and hybridity – is tattooing, which is itself a relentless ripping into the skin by a series of needles which deposit ink into the body's outer layers and leave a

[40] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 1. Bhabha discusses liminality and hybridity as the foundational forms of postcolonialism – which fracture and recombine traditional binaries to give presence to hybrid and in-between identities.

permanent trace of that event. Aside from tattooing's physical effects, it is most often understood as an outer reflection of inner psychology and personal beliefs. For the heavily "illustrated" body, these outer signs on the skin follow changes, hardships, and victories; yet, they also are the very index of the subject's penetration by something (or someone) foreign. In light of these traits, Lakra's unusual method seems an especially apt way of representing rupture and hybridity, the in-between and globalization – particularly when read in conjunction with the idea of the pin-up.

CHAPTER 2

TRANSLATING "BLANCA:" ACCESSING THE VISUAL IMAGERY OF LAKRA

Lakra's pin-up works are fraught with complex imagery. Comprised of source material culled from cheap weekly pin-up magazines from the genre's Golden Age (1940s, 1950s, and 1960s), these artworks are covered with over-painting as well as tattoos that the artist applies directly onto the paper's delicate surface. Indeed, their very "ground" – the vintage pin-ups from which Lakra begins – is contradictory and multifaceted, an unstable place from which to operate.

A part of Western visual culture since the advent of popular photography, the pin-up has a complex history and is uniquely situated within the matrix of sexualized images of women. One the one hand, the pin-up has had a long history in men's magazines as easily-consumable "cheesecake" imagery and has, since the genre's invention, provided easy access to the fetishized female body. On the other hand, the women depicted within this genre can be read as empowered, secure in her sensuality and fully embodying her subjectivity. Thus, the pin-up is a visual representation that crosses a border between two seemingly divergent states: objectivity and subjectivity. As I will argue, it is exactly this duality – this play of power and disenfranchisement – that is of interest to Lakra, who sees the pin-up as a compelling analogue for the postcolonial subject, who is likewise empowered and objectified by the politicized gaze of another.

The pin-up was, by its very nature, rebellious. Even seemingly overtly sexist pin-ups from the European and North American Golden Age of pin-up in popular magazines like *Esquire* and *Playboy*, or in calendars from tool companies and Bigelow and Brown

Figure 4: Gil Elvgren, "Pleasant to Si," 1969 and
Figure 5: Postcard image of Mae Davis, Ziegfeld Girl, circa 1920s

were images of a feminine subversive type. The burlesque dancers, actresses, and courtesans that graced the first postcards (Fig. 5) at the turn of the twentieth century in The United States and Europe were not the nice girls that you took home to mom and were expected to "settle-down" with and marry. Instead, they were girls that exuded sexuality and confidently, provocatively, returned your gaze. And if they *were* the girl-next-door type their squeaky clean facade was tantalizingly compromised by a peep under the skirt, an impossibly skin-tight bodice, and/or a strategically loose strap that revealed a bare shoulder. These girls weren't complicated by domestic needs and wants, they were there for one purpose only: to titillate. Even so, the pin-up wrestled with a double agenda in which women were primarily depicted as objects that, as Maria Elena

Buszek has noted, nevertheless succeeded in "defining, politicizing, and representing their own sexualities in the public eye."[41]

The quintessential pin-up – and the kind deployed by Lakra – is a predictable, straight-on shot of a provocatively posed woman, accompanied by kitschy props that correspond to any number of different personas and superficial settings (the active housewife, the cowgirl, the ballerina, the señorita (Fig. 4), the naughty nurse … in the kitchen, dressing in the bedroom, on the beach, in front of the fireplace …).[42] Because these images were intended for mass-consumption, they were printed using the least amount of ink and the most economical paper available. As a result, many pin-ups were grainy or faded on delivery; in turn, this lack of quality added to its raffish appeal. Moreover, because the pin-up is a "soft-core" image, it embodies a basic tension between overt seductiveness and modesty; at once public (a mass-distributed commodity) and private (addressed to ostensibly "private" desires), it is an image that reveals and conceals simultaneously.[43] As Buszek summarily put it, the pin-up simultaneously examines "omnipresence and invisibility, bawdy appeal and prudery, artistry and commercialism" occupying a display-ready form (as its namesake divulges) bringing together "portraiture and pornography."[44]

As I see it, these aspects of the pin-up are useful to Lakra as a means of expressing a set of ideas related to Mexican postcolonial identity. To be Mexican, as

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[41] Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

[42] The art nude was understood as an ideal, whereas the pin-up was thought to be derived from "real" life and "real girls." Visually, in style as well as reproduction quality, pin-ups were formulaic and mediocre and they differed from the "fine" art genre of the nude in composition, props, and setting. The genre of the nude used complex angles and highly stylized poses as well as settings intended to elevate the human form.

[43] Casey Finch, "Two of a Kind," *Artforum International* 30, no. 6 (February 1992): 91-94. Finch goes into great detail of the pin-up associations with soft-core versus hard-core imagery in this article.

[44] Buszek, 11.

conceived by the conventional imperialistic West, is to be a populace that is both ever-present as ethnic Other and growing presence in the diaspora, yet invisible due to their lack of socio-economic power. In addition, the Mexican subaltern is stereotypically seen as the hyper-sexualized Other as well as the prudish Catholic moralist. Equally formulaic, the Mexican Other is also seen as being capable of great artistry and creativity, yet only as far as that idea can be co-opted for the North American consumer in kitsch, craft, home décor, or "fine" art capitalist-based markets. As I will suggest, Lakra's pin-ups do not merely bring these subaltern stereotypes out in the open, amplifying the contradictions amongst them, but they also offer an alternative: a Mexican identity that is actively independent and openly resistant.

If the pin-up is useful to Lakra, functioning as an analog for a Mexican subject that is at once passive and aggressive, subject and object, public and private, his preferred method – tattooing – is equally suggestive. Associated with various world, counter, and subcultures, the tattoo can be understood as a conjunction of opposites that resonate resoundingly with the work of Lakra. As noted, Lakra willfully imports the "low" art form of tattooing to the world of "fine" art, not only to exceed a series of high/low distinctions, but as a subversive practice related to deviance, "primitive" urges, aesthetics, authorship, and the frequently overlooked intricacies of human skin. Equally important to an understanding of Lakra's work, and the pin-up works in particular, is the fact that tattooing combines the concepts of pleasure and self-expression with the experience of penetration and pain. These ideas, when read in concert with the already complex connotations of the pin-up genre, are central to an understanding of Lakra's

tattooed pin-up works. I intend to begin unpacking these pin-up works through a detailed examination of one of Lakra's most labyrinthine images: *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003.

Dr. Lakra's *Betty*: Object, Subject, and Hybrid Identity

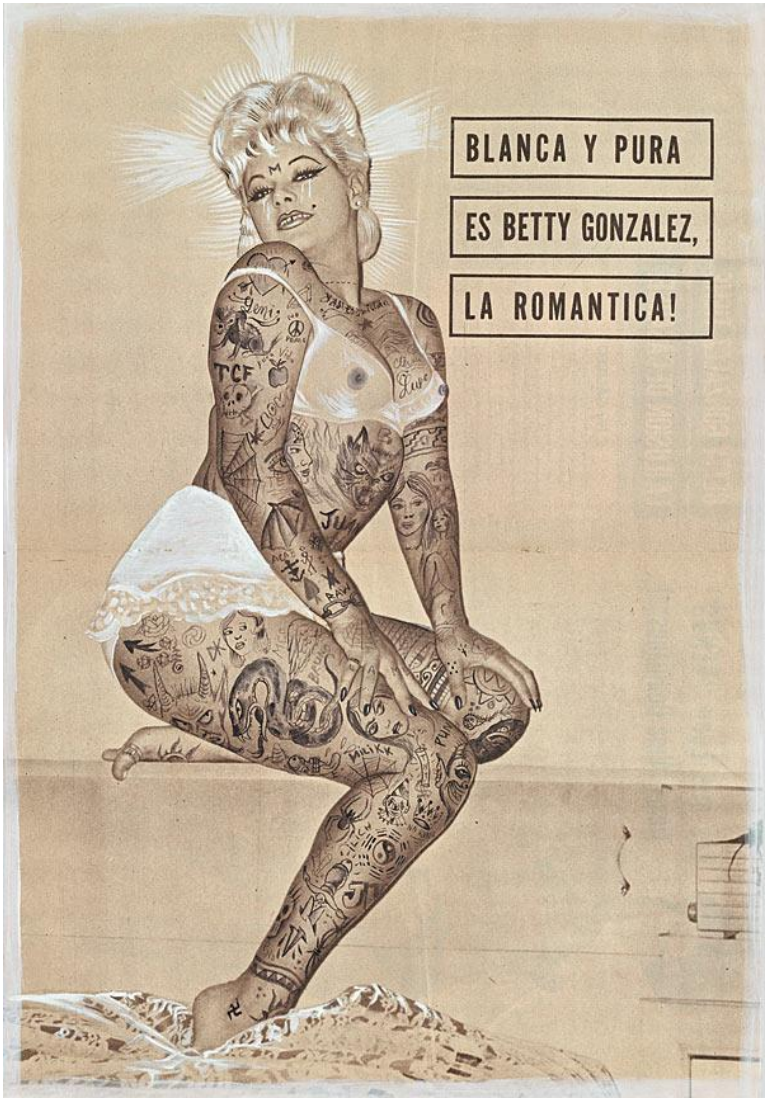

Figure 6: Dr. Lakra, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003, colored ink and synthetic polymer paint on magazine page, MoMA Contemporary Drawings Collection, 51.8 x 35.9cm

Faced with *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003 (Fig. 6), one can't help notice her plethora of tattoos. A small poster-size digital print of a semi-nude fully-tattooed woman

showing most of her adorned skin is unusual in a gallery setting. The large areas of sepia tones of this altered pin-up photo almost seem "dirty" when offset by the extra-bright white walls surrounding it. The white-painted border that skirts the pin-up poster is visibly uneven, thicker in some places and thinner in others. Like Betty's bra, this border is not at all opaque, but merely ghosts the details of the photograph beneath it. In contrast with the contrived pose, this border offers a look of roughness, which is further emphasized by the grainy quality of the photo.[45] *Betty*'s transparent, white mesh bra is an unconvincing form of whitewashing as well, not even disguising her dark erect nipples. Her frilly lace briefs offset, and thereby call further attention to the crassness of her inked flesh, as tattoos surround the white lingerie on at least three sides. It is hard to tell if the artist added the underwear to the pin-up or he merely enhanced what was already given in the photo. This ambiguity derives from Lakra's naturalistic technique of administering the tattoos and over-painting, which stick closely to the contours of *Betty*'s body and the volumes of her skin. Yet still, on closer examination, there is awkwardness to the white over-painting, the lace seems clunky, the underwear bulging and ill-fitting. Moreover, during this close inspection, it becomes clear that Lakra has not *drawn* the tattoos that adorn her, but he stippled them with a modified tattoo gun designed to adhere the ink to the paper.[46] This technique ensures that these tattoos – at once tattoos and drawings of

[45] MoMA lists this work as being a magazine page, which it was originally, but the size of this work of art is four to five inches larger than any of the weekly pin-up magazines that Lakra uses as source material or found objects. So, more likely this is a magazine page which has been scanned and enlarged, then transferred onto paper as a digital print. Lakra sometimes uses this technique in order to expand the amount of tattooing and detail he can accomplish on a work. Although, Lakra does also use actual found-art magazine pages as well in some of his works - working directly onto the more fragile and deteriorating paper.

[46] This "stippling" technique on *Betty* is an assumption made by the author of this text. As Lakra started out with this technique on paper to practice his craft and there are photos of him using modified tattoo guns to ink dolls and mannequin parts, it seems most likely that Lakra has continued this technique instead of drawing the tattoos into the images.

tattoos – appear to be on the actual skin of the paper (arguably, each dot can work around a curve much more effectively than using a straight drawing technique of lines).[47] Indeed, the question of whose tattoos we see – Lakra's or those of the depicted female subject, as faithfully recorded by Lakra – will be central to an analysis of this work and the pin-up works more generally.

As a pin-up, and a dramatically altered one at that, *Betty* fits somewhat uncomfortably within the genre of portraiture. Pin-ups are always about bodies and, as this body is covered with tattoos and various other markings, the spectator comes belatedly to Betty's face and the words which are blocked out to the right of her upper body. It may seem suspect that we only get to *Betty*'s face near the end of our time looking at this pin-up, perhaps we feel a bit uncomfortable having treated her as an object in our first moments with her, but the angle of the photo and the amount of space demanded by her body assure us that the purpose of this image is to emphasize the body's overtly sexy pose. After all, Betty is, and aren't we all, mostly body. And certainly, with her unabashed pose *Betty* seems proud of that fact. But, back to her face, as it seems to tell a more complicated tale. *Betty*'s eyes well-up with white tears which stream down her face. Covered with make-up, her face could be perceived as a mask, perhaps altering how we observe her confidence-level. Her blonde hair is frosted further with white highlights; brunette roots lurk underneath, ostensibly revealing *Betty* to have a beauty that is constructed atop a dark foundation she knows to be stigmatized.

The text branded onto the sepia backdrop seems to echo a hidden uncertainty as well: "*BLANCA Y PURA/ES BETTY GONZALEZ,/LA ROMANTICA!*" Depending on

[47] I imagine viewing this image from far away the stippling is more ambiguous than close-up; much like a Seurat Divisionist painting, only with much smaller dots. Once viewed at a shorter distance, the obviousness of the over-painting and inking stand out from the print.

your first language, these words are already obscured. Translation must occur for the English speaker, but this is hardly a difficult conversion: "WHITE AND PURE/IS BETTY GONZALEZ,/THE ROMANTIC!" The words are cognates and seem pretty direct. Their implications could be as simple as: "enjoy *Betty* as an example of light and virginal flesh, she likes it, she's a hopeless romantic." Of course, such a reading objectifies Betty by attributing to the work a description that focuses first on her attributes of flesh: "white" and "pure." Only as an exclamatory after-thought do we get any window into *Betty*'s personality, which is really just another generality and restates her availability for consumption: "romantic." This seems straight-forward enough, but the term "Blanca" carries with it more complex associations. "Blanca," as a Mexican colloquialism, is a slang term meaning: cocaine or a white girl (sometimes in a derogatory manner).[48] "Blanca" is, at once, the illicit drug personified and a Mexican woman with light skin or a Caucasian woman. It may also be used as a cat-call to show appreciation, or called out as an insult, especially when pointing out a Mexican girl who is capable of "passing" for Caucasian. Thus, whatever its original connotation, in this context the word is a loaded one, suggestive of a complex racial interplay that is inherent to colonialism and its aftermath. Equally suggestive are the marks that radiate outward, from behind Betty's head. Were it not for this detail, the pin-up might have been considered completely naturalistic since Lakra takes care to render the tattoos

[48] These translations and colloquialisms come from a few sources. Urban Dictionary.com: "Blanca," *Urban Dictionary*, accessed March 25, 2012, http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=blanca. Also, drug terms from the state of Texas: Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, "A Dictionary of Slang Drug Terms: Trade Names, and Pharmacological Effects and Uses," *Texas Department of State Health Services* (1997), accessed March 25, 2012, www.tcada.state.tx.us/research/slang/terms.pdf. As well as the Dictionary Slang page: "Blanca," *Dictionary Slang*, accessed March 25, 2012, http://www.dictionaryslang.com/blanca.

convincingly and *Betty*'s base image is a photograph. This white halo serves as a final twist: an emanating glow that crowns her as a religious saint.

With all of these aspects of Lakra's pin-up work in mind, it must finally be said that *Untitled (Betty González)* accommodates two, diametrically opposed readings. On one hand, the tattooed woman therein can be read as the vibrant subject of the work, the tattoos upon her body revealing the intricacies of her personality and life as dutifully recorded by an artist for hire. On the other hand, the tattooed figure could also be read as the unwitting victim of the artist, Dr. Lakra, who forcibly subjected her to a series of transformations and modifications of which the figure's tattoos are only the most obvious. But, as a closer reading of *Betty*'s markings will suggest, Betty evidences both dominant and submissive, light and dark, pure and impure, clothed and naked, body and mind, sacred and profane, hatred and pride, and perhaps fundamentally, cooperation and resistance in Lakra's rendition of her image.

CHAPTER 3

READING *BETTY* AS AN IMAGE INDICATING OBJECTIVITY

Scantily-clad women, demons, dark creatures (snake, bat, spider), and daggers: Betty's tattoos, on a preliminary survey, seem to not "fit" to her. Betty is tattooed with signs of being bound with webs, chains, and barbed wire. These marks of suppression and imprisonment seem to indicate an outside force catching, enslaving, and corralling Betty. Likewise, included among Betty's tattoos are initials, often carved into trees, desks, or other objects to show either ownership or as a form of graffiti to claim the space. "TCF," "DK," "MCO," and "BND" can all be found carved into Betty's skin, and together they seem to corroborate the idea that Betty is a site to penetrate and occupy – ideas that resonate in obvious ways with both feminism and Mexican history. The concept of the female body as object is echoed among the early writings on Lakra, where some critics interpreted his work in terms of taking over the image. One author, writing in 2007, even framed Lakra as: "indulging in a parodic B-movie style, where unexamined misogyny is allowed," who asserts his "macho" power over female pin-ups by covering their skin with tattoos.[49] Later in the same essay, this author goes on to say of Lakra's work: "... [it] acts like a collage of uninspired Americana and Mexicana, a hotchpotch of boil-in-the-bag cultural influences that requires no thought and inspires little joy."[50] This author recognized certain stereotypes and patriarchal influences within Lakra's work,

[49] Alexander Kennedy, "Feral Kingdom: CCA, Glasgow, until Sat 10 Nov," *The List* 588 (18 October 2007), accessed: February 8, 2008, http://www.list.co.uk/article/5309-feral-kingdom/.
[50] Ibid.

stopping short of any other reading by criticizing his treatments as either misogynistic, super-male processes, or wholesale Mexican.

Reading *Betty* this way, seeing her tattoos as evidence of processes enacted against her own will, means seeing Lakra as colonizer – something he perhaps encourages by conflating his hand with the "whitewashing" influence of European culture.[51] Lakra's depiction, in a sense, postulates him as further misogynizing the already objectified sexual flesh of the pin-up and the names become a kind of "tagging" to indicate presence and power over the space.[52] On this account, Lakra is guilty of perpetuating the same violent systems to which he has been arguably subjected. Betty is portrayed by Lakra as a product "of nature, passive and quiescent, incapable of acting in the world, or simply irrelevant" – a point-of-view that imperial powers arguably still maintain relative to postcolonial subaltern nations.[53]

There is more: *Betty* doesn't just represent a female body as object, but rather a body objectified through ethnography. Behind her, the background is very minimal. As a result, she is divorced from her context and the background never competes with her, or conversely, compliments her. We know only that she is seated higher than the viewer on a seemingly stone monumental plinth like an object in an ethnographic exhibit. The "tribal" tattooed bands applied to her arms, ankle, and toe, in addition to the totemic face placed on her thigh and Aztec-style sun on her upper-knee offer clues to an

[51] There is some evidence to indicate that Lakra wants this process of representation (his hand) to be seen in his works as part of the subject matter of the work itself. In his most recent exhibit at the New York Drawing Center in 2011, he left the vellum sheets he uses to transfer his images to the wall, on the wall as part of the exhibit (Fig. 1).

[52] "Tagging" refers to a graffiti term in which individuals mark their territory with usually numbers, gang related signs, or altered versions of their names to show anti-establishment and claim on a space. Usually these spaces are industrial or government wasteland within urban areas.

[53] John Mraz, *Looking for Mexico: Modern Visual Culture and National Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 4.

anthropologically categorized ethnicity (Fig. 7). *Betty* goes further by making use of the very hallmarks of ethnographic photography – sepia-toned, solitary figure, stock poses, very few words of description, minimal setting – and reminds us that these images, ostensibly instruments of documentation and research, were often understood in erotic terms. Thus, *Betty*'s sepia-tone, or "dirty" coloring does more than evoke a grimy atmosphere stereotyped by an Orientalist viewpoint of Mexico – it seems also to be a

Figure 7: Detail I, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003

reference to the ethnographic photography at the turn of the twentieth century in Mexico that was captured by Daguerreotypes. These "types" were warriors, cowboys, merchants, indigenous peoples, and women. Their photos taken in the same stock manner to display the figure, to show that each possessed certain "racial physiognomies, customs, and

fragments catalogued in an attempt to lend coherence to heterogeneity of the nation."[54] Indeed, these ethnographic formulaic photographs often depicted a single figure, straight-on, full-bodied, with minimal backdrop, and were calculated to achieve a romantic/picturesque appeal, sometimes aided with a few lines of description.[55] These photographs were considered somewhere between realism and romanticism – not unlike the original pin-up with which Lakra works. In this respect, the midcentury pin-up becomes its own "artifact" of nostalgia and Lakra's treatment reveals the layering of those stereotypical features based in the dominant cultural gaze.

Of course, this line of argumentation relies on the idea (by no means original) that the West perceives the Other as feminine, i.e. passive, fertile, and undeveloped.[56] The subaltern Other, as the victim of Lakra's adjustments, loses its agency. Consequently, the work (and implicitly the woman therein) becomes a space that has been invaded and penetrated by patriarchal imperialistic attitudes. Relatedly, Edward W. Said, an influential Palestinian literary theorist and chief architect of postcolonial theory, explains that within an Orientalist framework: "Orientals [are] an 'object' of study, stamped with an otherness" that is "passive, non-participating … non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself."[57] Said recognizes that these are conventionally feminine attributes and notes that they are mapped onto the Other, regardless of sex. In essence, the "Oriental" or subaltern Other "as a *whole* is 'feminized,' deemed passive, submissive,

[54] Segre, 94.
[55] Ibid.
[56] A. L. Macfie, A.L., *Orientalism: A Reader* (Cambridge: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 4. This concept of the Other as controlled and female is part of the basis for Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978).
[57] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 97. Said is referring to the Orient as characterized by Anwar Abdel Malek. Said's text remains foundational to postcolonial theory/discourse.

exotic, luxurious, sexually mysterious and tempting."[58] This comment taken in a straight-forward way asserts that all subaltern people (even all males) are seen as feminine, female, effeminate and penetrable. This gendering is further evidenced by a specifically "sexual vocabulary… 'penetrated' … 'possessed,'… 'ravished'" by the dominant West when describing subaltern areas.[59] Similarly, according to Said, the female was "often depicted nude or partially clothed … as immodest, immoral, active creature of sexual pleasure …"[60] These descriptions relate directly to descriptions that have been ascribed to pin-up. As such, our discussion of Lakra and his appropriation of a predominately female genre are effectively matched with the sexed discourse of colonialism.

Another way in which the subaltern is "penetrated" by imperial powers is through the mechanisms of capitalism, to some extent foundational to the whole idea of colonization. Often the impetus for European countries to settle the New World lay in the hopes of exploiting their resources and inhabiting their land – to seek wealth through conquering far off lands and importing and exporting across borders for self-interested gain. Yet, the imposition of a capitalist system on Mexico encompasses not just goods but the native people themselves. In *Betty*, capitalism is a subtle but foundational aspect of the work. As a mass-produced, widely disseminated pin-up magazine image, *Betty* is in and of itself evidence of capitalist culture. *Betty* is pop-cultural commodity, a simple transaction of sex sold for less than a dollar. This capitalist mentality is differently (and more directly) explored in other pin-up works, such as Lakra's *Untitled (Business)*, 2005

[58] John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism, Second Edition* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), 54. Author's emphasis.
[59] Ibid. McLeod is quoting and paraphrasing Said.
[60] Ibid., 53 – 54.

(Fig. 8), where he seems to depict the large corporation as exploiting and objectifying the subaltern populace.


Figure 8: Dr. Lakra, *Untitled (Business)*, 2005 and
Figure 9: Don Cook, Ohio sportsman with his "trophies"

In *Business*, the tables are turned to posit the large figure in this pin-up work as the capitalist entity. The giant central figure's sweet fake smile perhaps was originally meant to be an invitation, but under Lakra's treatment her smile becomes unsettling. Her perfect toothy grin and her cocked-head make it seem as though her intentions to lure you in are not necessarily completely virtuous. Her light-colored skin is covered, more faintly than Betty's, with predominately one color of green ink. These markings, due to their formal fluidly sweeping designs and mostly thin outlines, seem less about claiming the space of *Business* than in *Betty*. The pin-up in *Business* seems to rule over the other smaller, darker-skinned figures in the image. These smaller images are not the faux demure pin-ups but rather pornographic figures bent-over in positions ready for penetration, passive reclining positions, or in awkward in-between poses. Arguably, these smaller, more sexualized females stand in for the subaltern Other. When all these

little poses are viewed together like this, in their similar palette, they seem homogenous, an ethnographic type. Taken out of their generic boudoir interiors or their peep-show beach scenes, these collaged pornographic miniatures become *caught* in the vertical white sticky web of the colossal center-image. Suddenly the beaming giantess becomes a murderous black widow, beguiling her prey before stripping them of all semblances of life itself. Looking closer at the central pin-up's tattoos, they seem to be predominantly Chinese designs on her legs and a few references to Unites States "Old School" tattooing on her shoulders, two of the economic "super-powers" of the world. What is more, the composition of the work recalls a specific kind of portrait, namely, those taken after a hunting expedition as commemoration of the hunter's power and skill (Fig. 9). As the hunter, the center pin-up spreads her arms out-around her collection of former prey as if to show them off while her beauty-pageant-worthy smile gleams with pride. The pornographic girls behind her stuck to the background on display. Also, much like a hunter taxidermies his former prey into various action poses or into displaying the beauty of the animal's head, the smaller girls seem to be in action and displaying their "finest features." This colossal pin-up has a large body count, one which is literal to the history of colonization. More indirectly, the "monstrous" model takes a figurative body count, symptomatic of massively destructive capitalist agendas (for instance, Mexico's relationship to NAFTA and the U.S. is one example by which capitalism has forced the subaltern into poverty, subordination, and refugee status).

Figure 10: Detail II, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003

Returning exclusively to *Betty*, and a more literal form of penetration, we see additional evidence of invasive acts of sex and violence performed on her passive and available feminine flesh. The two arrows on *Betty*'s buttock suggest anal penetration, and the dagger on her leg suggests a stab through a slice of her skin (Fig. 11), perhaps relate to the tears on her face. The wagging and drooling tongue of a demonic creature on her right back thigh (Fig. 10), Betty's arrowed ass (Fig. 10), half-naked appearance, erect nipples, and seductive sinuous "S" pose seem to prime Betty's body for violation and victimization, whether by Lakra or the viewer of his work. Moreover, one could say that her make-up, bleach blonde hair, and beauty mark function as proof of Lakra's ambition to shape her into a Western controlled concept of beauty, even to the point of using body modification, a category into which tattoos have been placed as well. Furthermore, Betty's blonde locks can be read less as the result of personal choice, and more as an indication of the deep alterations to the concept of identity in a culture that

has been "Anglicized."[61] Yet, as these modifications can never be fully realized, a certain amount of self-loathing results and more extreme body modifications are sought (much like Toni Morrison's main character in *The Bluest Eye*).

Figure 11: Detail III, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003

But what would it mean to suggest that Lakra, himself a postcolonial Mexican subject, has subjected Betty to these alterations? If we treat these tattoos and other modifications as evidence of a will to colonize, then perhaps *Betty* offers Lakra a way to recreate and thereby own the violence of imperial control. [62] As a result, in this reading,

[61] McLeod, *Beginning Colonialism*, 54. Also: Homi K. Bhabha, 125. Bhabha goes on to say that ultimately "to be Anglicised is *emphatically* not to be English," meaning that colonizers will never admit the colonized to be equivalent through fear of their threat to overtake the dominate role.

[62] Contra to the notion of the tattoo as "primitive," there are also circumstances in which the tattoo is aligned with Western authority. Perhaps, most notable in Nazi Germany, concentration camp individuals were tattooed with numbers for tracking purposes. In Japan, prisoners were sometimes tattooed in order that they are recognized after their release as permanently stigmatized members of society. This was also the case in nineteenth-century British-run Australian penal colonies and in the Japanese "internment camps" in the U.S. during WWII. This history of the tattoo is especially poignant when Lakra chooses to inscribe the Aryan form of the swastika into Betty's right ankle (Fig. 11). By this simple mark, Lakra conjures images of Jewish and marginal people tortured and killed in Nazi WWII prison camps. A sickening feeling of disgust and complicity, even more than half a century later, still rises in our throats and the scars of these events on culture and people throughout the world remain close to the surface. The extermination of millions of people treated as mere objects, without any right to their own identity or body,

Betty is doubly "fucked" by both the dominant West and Lakra himself. Yet, Lakra is also "fucked." For, considering that most of these marks are tattoos drawn in a kind of manner suggestive of adolescent doodling and a sophomoric skill-level, it seems that the Mexican artist remains *by his own hand* underdeveloped and "primitive." As noted, Orientalist stereotypes frame the subaltern as "crude," "inferior," and "despotic" while the West is "developed," "superior," and "rational."[63] So, like the construct of the Mexican Other, the graffiti shows he can try but never fully succeed in being a dominant force. Although he makes his mark, it will never be seen as mature or complex. Lakra performs his graffiti onto *Betty* as a "mimic man" whose acts of mimicry only enforce the distinction between colonist and colonial subject. Homi K. Bhabha, Indian-born author of an integral text on postcolonialism: *The Location of Culture* (1994) takes over where Said left off, arguing that the "colonized subject" acts like a colonizer, a "mimic man" who is never accepted as equal.[64] Therefore, although Lakra – as artist – can take over the representation of Betty, he still perpetuates the same cycles of control used by the Western colonizer (thus, never breaking from it) and does so immaturely, irrationally, and unconvincingly.

Within Mexico, perhaps the most enduring legacy of Spanish colonization is the Catholic Church, references to which pervade Lakra's work and *Betty* in particular. For example, in addition to three dots that represent The Trinity in several places on Betty's legs (Fig.11), there is the cross on her cagina, the halo which encircles her head, and the two thin-line tattoos of thorny branches (Fig. 12) around Betty's wrist, which

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is beyond gruesome. Yet, the labeling and inhuman treatment of marginal people continues to this day, even if on a smaller scale, under circumstances deemed crucial, and masked by governmental regulations.

[63] Macfie, 4.

[64] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 54.

suggestively correlate with Christ's victimization. Such blatant references to Catholic iconography mark the subject as (literally) scarred by European culture. Her halo, earlier a mark of exaltation, under the influence of her other objectifying marks, becomes a surrounding light that quashes rather than radiates. The halo suddenly looks heavy and more like a helmet or vice placed onto Betty's head, and the thorns around her left wrist (called a "cuff" in tattoo culture) evidence her victimization and persecution, as well as her enslavement within a culture defined by Christianity. In the Mexican context, the Catholic themed over-painting and tattoos are signs that the Spanish plan of colonization and control, imported and implemented in Mexico, was successful in supposedly "civilizing" the native inhabitants.

Figure 12: Detail IV, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003

Many of the ideas considered thus far, are taken to extremes in Lakra's pin-up *Untitled (Por Payasa)*, 2003 (Fig. 13), as a cursory description of the work makes clear. Weighted heavily to the dark side of the discussion around postcolonial identity, *Untitled (Por Payasa)* is organized around a pin-up best described as a suicidal clown. A brutal scene of degradation through sexuality and violence, she is at the center of a gory tableau where she has slit both of her wrists and is letting them to bleed out onto her dirty white

bed. Her white sundress hiked to just below her crotch, she weeps white-washed tears which may or may not be part of her disturbing clown make-up. Her skin is inked with women who mimic her arms-akimbo pose, typical iconography for female nudes who positioning themselves for the best possible display of the body. These other women line up to accentuate *Payasa*'s pose, linking her to a chain of accessibility and victimization. She seems deranged, and may be hallucinating, as is suggested by the inclusion of a "native" spirit guide beside her head, which seems to intimate the her own imminent

Figure 13: Dr. Lakra, *Untitled (Por Payasa)*, 2003

and violent end. Her painted-up derisive sad clown face actually derives from Chicano "Cholo" tattoo iconography, wherein the clown with tears would be referring to "the bad

times" when the wearer has gone through deeply painful experiences but is forced to keep a mocking jovial mask.[65] Here *Por Payasa*, wears the mask herself instead of picturing the sad clown on her body, as is customary, making the mask more literal and the pain more central. Her skin is also tattooed with some of the same tropes of rupture and imprisonment seen previously in *Betty*: initials, the dagger, the web, barbed wire, and chains. She seems backed against the wall and perhaps the victim of sexual assault due to her awkward position on the bed, tooth missing, and the seemingly stained sheets. There is a tattoo of a rope around her neck, to extend the depth of *Por Payasa*'s macabre state of mind. Her feet are cropped out of the frame leaving her stuck, immobile, and passive.

Black Faces, White Masks is the provocative title of a now famous book by proto-postcolonial scholar Frantz Fanon, in which the author refers to the subaltern treated as "the wretched of the earth." Fanon speaks directly about the fragmentation and violence that colonized people and decolonized people have against others – as well as themselves – after years of degradation under the influence of imperialistic dominance. Although there are many important differences between colonies, several things are typical of the colonial experience. Most obviously, in the colonial experience the conquered body is typically enslaved, violated, executed, and manipulated toward imperialistic ends. For, as intimated by Fanon, that is only one facet of the control; there

[65] See: Mark Dery, "Brown Power," *Print* (September/October 2005): 97. Dery identifies the sad clown as iconographic of "Cholo" "bad times." The sad clown is actually multi-faceted and multi-cultural, it is not exclusive to the Mexican/Chicano/"Cholo" population, and it is worn by a wide variety of cultures - ancient to contemporary. In addition to the explanation in the text, it can also mean a mockery of the flawed world in which the wearer inhabits, the pain of making mistakes: being human, as well as evidence that the wearer can't show their emotions and keep real emotions hidden from public view (http://tattooswithmeaning.org/meaning-clown-tattoo/). "Cholo" is an offensive term of a lower-class Mexican or a "mestizo" (Mexican with half-Indian blood, mixed-blood), however this term has partially been taken back by the Mexican/Chicano community and now applies to a specific sub-culture, tattoo style, and dress. Some associate this term with gang membership, but that is not necessarily the case.

are also a number of ways – conscious and unconscious – in which colonizers invade *the psychology* of "colonized subjects."[66] Focused on the psychology of black colonial subjects, *Black Skin, White Masks* nevertheless had profound implications for postcolonial theory, despite not being translated into English until 1967. It remained obscure until its re-release in 1986, when it grew to become a foundational text for postcolonial thought and is still a foundational text for those interested in the idea of a divided subject, on who is, like *Por Payasa* and *Betty*, more object than subject.

Fanon looked at the cost to the individual who lives in a world where due to his race he is "rendered peculiar, an object of derision, an aberration."[67] With Fanon, identity is defined in negative terms by those in a place of power and he is:

> … forced to see himself not as a human *subject*, with his own wants and needs, but as an object, as inferior and less than fully human, subservient to their definitions and representations. The violence of this 'revision' of his identity is conveyed powerfully in the image of '… an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage…' Fanon feels abbreviated, violated, imprisoned by a way of seeing him that denies him the right to define his own identity as a subject. Identity is something that is *made* for him, and in so doing they commit a violence that splits his very sense of self.[68]

Clearly, Fanon struggles with identity of the subaltern in a postcolonial world that treats a person as an object. The visual and invisible fissures of this treatment are great and, vividly for Fanon, cause irreparable damage to the point that the subaltern may be treated as and feel less than human. For Fanon, one "can never be fully outside a structure of

[66] Bhabha, 95. Bhabha discusses a "process of subjectification" which employs a "repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs colonial [identifying subject]."
[67] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism, Second Edition*, 22 – 23. McLeod is summarizing Fanon.
[68] Ibid. Also: Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 1952), 112 – 113. McLeod summarizes Fanon's text, quoting him directly.

power."[69] Therefore, seeking identity under imperialistic powers always involves a degree of objectification, violence, pain, and imprisonment of the self in this system. The violence of this revision of identity is conveyed effectively in his image of "an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage …" to his identity when he describes being a black man in a white world.[70] Like Fanon's extreme language of violence, deviance, and mockery, *Payasa* goes to extremes to convey the effects of treating the body as an exploitable and contemptible object. Unlike most of the other pin-ups in Lakra's oeuvre, *Payasa*'s skin has *literally* been split. Her wrists lacerated with marks of expurgation, in an act of self-mutilation that will inevitably be her last. Her face, actually painted with a mask, divides this pin-up between the subject underneath and the object on the surface. With cocked party hat and weeping clown makeup, this pin-up becomes a sick joke. At the mercy of Lakra's treatments, she becomes so "penetrated" that there seems to no longer be any signs of a sense of self. With fervent climax, Lakra's rendering of this pin-up indicates derangement, schizophrenia, an ultimately incoherent subjectivity. This type of degradation is clear in *Payasa* as well as (to a lesser degree) in *Betty*, but provocatively another interpretation of Lakra's pin-ups is also possible. In an alternative reading, power is *not* exclusive to the dominant regimes that continue to act as colonizers in current global system. There is visual, physical, cultural evidence of resistance and agency of the subaltern as well. It is to this alternative reading that my thesis now turns.

[69] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism, Second Edition*, 298. McLeod is quoting an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a postcolonial scholar who shares a similar stance as Fanon to the role of the subaltern.
[70] Frantz Fanon, *Black Faces, White Masks*, 112 – 113.

CHAPTER 4

READING *BETTY* AS AN IMAGE INDICATING SUBJECTIVITY

Thus far, we've read *Betty* and other related works as variously evidencing the implications of colonization. But it is also possible to read Betty's tattoos as a sign of her own agency as one who resists and takes pleasure in this defiance. On this reading, Betty's body is proud rather than posed, her tattoos subversive, rather than the sign of her subordination. Of course, resistance implies a will to overthrow the dominant system, and yet in order to achieve this type of unchained representation, the same images – or indeed, the same practices – are often used in order to re-inscribe their meaning with new connotations, sometimes turning the significance 180 degrees to signify its exact opposite.[71] For Said, reclamation of subjectivity involves bearing the "scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a postcolonial future."[72] Said speaks to the possibilities of pain turning into pleasure – a concept that is, as noted, central to the experience of tattooing – by affirming that past rupture can be absorbed and turned into means for powerful change.

[71] In this sense, the subversive *Betty* can be associated with the "notorious" "dark angel" Bettie Page, a U.S. Golden Age pin-up who often was photographed for "s & m" and fetish magazines. Wildly popular in her own time and now in ours, Page has since become an adapted symbol of rebellious sexuality for contemporary culture around the world, but especially in the U.S. Betty *González* could therefore be an appropriated Mexican version of this subversive figure, who works within the confines of pin-up but celebrates the agency of pleasure and pain. "Betty" is also a generic term for an attractive female: "babe."
[72] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 212.

Aligned since the early twentieth century with various sub-cultures and counter-cultural identity, the tattooed body – once a sign of the "primitive" – now works against the presumed superiority of the dominant culture through its connection with outlaw subcultures. Bikers, circus freaks, shore-leave sailors, blue-collar workers, gang members, and criminals have been the bedrock of tattooing in the United States and Mexico. Even into the 1990s people with significant body coverage were grouped in with "thieves and marijuana users" in sociological deviance studies.[73] However, recent changes in sociological discourses have reformed the connotations of deviant behavior – no longer classified exclusively as negative – so that they are also seen as helping to break down cultural barriers that are stagnant and oppressive. The tattooed body, once thought only to represent the scum and "base" impulses of criminals and wrongdoers, now takes on a new significance symbolizing a desirable form of agency. Now, sedition is seen as empowering change, and deviance is no longer a dirty word. The subaltern gets to "fuck" the system and does so with marks that were once the very sign of the Other's authority.

With this in mind, two of Betty's tattoos seem particularly evocative. The hissing cat and the waggling-tongued demon (Fig. 14) on Betty's skin seem to be performing defensive and mocking actions in order to fend off invasive attacks. The cat, pictured prominently on Betty's upper stomach, is wild-eyed with its hair standing on end pictured in front of a menacing wall of flames. Its hissing is suggestive of aggression and disapproval; she is perhaps ready to attack after being cornered. Likewise, the demon, which can be read as drooling and objectifying Betty's nether regions, takes on new

[73] D. Angus Vail, "Tattoos are Like Potato Chips … You Can't Have Just One: The Process of Being a Collector," *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 20 (1999): 253. This article was referring to sociological texts on deviance theory of which tattooed people have a large part.

meaning when read through the lens of resistance. When seen in this light, the demon seems to stick out his tongue at the giant hissing snake that threatens him from only a few centimeters away; notice how the demon's one eye and half-face, literally on the margins of Betty's body, condescend to the intimidating snake. The serpent, present on the

Figure 14: Detail V, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003

Mexican flag's coat of arms as representative of Mexico's enemies or of Evil, is now mocked with childish vigor; the spittle now seems to be the result of the action of his tongue making a fart noise with his mouth. Such crass humor and pointed contempt for dominant powers are the backbone of this resistance, and the fact that Lakra chooses to picture Betty's oppositions in such "lowbrow" and subversive ways surfaces in other choices of her tattoos as well.

Considering Lakra's background affinity for punk rock and alternative identities, the initials "DK" on Betty's outer thigh (Fig. 14) can be read as a tribute to the logo (Fig.

15) for the Dead Kennedys (1978 – present): a subversive "hardcore" punk band from San Francisco known for their morbid humor and biting political satire. This possibility is further supported by Betty's right knee, adorned with what appears to be the first three letters of the word "PUNK." Likewise, her knuckles are tattooed with the word "LAME," undeniably, a punk rock attitude. At essence, punk rock emerged as a means of expressing disdain for the excesses of the mainstream. The basic premise for legitimate punk rock was to write hard-edged, bare-essential instrumentation rock songs that were full of gravel-voiced anarchist manifestos and no-holds barred revelry in sex, drugs, and "no-bullshit rock-and-roll."[74] With their most well known songs being such cynical resistance-fueled tunes as "Kill the Poor," "Too Drunk to Fuck," and "California Über Alles," The Dead Kennedy's emblematize the kind of "stripped-down" détournement that is characteristic of punk, and in this context, Betty's appreciation for these sentiments can be seen as one indication (along with the simple fact that she is tattooed) that she is also a resistant subject.[75] Moreover, The Dead Kennedys, which can be read as a particular choice, whether Betty's or Lakra's, within a punk rock matrix, connote obscenity, as they are one of the only bands in history to stand trial against the

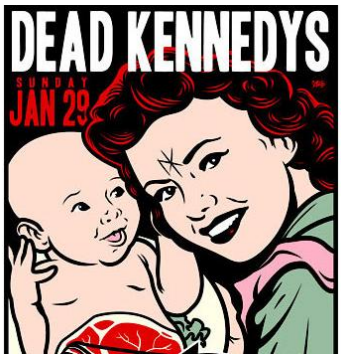

Figure 15: Poster showing logo for Dead Kennedys (as forehead tattoo), 2007

[74] Tommy Ramone, "Fight Club," *Uncut* (January 2007), accessed June 10, 2012, http://punkdaddy.com/tag/tommy-ramone/.
[75] Ibid.

censorship of album cover artwork in the music industry. In the mid-1980s, the band was involved in an obscenity trial in the U.S. over the artwork for their album *Frankenchrist* (1985), which pictured a series of cocks penetrating vulvas from below taken directly from H.R. Giger's *Penis Landscape*, 1973. The band was charged with "distribution of harmful matter to minors," but the trial ended without conviction due to a deadlocked jury.[76]

The "DK" icon, like much of the "DIY" artwork of punk rock in the 1970s and 1980s is "crude" precisely because, in punk aesthetics, the subversive nature of the image often trumps the visual appearance of the image. This is often true for tattoos as well.[77] Over and over in Lakra's tattooed pin-ups, we see the heart, the skull, the dagger, and the rose calling forth the iconography of "Old School" tattooing. Choosing to display all of these icons, Lakra's *Betty* coincides with the tradition of tattooing that relies on straight-forward, almost childish representations: a heart is love, a snake is evil, tears mean sadness. Meanings are stripped down to elementary levels. Initially, we connected this fact to an objectification and devaluing of the artist and wearer, who represented the "primitive" who could never equal the skill-level of the imperial West. Yet, it is just as possible to read these "crude" renderings as a deliberate choice to work against the elitist concepts of meaningful imagery as contingent on visual refinement. So too, these tattoos celebrate vulgar sexual jokes and amplify sexual anatomies in order to work against the conventions of dominant, prudish censoring attitudes of pornographic material. Read in

[76] "Frankenchrist Trial Ends in Hung Jury," *Alternative Tentacles.com* (2004), accessed June 10, 2012, http://www.alternativetentacles.com/page.php?page=frankenchristtrial1.

[77] I am not all claiming that tattooing is not aesthetically superlative or virtuosic; there are many practitioners that excel at creating highly masterful tattoos that take into account the kinds of forms, color, and naturalism that are lauded in the history of art. Yet, these "fine art tattoos" are most often not the impetus for the tattoo itself. The term "fine art tattoo" is used by some tattoo artists in the industry to denote their emphasis on the "fine" art world aesthetics defined by institutions/systems within art history.

this light, it seems important that Lakra's pin-up chooses not to depict virtuosic-laden tattooing imagery, but instead makes a point to use more simplistic and "crude" tattoos. By embracing "badly" drawn and simplistic symbols along with vulgar satire, sexual obscenity, and adolescent humor united with a "low" perspective on capitalist ownership of imagery, Betty, like punk-rockers before her, embraces subversive attitudes to dominant power.

As in *Betty*, Lakra's work *Untitled (Garter Belt)*, 2004, amps up the sexually obscene content of the image in order to seek détournement of the "primitive," not as evidence of shame and ignorance, but as evidence of her appetite for pleasure and pain. The woman depicted in *Garter Belt* takes the form of a demoness. Her undulating

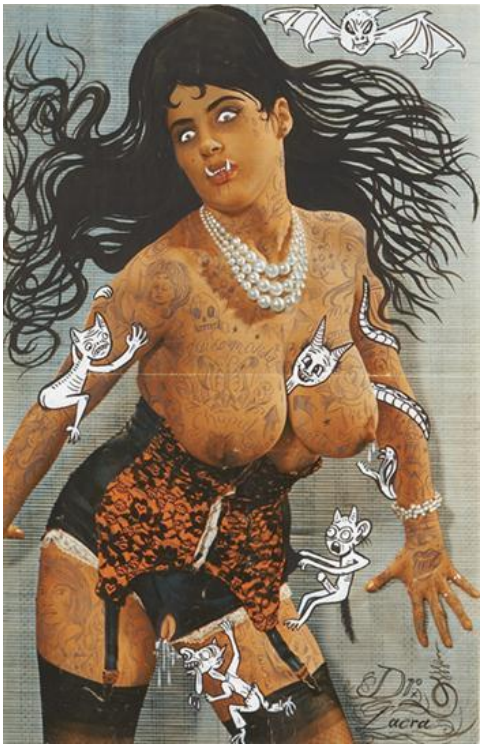

Figure 16: Dr. Lakra, *Untitled (Garter Belt)*, 2004, 47.9 x 31.1cm

untamed hair and bottom fangs dripping with blood conjure a vision of a Kali-like authority. Her wild eyes are transfixed on the viewer as soon as they approach. Without

much imagination, the rows of oversized-pearls around her neck could become the necklace of trophy skulls – the remains of those unfortunate enough to have crossed her – characteristic in images of the Hindu goddess. *Garter Belt*'s hair seems to not fit her head quite right and appears to be a beautiful disguise. Perhaps she is hideous underneath, using this disguise to lure in the unsuspecting to her wrath. The description of Kali in the Purānas could easily be applied to Lakra's demoness. The Purānas describe Kali, having manifested, as a horrifying destructive force with a:

> … dreadful swollen face flashing with indignation, wrath and ferocity, with knotted eyebrows, curving fangs and copper-red eyes, she sprang forth in fury, with murderous intent and hideous laughter.[78]

Kali bashes, ravages, devours, and tramples her victims "hurling them into her maw" and "chewing and grinding their bones in her teeth."[79] These destructive tendencies in Kali, cause her to lurk at the edges of the conventional world, spending her time in cremation grounds and battlefields. This similar depiction in *Garter Belt* is reminiscent of the marginal, subaltern Other who takes back the reigns of agency and affects his own identity, though still confined to the shadows. That Kali is a major deity in established Hindu thought, yet possesses characteristics that keep her confined to the perimeter, makes her an especially meaningful choice for Lakra's work. It is not clear if Lakra is purposely invoking Kali in this image, but considering his significant use of Asian material in his pin-up works and the similarities of their descriptions, her demoness persona could be a direct inspiration. *Garter Belt* – representing the extremity of sexuality and violence – depicts the Other in a hideous manner, yet it could also represent

[78] Cornelia Dimmit and J.A.B. van Buitenen, eds. and trans., "The Goddess," in *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purānas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 240.
[79] Ibid., 219 – 242.

a tipping of the scales, in which the outsider/the subaltern/the colonized transform into a dominant authority. Even the small little devils and the constrictor on her arm seem mere playthings submitting to her will and pleasure.

Of particular interest, both in *Garter Belt* and *Betty* (as well as other pin-up works that are also explicit), is the heightened pornographic sensibility. The erect devil penis, the gargantuan breasts, the drippy nether-parts, and the crotch-less panties in *Garter Belt*, or the erect nipples of *Betty*, offend the conventional and thereby suggest a subversive agency at work. Writing the same year as the critic who read Lakra's pin-up work as objectification, another writer saw Lakra's work in opposing terms: "Despite the status [of the work]as quaint … [it] seems to exert more agency than a flat pinup … relish[ing] its inked body …"[80]

This re-scribing of the "primitive" by inflating and collapsing dominant cultural barriers is not the only kind of defiance in which *Betty* is engaged. The "language" of prison and gang tattoos also works to express the agency of the imprisoned body.[81] By inking their own flesh, inmates and gang members feel a sense of release and resistance from a system that has literally confined them to ghettoized areas or penitentiaries. Alongside this literal confinement of the subaltern within American penitentiaries, the skin, as a marker of racial difference, is itself a kind of prison (explored in the objectivity reading), but is here reclaimed, affirmed, rendered theatrical, and cultural. With Lakra's markings, *Betty* verifies a "hard" life of imprisonment and violence.[82]

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[80] Julie Rodrigues Windolm and Joe Madura, "Dr. Lakra," in *Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City*, ed. Julie Rodrigues Windolm (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 114.

[81] Prison tattoos of various geographic and cultural milieus are a whole *huge* set of iconography and image making in tattoo history, suffice to say, cannot be done justice here in this smaller study.

[82] Although, to interpret evidence of prison-time, the tattoos pictured have to be seen as markings that "the system" has caused to occur, rather than by choice of the individual, the core of prison tattooing does

The three dots in a triangular shape (Fig. 18), mentioned before as being tattooed many times on Betty, have specific connotations within Mexican and U.S. prison and gang iconography. These marks symbolize either a type of notch-mark (tallying murders committed as member of in a gang), a "Hispanic" talisman for surviving in a harsh world: "*Mi Vida Loca*," evidence of a life on the streets: called "hobo dots," or simply The Trinity (as they did in our objectification reading).[83] "*Mi Vida Loca*" or "My Crazy Life" acknowledges living life fast and hard in order to join the forces already at work in a chaotic and unfair world; it's a matter of living crazy to survive in a crazy world. "Hobo dots" are meant to symbolize the protection of faith, hope, and love in a life on the streets that is often dangerous.[84] Additionally, the spider web tattoos on her right elbow and

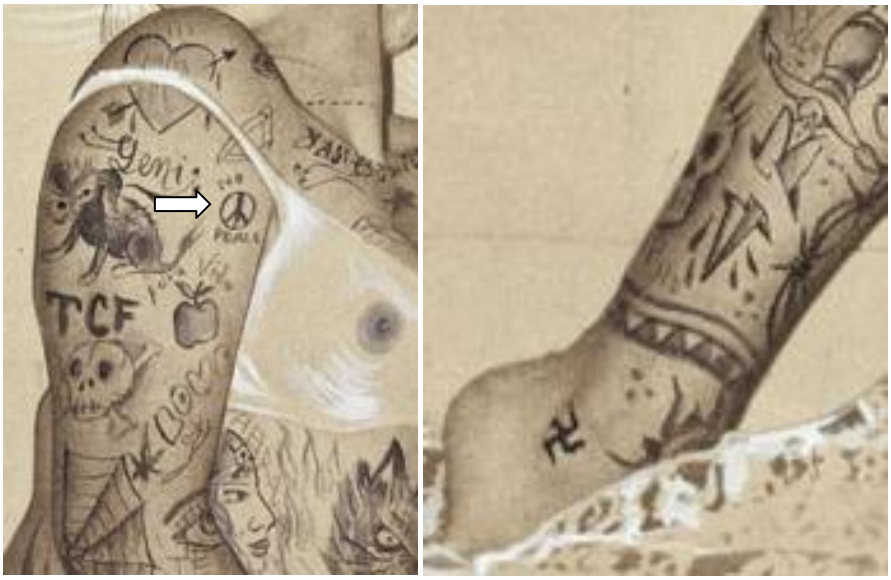

Figure 17: Detail VI, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003 and
Figure 18: Detail VII, *Untitled (Betty González)*

involve compliance from other inmates, inside-prison gangs, in addition to political, ethnic, and racially inscribed cultural groups at play within and against "the system."

[83] Three dots in a triangle are present in several cultures around the world; China, France, Sweden, as well as the cultures mentioned here. They have alternate meanings, but mostly concurrent with loyalty or group dynamics inside prisons, gangs, or in families. Although in China, the meaning is expanded to include spirituality (similar to the Trinity of Christianity, there is a Trinity in Chinese thought of heaven, earth, and man).

[84] Most often found on the hand, they are also known to be on the arms or leg or back of a tattooed person.

behind her knee as well as the five dots on her thumb are symbolic of violence and suppression. In traditional tattoo iconography, the spider web tells the tale of how many years in prison one has endured, one tier of the web per year. By this account, *Betty* has spent over six years imprisoned. The five dots (Fig. 19) are ordinarily seen in French prison tattooing as a "man between four walls" of the cell, sometimes a symbol of Chicano gang membership, or being backed up by your fellow members (the wearer is the dot in the middle with other dots representing that you are never alone on the streets). Betty's "M" tattooed in the middle of her forehead signifies her allegiance to the Mexican Mafia and her status internally as a leader (usually only leaders in the gang hierarchical system have the gang logo tattoos in their faces or necks). This placement of the tattoo defiantly on the face, re-inscribes the very identity of the wearer, as does any facial tattoo which is why only people truly committed to an alternative lifestyle and identity or committed to a "tribe" (whether it be a tribal religion, culture, or – what many consider a contemporary "tribe" – gang membership), will get facial tattoos.

Perhaps considered one of the most violent crime syndicates currently in society, the Mexican Mafia gang originated in Mexico in the late 1950s and expanded into the U.S. and Canada in the 1980s. Formed with the intent to protect their members from racial and economic injustices, the Mexican Mafia is an organization that has over 90% "Hispanic" membership. Currently, this group has a large following both inside and outside the prison system, remaining the largest gang inside the California prison system. These kinds of numbers, and the crimes committed by the members, suggest that the Mexican Mafia are a clearly defined group that sees themselves as resistant to the

injustices of the dominant systems both in Mexico and the U.S. (as well as other regions throughout the world).[85]

Figure 19: Detail VIII, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003

Whether literal or the metaphorical, this sense of imprisonment is reflected in some of Betty's other tattoos, many of which bear a formal resemblance to the kind that would be administered onto the body during the course of membership or imprisonment. For instance, the more stilted and awkward "No Peace" sign on her right arm (Fig. 17), the rose on her butt-cheek, as well as "raw" tattooed on her right wrist could be the product of a make-shift tattooing gun which is most often an indicator of tattoos done in prison or by a fellow gang member.[86] It is hard to get a smoothly curved line or any effective shading with one needle which is not vibrating at a high rate, so often prison or "DIY" tattoos have a basic stilted-black thin lines without a semi-jagged periphery to the

[85] The Mexican Mafia has members all over the globe, as does the growing membership of other primarily "Hispanic" gangs like The Maras (MS13), The Latin Kings, The 18th Street gang (M18), and The Bloods.
[86] "Cruder" rendered tattoos can be indicators of skill level or tattoos not done by a tattoo artist, much in the same way "taggers" function in graffiti. Sometimes "crude" tattoos are done by fellow gang members, or members of a group which based in violence or hate; like "white power" tattoos of swastikas or area codes tattoos for gang territory. These types of tattoos are also known to be done in various "street" cultures, done by friends or other untrained artists.

contours.[87] In this respect, Betty's tattoos link her not only iconographically, but stylistically to the concept of imprisonment.

Also noteworthy are *the amount* of tattoos on her Betty's body; she has a full "suit" all the way past her wrists and ankles. Here the "suit" fits. The amount of commitment and pain to this kind of full-body art is unusual. Most people who have been tattooed have just a few tattoos, and most are in places on the body which can be easily hidden. Continuing this interpretation, it stands to reason Betty felt some kind of release or control by altering her body in this way, as this amount of tattoo coverage often corresponds to a desire to re-inscribe the body. Through commemorating experiences that are meaningful personally, instead of allowing dominant systems to decide how race and the body's appearances are constructed, Betty arguably creates her own subversive identity.

In *Betty*, Lakra presents resistant nationalistic iconography as well, using the ever-present patriotic imagery featured on the Mexican flag: the serpent and the eagle. Betty's large hissing snake on her leg, the eagle caught between her breasts, and on her leg appears to be a wing of an eagle escaping toward her crotch, link directly to the Mexican flag. Perhaps one of the most recognizable emblems of Mexico, the eagle and the serpent are from the current version of the flag that was adopted after The Mexican Revolution in 1821. This imagery symbolizes the Aztec belief that the gods advised the capital city to

[87] Again, this formal quality is complex. Many inmates, "untrained" artists, and gang members are highly skilled with a make-shift single-needle tattoo gun - completing incredibly beautiful and complex systems of tattoos on the skin. Yet, they retain a certain "simpler look" because of using a single-needle tool. Though prison tattooing's origins come from this simple aesthetic, often these designs and characteristics have been adopted into more mainstream tattoos to invoke these criminal and outlaw tendencies in the wearer. As using these designs used to be strictly prohibited outside the wearer who *earned* them, contemporary tattoo artists have given these designs, especially the spider web, to a variety of populations. The white middle-class tattoo wearer who has never experienced the inside of a cell, for instance, but perhaps feels imprisoned by cultural systems instead.

be established on the spot where the eagle devours the serpent; that spot was believed to be the center of the empire in what is now Mexico City.[88] This mixture of nation and tribal indigenous imagery is standard throughout Mexico. Lakra often features the serpent and the eagle on his pin-ups' flesh as tattoos. However, often these icons are separated, fragmented from one another – not as the triumphant power couple of the eagle in full control destroying the evil snake. This could be Lakra's allusion to the turbulent history of Mexico as a country that has continually fought over unifying under one nationhood. [89] The diversity of indigenous peoples, the abject poverty of the majority, and the iron fist of the conservative government has left a practically constant series of conflicts in Mexican history (the current "War on Drugs" is no exception). The victory of the "Good" government authority is thereby challenged through the powerful depiction on Betty's thigh of the "Evil" subversive resistance. The flag, as it is used in many nations, is hailed on banners, postcards, bric-a-brac, and in political campaigns to pull-in political support for often fractured and diverse nations through pop-cultural visibility and commodity kitsch.[90] Here the symbolism of the flag dissolves by turning its uncompromising patriotism into a figurative and humorous thumb nosing.

Continuing our subversive reading of *Betty*, it is fairly noticeable that many of her tattoos are women's names and depictions of women. Typically, this type of tattoo would be used to venerate a significant relationship, either present or past, which has affected them substantially. It seems *Betty* has had a number of meaningful women in her life. Also, a majority of her portrait tattoos are of women; some are just of female

[88] "The Mexican Flag," *Inside-Mexico.com*, accessed May 25, 2012, http://www.inside-mexico.com/flag.htm.
[89] The snake and eagle are common to U.S. patriotic and "Old School" tattooing as well.
[90] Mraz, 5.

faces and some of naked female bodies. Read in conjunction with the idea that these are, in fact, Betty's tattoos these could be seen as commemorations of a number of friends and lovers. Moreover, the bleeding heart with an arrow through it on her right shoulder tells us that *Betty* has at least once been jilted by love. The naked posturing woman on *Betty*'s left forearm could be an empowered woman with whom *Betty* feels some affinity (Fig. 20). However, on further inspection this seems to be an intimate depiction of a lover.

Figure 20: Detail IX, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003

So, in the case of this tattoo, the all-nude reclining woman with one leg propped up, a semi-ecstatic look on her face, and what seems to be a rosy-cheeked likeness of her face tattooed right above to the left of her (like the format of a photo portrait popular in the 1980s at Sears or Olan Mills) seems to speak to an intimate relationship. We could interpret this depiction as having possible lesbian connotations. These connotations would reflect a reading of Betty – who elects to only intimately connect with women – as a rebellious subaltern subject who refuses intimacy with the (implicitly male) colonist.

This places *Betty*, again, into another category in which she can claim resistance, this time she is at odds with heterosexual dominant "norms."

The resistance to religious traditions is evident in *Betty* as well. Already, we have noted her stylized radiating halo, her tattooed skin, her confident pose, and her overtly protruding nipples as the iconography of an alternative saint. These aspects alone challenge the conventional ideas of what a Judeo-Christian icon should look like. Ordinarily, a female saint's virginally demure stature is humbled before god. *Betty* instead puffs up her chest and displays an ease with her tattooed and sexualized body. Her halo glows white and from our point-of-view, she is seated above us looking down over her shoulder, asserting her lofty character. Additionally, the "tribal" tattoos we noticed earlier depict an allegiance to spirituality based not in dominant Catholic ideal and stereotyping of Mexican identity, but in an alternative and perhaps indigenous alliance to the spiritual. The multiple sun tattoos can be read as laying claim to earth religions that value the sun as life source and ultimate deity, the Aztecs, Mexicas, and Mayans all had major deities relating to the sun.

The "tribal" and sun tattoos are not the only way in which *Betty* expresses resistance to dominant-systems. The sepia-tones and archetypal layout, which lend themselves to an ethnographic reading, reference the introduction of "Mexican types" in postcards and publications. These photographs were either Daguerreotypes in brown-toned pigments, or early photographs that came out in similar tones due to the chemicals used, or re-touched colored photos (Fig. 21).[91] At their onset in Mexican history, these photos were "artifacts" that removed the subject from his context, fracturing the documentary abilities of the image, in order to study the subaltern Other's unfamiliar

[91] Ibid., 250.

cultures. However, these photos were eventually appropriated and re-photographed by Mexicans after the revolutionary wars of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in nation-building strategies to acknowledge the diversity of Mexico by representing all of its distinctive figures. Because of this shift, the *soldaderas* (female

Figure 21: A selection of vintage photographs of "Mexican types" in the tradition of *costumbrismo* (from left: el charro, el china poblana, and el tehuana)

soldier type) and *charros* (cowboy type) have now become heroes and models for ethnic pride. The *tehuana*, and *china pobalana*, no longer ethnographic specimens, in a contemporary context, instead reflect the prideful diversity of the Mexican people. Since there was an "unstable identity of socio-cultural order" in Mexico since its independence from its European imperial powers, there was an overwhelming feeling that a recalibration of the Mexican subject was tantamount to showing agency despite the imperialistic presence.[92] Initiated by its own agenda for a diverse but unified nation, the Mexican government encouraged, funded, and released ethnographic postcards and books

[92] Segre, 12.

of "types" in the tradition of Spanish *costumbrismo*.[93] The photographs taken over by Mexican nationalists were often very similar to the ethnographic photographs, with minimal background and isolated single figure. A slight alteration was present, more often in the poses of the figures, which were less about profile and blank-look shots (as in typical ethnographic photos) and more about, à la Betty, the subject's heroic or engaging poses (i.e. in a three-quarter dynamic pose or up on a horse). However, the main shift came in their usage. Much like Lakra appropriating images of pin-ups to explore contemporary cultural constructs, so did subaltern Mexico appropriate a stock set of "types" to further their own agenda of the state, representing these clear – if limiting – examples of "social types" to pull in support from a diverse population toward one agenda of autonomy. Dr. Lakra seems to engage these qualities in his pin-up works that reference this photography of "social types" after The Mexican War for Independence and the Mexican Revolution by adhering to the same format of these types of photographs.[94]

All in all, Betty, read as a subversive agent, actively resists dominant ideologies. This feature of subaltern resistance is what Bhabha asserts as: becoming a "menace," making the subaltern voice heard and presence felt.[95] For Said, *this* "menace" *was* "resistance" in which the subaltern sees the currency of culture as "urgently

[93] Costumbrismo is a movement in the literature and fine arts of nineteenth century Spain and Hispanic-colonized America. Arising out of the interest of romantic folk life, costumbrismo was a turn toward a realistic portrayal of the world, expressing an upsurge of national consciousness and a desire to convey features of the people's life, frequently with an idealization of patriarchal morals and customs. Costumbrismo played an important role in the photography, graphic arts, and painting of Latin American countries. It was often linked to the scientific study of a country and was based on the documentarily accurate depiction of nature and the simple, attentive, and precise reproduction of the characteristics and colorful features of folk life and culture. ("Costumbrismo," *Free Dictionary.com*, accessed May 24, 2012, http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Costumbrismo.)
[94] Segre, 12.
[95] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 220.

reinterpretable and re-deployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory reclaimed as part of a general movement of resistance from the colonist."[96] As such, the treatment of *Betty* and her tattoos in Lakra's pin-up can be read not only as evidence of subordination, but as a re-appropriation of past groundwork, and a détournement of that space, in order to establish new lines of identity for the subaltern Other, at times, directly *overtop* the dominant established ones, with often with the same forms. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (the self-described Indian "Marxist-feminist-deconstructionist" of postcolonialism) notes that:

> … the more vulnerable your position, the more you have to negotiate … you must intervene even as you inhabit those structures … In order to keep one's effectiveness one must also preserve those structures – not cut them down completely … You inhabit the structures of violence and violation …[97]

These revised identity structures indicate ways of re-inscribing identity and taking it back from outside powers, or colonizers, while at the same moment still being bound-up in the systems inherited from those same imposing forces.

While it would be possible to simply view Lakra's pin-up works as ambiguous – an undecidable indication of objectification or subjectivity – it is more appropriate to read the work as being precisely about the entanglement (historical, cultural, biological, …) of cultures joined together by colonialism. It is, as I have suggested, a peculiar circumstance in which pleasure is, as in tattooing, found in and through the experience of pain.

[96] Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 212.
[97] McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 298.

CHAPTER 5

READING *BETTY* AS AN IMAGE INDICATING HYBRIDITY

It is my contention that *Betty* (and the pin-up works, more generally) use the body and tattoo iconography in an effort to express the complexities of the postcolonial globalized self as ultimately hybrid and liminal. Both hybrid, in the sense that fragments from seemingly divergent states of being are combined into a new whole, and liminal, in the sense that these new identities are never *fully* whole. As such, an identity at the limen is dependent on past definitions of identity but acknowledge the hypocrisies and difficulties of that inextricable state. Ultimately, the in-between identity acknowledges a continuous fluctuation of identity somewhere beyond and in-between any stable categorizations.

As Said contends: "cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous, they are so interrelated and interdependent as to beg off any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality."[98] Bhabha continues this definition by describing a liminal lacuna present in postcolonial identity as a "in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity …" where past fragments bear on the present subject and a "restaging" takes place that produces identity from a process of hybridization.[99] Subjectivity then becomes an entity

[98] Said, *Orientalism*, 347.
[99] Bhabha, 2. Then: McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 218 - 219. Bhabha outlines in his introduction the stakes of liminal spaces and McLeod summarizes Bhabha as setting up a process of "restaging."

from unpredictable sources, diverse materials, and many locations demolishing the "very idea of a *pure*, 'ethnically cleansed' national identity" that is stable and singular.[100]

Nowhere are the concepts of hybridity and liminality more clear than in *Betty*'s religious imagery, as the language of the colonizer and the colonized are especially entangled. A conglomeration of Catholicism and tribal religions, The Virgin of Guadalupe and The Day of the Dead iconography are prominent within Lakra's pin-ups. Notably, these traditions self-consciously emphasize the idea of identity as something constructed and unstable. The type of halo which radiates from *Betty* (Fig. 23), for example, is a hybrid image in-between spirituality, nationalism, and ethnographic connotations.

Figure 22: La Virgen del Carmen in The Church of Santa María Zaachila, Oaxaca and Figure 23: Detail X, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003

In *Betty*, the halo is a key example of these kinds of amalgamations. This halo can be seen as a specifically Oaxacan type of stylized halo present on life-size full-figured depictions of religious martyrs that are in churches throughout this region. Two examples from the city of Oaxaca are from San Antonio Castillo Velasco as well as Church of Santa María Zaachila (Fig. 22). These halos ostensibly represent a fusion of

[100] Bhabha, 7. Also: McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 218 - 219. McLeod defines the diversity of subjectivity by outlining Bhabha's sources, materials, and locations. Author's emphasis.

the sun goddess local to Mexican indigenous cultures with the halo present in Catholic imagery for the Virgin.

Catholicism was introduced to Mexico by Spanish colonizers beginning in the sixteenth century with the expedition of Hernan Cortes on behalf of royal crown which wanted to defeat British and indigenous claims to the region.[101] The history of Catholic faith in Mexico is a combination of forced and coerced Spanish influence as well as resistance and adoption from indigenous peoples.[102] The evidence of these cultural scars is in the imagery itself. Said establishes, once again, the postcolonial foundations of hybrid resistance and power by identifying that "'Old' religions were not simply removed, far from it: they were reconstituted, redeployed, redistributed" in alternate frameworks.[103] Betty's spiny halo is ultimately an accumulation of imagery based in the kind of halos used in Mexican icons and The Virgin of Guadalupe (Fig. 24). Betty's seems to be a conglomeration of the Catholic orb-type halo with a Mexican indigenous twist to include single-rayed spines and a breakdown of the smooth halo circle into an irregular radiating halo. Thus, this kind of halo is considered emblematic of nationalism for Mexico, evidence of Catholicism, as well as exhibiting ethnographic residue.

This halo also functions as a reference to contemporary commoditized Mexican kitsch when connected to the wildly popular cultural icon The Virgin of Guadalupe. The extent of kitsch involved in The Virgin of Guadalupe brings her all the way to our grocery stores as a cheap prayer candle. It seems odd that in the ethnic food section at a

[101] "The Border: Hernan Cortes Arrives in Mexico," *PBS.org*, accessed May 25, 2012, http://www.pbs.org/kpbs/theborder/history/timeline/1.html.
[102] Shep Lenchek, "The Catholic Church in Mexico: Triumphs and Traumas," *Mexconnect.com* (2000), accessed May 25, 2012, http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/668-the-catholic-church-in-mexico-triumphs-and-traumas.
[103] Said, *Orientalism*, 121.

local North American grocery that the Catholicism of Mexican culture is so fundamental as to offer these candles as seemingly essential "package-deal" of what being Mexican

Figure 24: Rodrigo Valencia Toro, *Virgen de Guadalupe*, 2001

means. This is further exemplified in the mass-production commodity sterilization which happens across the site of The Virgin using her image (among many other things), on mud-flaps, as a glow-in-the-dark dashboard statuette, and on the front of cowboy boots sold by a U.S. manufacturer.

The symbolism of The Virgin of Guadalupe or Our Lady of Guadalupe or Morena, which translates to "brown-skinned" virgin, has roots in the resistance and reclamation of Mexican indigenous religions with the onset of Spanish Catholicism. The origin story for The Virgin is from the sixteenth-century, when Juan Diego was a short distance from Mexico City in the Tepeyac desert and an image of the Virgin Mary

appeared to him. She appeared not as a European Madonna but as an Aztec princess speaking Juan's native language, telling him to build a church at the bottom of the very hill where her apparition had manifested.[104] Connections are also made from The Virgin to the sun goddess/earth goddess/the lady of the seven flowers/Tonantzin, as it was believed that the site of Juan's church was the site of a temple, leveled years back by the Spaniards, used for worship of this pre-Columbian goddess figure.[105] Needless to say this hybrid form of European Catholicism and native Mexican religion made a huge impact. The Virgin of Guadalupe is now a national symbol of Mexico and a symbol for independence from European culture, regardless of its past as a tool used to impel Catholic conversion. The Virgin was even used in military and political campaigns from pre-Revolution times to contemporary regimes. The influential leader in The War for Independence, Miguel Hidalgo, and the Mexican Revolution's unifying figure, Emiliano Zapata, both emblazoned their flags with images of The Virgin.[106] More recently, in the 1970s, Cesar Chavez carried her banner in the United Farm Workers struggles for economic justice.[107] Clearly, this symbol has deep roots in the resistance and re-inscription of colonial culture in Mexico.

Looking, then, at the particular ethnographic elements of The Virgin of Guadalupe icon it becomes obvious the influences that co-mingle in this image. The main figure is very much a typical Catholic rendering of The Virgin Mary in her characteristic blue mantle, crowned as the queen of heaven, with eyes downcast modestly

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[104] "Our Lady of Guadalupe," *Catholic Online: Inform, Inspire, Ignite*, accessed April 10, 2012, http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=456.
[105] Joseph M. Gilbert and Timothy J. Henderson, eds., *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 25.
[106] Judy King, "La Virgen de Guadalupe – Mother of all Mexico," *Mexconnect*, accessed April 10, 2012, http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/1404-la-virgen-de-guadalupe-mother-of-all-mexico.
[107] Ibid.

and hands in prayer. Yet, that mantle for Guadalupe is dotted with stars to symbolize her connection to the cosmos and her dress has a textile pattern native to Mexico. The mantle of stars actually forms the picture of the sky as it is on December 12th, 1529 when Juan Diego had his vision. Also, the roses usually pictured right outside of the glowing mandorla refer to the earth goddess' link to flowers and the Castilian roses which Juan Diego gathered in the origin story of this symbol. The mandorla's golden glow which emanates as kind of full-body halo also has very stylized striated spiked rays coming out from The Virgin's body. These details are residual images from The Virgin's association with the sun goddess/earth goddess; they are most often thought to be the product of the rays of the sun and their treatment in Aztec imagery or maguey spines (a plant similar to agave, useful and sacred in Mexico).[108] Many fusions of these types have taken place within Mexican culture, and are not necessarily thought of as Spanish-influenced anymore, but still, the residue of these violent incursions remains glaring present.

The skull tattoos on Betty's leg and arm connect with the skulls that pervade The Day of the Dead altars and iconography. The icon-laden altars reflect the religious hybridity and liminal border-crossings present in The Day of the Dead festivities include Catholic crosses and "tribal" skeletons, prayer candles and sacrificial offerings, images of the Virgin and images of loved ones, pop-culture and commodity culture. The first days of November have corresponding religious holidays around the world as The Day of the Dead rituals occur in many nations alongside the Catholic version – All Souls' Day or All Saints' Day. Originating in Mexico, The Day of the Dead has massive observances of parades, altars, and prayer throughout the country. This religious day combines

[108] I consulted several sources for this background information: see *Mexconnect*, *The Mexican Reader* (25), *The Mestizo Mind* (190), and *The Mexicans* (95).

Catholicism with an Aztec festival that celebrates the goddess Mictecacihuatl (queen of the underworld) where observers would gather in burial grounds and leave offerings for the dead in remembrance. Marigolds, brightly-decorated sugar skulls, demons, and food offerings continue to be a part of The Day of the Dead linking this Catholic tinged holiday with its tribal-based religious rites.

Figure 25: Four examples of hybridity and liminality in Day of the Dead altars

Despite the candles, altars, and crosses adulation on The Day of the Dead, it is the prominence of the skeleton in the iconography that sets it apart from its Roman Catholic predecessor. Considered a *momento mori* – a reminder or mortality – the skeleton is a key component of Mexican imagery and can be considered to cross-over from religious

imagery to that of nationalistic and Aztec imagery as well. Its notability could be attributed to the popularity of The Day of the Dead altars, evidence of Mictecacihuatl in the modern *Catrinas*, or the popular imagery of José Posada (which prominently and sardonically features The Day of the Dead skeletons and demons in context of Mexican socio-political situations).[109] Additionally, Oaxaca, Lakra's hometown, hosts one of the biggest The Day of the Dead festivals each year.

The altars are not simply a showcase of indigenous or Catholic imagery, but can be reverence for pop-icons as well (Fig. 25). From immediate family to Frida Kahlo, from Johnny Ramone to Mel Blanc, The Day of the Dead parades and altars have become ways to mourn and celebrate the lives of many different kinds of identities, at the same time dominant and subaltern, capitalist and grass-roots, and everything in-between, creating a hybrid imagery based simultaneously in reality and fantasy. Bhabha likens this hybridity to new and shifting complex forms of representation which emerge to deny boundaries in the liminal self. There are no longer binary divisions of native/foreigner, master/slave, imaginative/physical.[110] The difficulty of letting go of past forms, that have been shored-up for centuries in honored traditions, is still evident in many ways in political, socio-economic, and visual cultural spheres. Yet, the certainty and fidelity in the development of these forms continues to crumble as global systems (primarily

[109] It could also be linked into the Aztec god Xipe-Tótec (the "flayed-one" who essentially becomes a skeleton once he removes his skin and who puts on other people's skin, male or female, shape-shifting from body to body). The information of Xipe-Tótec comes from: Erica Segre, *Intersected Identities: Strategies of Visualization in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Mexican Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 264. Also, Carlos Miller, "Day of the Dead," *Azcentral.com*, accessed May 25, 2012, http://www.azcentral .com/ent/dead/articles/dead-history.html. *Catrinas* are lady skeletons, often wearing colorful dresses or wedding attire, who are attributed to the goddess of the underworld as well as Posada's well-known, revered depiction (c.1890-1910) of a skeleton named Catrina in a large straw hat with flowers.
[110] Bhabha, 145 - 174. Also: McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism, Second Edition*, 252. Bhabha discusses the Hegelian "master/slave" and other hybrid forms that are present from binaries in Chapter 6 of *The Location of Culture*, entitled: "Signs Taken for Wonders."

through the internet) give a more diverse range of people access to knowledge, one that is not always filtered through dominant media controls.

As a mainstay of this artist's pin-ups, tattoos are impossible to ignore in Lakra's work. The breadth of diversity and overall composition of Betty's tattoos (which we have yet to discuss) evidence hybrid and liminal forms – imagery that pushes subversive subaltern agendas to the forefront while showing the enduring influence of dominant colonizers. The arrangement of one tattoo to another tattoo in *Betty* seems to be linked with "Old School" layouts (Fig. 26) as well as one strain of Mexican/Chicano designs. Mexican and Chicano style and layouts are generally more based in "black work," thin lines, and circuit-based organization of images (Fig. 27) due to influences from the subaltern culture, the prison system, and the poverty of Mexican populations in California and other areas of the U.S.[111] In contrast, "Old School," the origins and aesthetics of which are based in the U.S., generally have thick outlines, colorful inks, and collage-based layouts with an emphasis on separate pieces being juxtaposed together on one body (rather than melding together, intertwining like the Chicano, circuitry style). Betty seems to predominately sport the "Old School" collage layout, a tattooing style that was originally a product of the neo-imperialistic U.S. perhaps targeting its influence on Mexico in this image. Lakra's choice to primarily overlay Betty with "Old School" collage-style is not surprising considering her readings earlier that link her to Aryan and "Anglicized" dominant structures. Yet, Betty's double-portrait on her left inner arm (an

[111] "Black work" is tattooing that only involves finessing black ink into the skin, monochromatic shading and images only. Mexican and Chicano style tattoos are usually only done using one needle (due the cost of needles and their lack of availability in a penitentiary atmosphere). Their *circuit* based layouts involve the images "plugging into" one another rather than remaining separate and collage-like (as in the "Old School" layouts). There is also indigenous, "Chilango," as well as many other tattooing styles related to Mexican and Chicano tattooing, but the style highlighted here is certainly one of the most prominate.

image that fluidly tops a rosy-cheeked nude with a close-up of her own face) as well as the intermingled lettering on her chest, and "M" (Mexican Mafia) on her forehead connects Betty to Mexican and Chicano designs.

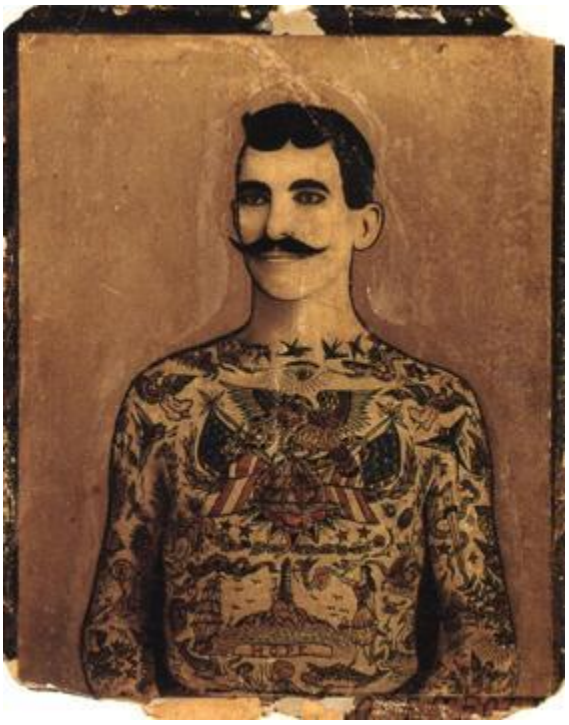

Figure 26: Gus Wagner with "Old School" collage-based layouts (c. 1890s) and
Figure 27: Mexican/Chicano tattoos: circuit-based, thin lines, and "black work"

Importantly, these forms share space with tattoos from other cultures. Note the black, thick-lined "tribal" whirl-pool on her left outer shoulder and her Chinese yin-yang symbol on her leg. Indeed, with further scrutiny, Betty's tattoos reflect a skin that is at once multi-national and multi-ethnic, thereby transcending and complicating a reading of Lakra's work that is restricted to colonialism and its legacy in Mexico. In *Betty* there is a bit less diversity of mixing of styles, but often Lakra's pin-ups include a multitude of references to many different styles from around the globe.[112] For instance, in the pin-up

[112]These terms outline a conglomeration of cultures which have combined throughout diasporas from Mexico (and other "Hispanic" countries) to the United States and abroad. Lakra uses iconography and

Untitled (Toñito), 2010 (Fig. 28), where Lakra depicts "Oceania" facial tattoos, United States or Mexican Eagle, Japanese Koi fish and dragon, Thai-looking tiger, and Chicano gang-style girlfriend portraits with a mainstream Asian swastika on one body. This

Figure 28: Dr. Lakra, *Untitled (Toñito)*, 2010

admixture, which rarely appears in the "real world" of tattooing (mixing styles does seem to appear more in the U.S. than in a majority of the cultures with a more extensive history of tattooing), was not always favored, and it remains uncommon to mix all these styles, even today. Thus, the scope and format of Lakra's tattoo iconography amplifies the

techniques honed from Japan, The Philippines, Thailand, New Zealand (Māori), and still endless others. Traditionally a tattoo wearer would only be tattooed with one style with specific rules, where as contemporary practice often mixes styles indiscriminately. However, there are still contemporary tattoo styles and artists who refuse to give or mix certain culturally associated tattoos. Lakra's entire "fine" art practice mixes tattooing cultures and ethnicities as well.

diversity occasionally seen in contemporary tattooing toward a specifically globalist end, drawing on everything from Thai "magic" tattoos, U.S. "Old School" tattooing, and "Chilango" styles to tattoos which evoke Buddhism, The Day of the Dead, and Socialism.

Figure 29: Detail XI, Dr. Lakra, *Untitled (Betty González)*, 2003

Another prime example of this type of simultaneity and hybridity, that has changing meanings, is in the symbol on the pin-up's right ankle: the swastika (Fig. 29). This symbol, which today has a strong and seemingly stable meaning, in fact, is layered and ambiguous, especially when deployed in the company of so many other symbols. The Aryan swastika is inextricably tied to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust as a symbol of mass-murder and a horrific attachment to ethnic "purity," and the swastika has been adopted by many groups after this time period to emblematize their messages of hate and violence: in recent memory, the "white power" movement and also cult leader and killer Charles Manson. Yet this symbol has a complex history. It is also an Indus Valley, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain symbol that far pre-dates any adoption of the swastika for other agendas. In these ideologies, certainly a sweeping generalization, the swastika indicates a lucky or auspicious object. Though the swastika here in *Betty* is turned to indicate the Nazi power symbol and perhaps indicate the Aryan dynamics of control

(from which Mexico itself has had a history of obliteration of racial and ethnic difference), Lakra does use the swastika in many of his pin-up works ambiguously (as in *Toñito*). The point being, the symbol's origins are not simply dominant and are often well removed from violence or hate and are routinely manipulated toward other ends by Lakra.

Asian influences play only a small part in *Betty* (her "tribal" and yin-yang tattoos), but Lakra relies heavily on Asian imagery in many of his pin-up works.[113] For

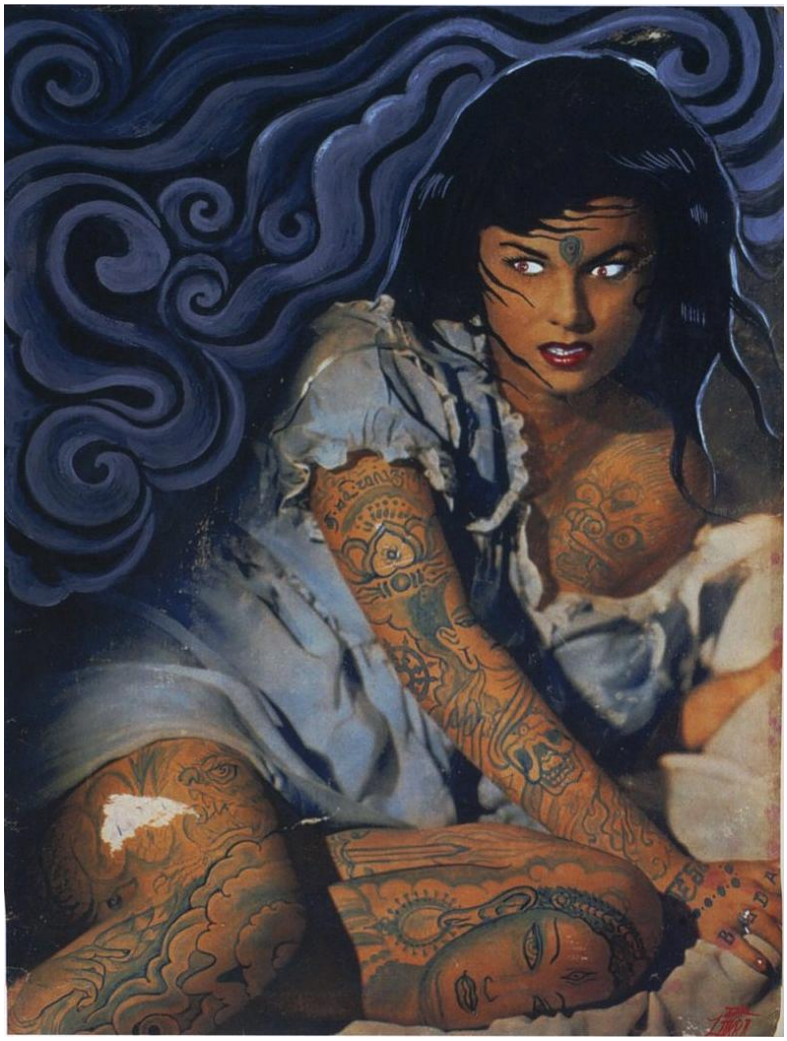

Figure 30: Dr. Lakra, *Untitled (Budista)*, 2003

[113] See: *Untitled (Cine)*, *Untitled (Lyn May)*, *Untitled (AnnaBella)*, *Untitled (Budista)*, *Untitled (Toñito)*, and *Untitled (VEA)*, 2007 … to start.

example, Lakra's *Untitled (Budista)*, 2003 (Fig. 30), is a pin-up which pays homage to Asian tattooing and Buddhist thought; she is also a bodice-busting reclining pin-up who has been over-painted and inked with tattoos.[114] Lakra has outlined the pin-up's hair with a thin line of white creating a back-glow around the *Budista*'s head. He has re-painted her eyes, wide-eyed and fearful, or maybe dangerous. Her hair seemingly blackened and its sheen enhanced with blue streaks of paint, the blue-black hair looks as if the wind was blowing provocatively and at once growing sinisterly across her forehead – a treatment that is very graphic and comic-strip in nature. Her lip, moistened with a glossy reflection, highlights wantonness. The backdrop includes Japanese-style depiction of ocean waves or the sky. On her forehead is her third-eye in the tradition generally used for male deities perhaps in the manner of Shiva or Indra.

Once again, Lakra combines multi-cultural tattoos. The tattoo on her shoulder, perhaps Tibetan, seems to be a demon's face. On her arm, one finds writing and lotus petals above half of a Buddha torso, on her elbow a wheel, perhaps referring to the wheel of Dharma and teachings of the Buddha, or to the wheel as a secular symbol of good luck. The writing on her right arm is not quite faithful to early Sanskrit characters. This could be a product of Lakra quoting a nineteenth-century version of certain Buddhist texts copied by Europeans or other Asian pilgrims who came to study Buddhism and copied script in order to bring it back to their countries, despite lacking the ability to accurately copy the language. A stylized skull, on that arm, seems to resemble a depiction from a Tibetan bead or bowl. Her knuckles have the letters "B – U – D – A" on them, a placement showing the level of her devotion. Hand tattoos mark one of the most

[114] The interpretation of these signs relies heavily on this author's conversations with my committee member Dr. Nicolas Morrissey, specialist in Asian art and architecture.

visible parts of the body, as the hands are not easily concealed in a normative social setting. Any tattooing on the hands is thus incurs the true weight of the stigma of a tattooed body. Next on her legs, on the left, is what seems to be a Buddha head with an Indian style ear and a flaming sword next to him. The sword could belong to the bodhisattva figure Manjuśri, and would thus represent discriminating wisdom.[115] The right leg has a lot of smoke or wave design on it with a hand holding what looks like a lotus blossom, perhaps held by a bodhisattva figure. To the left and above this hand is the tail of a seemingly Chinese dragon, perhaps from the medieval period, and a tiger's head and mouth with a curling tongue.

Read in conjunction with Said's characterization of the "Oriental" female, Lakra's pin-up traverses the line between sexually willing and willed. Lakra infantilizes the pin-up once again in this image with ripped baby-doll style dress on *Budista,* which effectively places her in a docile and malleable category, perhaps suggesting that she is in the process of being raped. Her posture could be read as semi-reclined and submissive. The image continues a disturbing turn if you read her eyes perhaps showing fear, a detail distressingly feeding into the male power-fantasy. The Western subject, on Said's account, seeks to possess the female subaltern, treating her body (and the land for which she stands) as a fertile, compliant object. At the same time, *Budista* could show signs of resistance – though this type of action, on the part of the colonized, is passed off as irrational and untamed sexual energy in need of a steady Western hand. Are the pin-up's eyes scary, instead of scared? Is *Budista*'s half-reclined pose in fact an indication of movement, as she labors to get up after having been kicked down, her dress torn in the

[115] "Manjuśri: The Bodhisattva with the Sword of Discriminating Wisdom," *BuddhaNature.com*, accessed April 10, 2012, http://www.buddhanature.com/buddha/manjusri.html.

course of fighting back? Certainly, Lakra's image could be portraying the violent histories of colonized lands as well as the resistance to this type of aggression.

In stark contrast to *Betty*, Lakra's *Budista* pin-up offers a mélange of Asian Buddhist iconography. Not coincidentally, it seems, Buddhism is a system of thought which centers on the exact opposite of the violent scene described above, instead emphasizing mindfulness, tolerance, and the control of sexual faculties. Interestingly, in *Budista*, Lakra chooses to show what appears to be the flaming sword of Manjuśri, a figure in Vajrayana Buddhism who personifies the sword to cut through ignorance. In the Tibetan Dhyani texts of songs and meditations, Manjuśri reflects these tenants:

> The perception of truth is not for all minds
> These are the qualities which force its exclusion:
> Desire, greed, ignorance, pride,
> Joy in sensation, love of the past, fear for the future,
> Anger at the present, the inability to see clearly.
>
> These are the qualities which bring it nearer:
> Hope, joy in change, love of the many
> Creative action, individual growth, acceptance of new ideas
> The ability to understand potential.
>
> These are the qualities when truth is here:
> Acceptance of all form as having equal reality
> Clear vision over long distances
> Love of all things and non-things
> Joy in what is.
>
> With my sword I strike down those who presume to travel
> to places forbidden to them
> I decide the worthiness of an adept, the talent of a master
> the distance both may travel
> My book records the karma of each whose deeds
> determine the world which they shall inhabit.
>
> I guard the door to Truth unending
> Neither mercy nor power shall move me from my decisions
> I wear the robes of judge and jury

Across the abyss I hold my golden ladder to aid the worthy
While the unworthy who try to cross
Find only shifting sands within their grasp.

I am blue and gold and also white
I bend neither to the right nor the left
If you wish to ascend to truth, then you must do these:
Look deep within your heart
Feel the many chains which bind you, hold you like an anchor
To the planes of illusion
Not one link will I allow to pass the sacred gates.

Impartial understanding, great in the wisdom of many worlds
Only these do I allow to pass
That they may have wisdom to trade for Truth …[116]

There are many telling parallels between the idea of a flaming sword that strikes down ignorance for the purpose of seeking clarity in chaos and the predicament of the subaltern that challenges the violent impositions of a dominant culture. These Buddhist verses diagnose the imperial colonizer as ignorant and of limited capacity: "…The perception of truth is not for all minds/These are the qualities which force its exclusion:/Desire, greed, ignorance, pride,/Joy in sensation, love of the past, fear for the future,/Anger at the present, the inability to see clearly…" And the subaltern solution is offered as the antidote: "Hope, joy in change, love of the many/Creative action, individual growth, acceptance of new ideas/The ability to understand potential./ These are the qualities when truth is here:/Acceptance of all form as having equal reality/Clear vision over long distances …" In another segment, resistance to binaries can be implicated from the language of this song: "I bend neither to the right nor the left/If you wish to ascend to truth, then you must do these:/Look deep within your heart/Feel the many chains which bind you, hold you like an anchor/To the planes of illusion …" By representing Asian

[116] "Manjusri: The Bodhisattva with the Sword of Discriminating Wisdom," *BuddhaNature.com*, accessed April 10, 2012, http://www.buddhanature.com/buddha/manjusri.html.

thought systems and imagery, Lakra taps directly into cultures which were foundationally seen as the "Orient," therefore, *Budista* further represents the passive stereotypes as well as a subversive "menace" to violent Western assertions.[117]

As such, some of the sentiments expressed in this song are directly applicable to notion of postcolonial resistance: most notably, the desire to "strike down those who presume to travel to places forbidden to them" while hoping for an "impartial understanding" to take hold afterward. This verse even seems to connect to contemporary, global attitudes: "clear vision over long distances." The first three stanzas alone seem like they could be an indictment of the colonial with a prescription for the future – the first stanza describing the Western qualities which led to the need to seek and possess other lands, the second and third stanzas an instruction for the solution of universal understanding. Above all, this song reflects a profound statement for a universal understanding of Otherness to which Lakra also aspires. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Lakra was thinking of this song in particular when making this work, only that it is possible that he is aware of the specific Buddhist iconography he uses and its implications as contrary to Western thought systems.

Using Asian material, traditionally from separate nations and cultures, Lakra's work embarks on further fusions and liminality. This synthesis, can be read in the translated Sanskrit (or what could be epigraphic Sanskrit) of Lakra's *Budista*, which explores a certain kind of deceit, though perhaps not intentional. The conversion which happens in the process of translating these images is like copying a copy of a copy. The Sanskrit copied by Lakra may have come from a nineteenth-century European copy and may reflect either an effort to understand anthropologically the practices of Buddhism or

[117] Perhaps, *Budista* further represents rebellion by referencing the Sandinistas or Batista in her name.

the attempt of an Asian pilgrim who traveled to India to learn Buddhism as a devotee before returning to his native country to teach others. This type of malformed image is also present in Lakra's *Untitled (AnnaBella)*, 2009 (Fig. 31), where the symbol on her shoulder looks to be a Thai (or at least Southeast Asian) copy of a Buddhist symbol.[118]

Figure 31: Dr. Lakra, *Untitled (AnnaBella)*, 2009, 9.9 x 13.9 inches

This trend of changes during translation, reminiscent of our earlier discussion of Paz, is extended to the tattoos on *Budista* in that the pin-up displays a type of Pan-Asian conglomerate on her flesh. Lakra has *Budista* don a Tibetan face, an Indian ear, a Chinese tail in the imagery of her tattoos. Whether for the sake of art, seeking anthropological understanding, or due to a pilgrimage, these translations and the fusion of the multi-cultural images by Lakra, the West, and Asian pilgrims are less about a lack of respect than an effort to understand. So, once again, Lakra seems to intentionally show

[118] Again, this interpretation comes through conversations with Dr. Nicolas Morrissey (see earlier note).

"multiple meanings" and interpretations in order to ride as well as cross the line between established narrow-minded conventions of right and wrong, good and bad.

With these attributes, *Budista*'s skin becomes inscribed with "mixed" ethnicities and variations of thought systems. Each penetrating the other to form a hybrid image, a new body emerges that exhibits visible remains of ruptured fragments. The ebb and flow of translation, and its essential process of breaking through barriers in order to put things back together in ways that are inevitably different (as through Lakra's hand), becomes especially apparent in *Budista*. The Asian conglomerations herein, illustrate an interchange of dominant and subaltern – both influencing and resisting – to fuse momentarily on the flesh of *Budista*; just as these types of combinations appear in Mexican imagery in *Betty*, as we have discussed. Lakra's pin-ups then become willfully unstable, endlessly complex, and multi-racial to reflect the conglomerations characteristic of hybrid and liminal postcolonial identities.

"Going Global:" Lakra's Shift toward Global Structures

Throughout this chapter we have explored *Betty* and other, related works in detail, treating the former as a kind of Rosetta Stone through which to understand the dense imagery in Lakra's pin-ups works. As I have already begun to suggest, the giving and receiving of penetration as a type of "fucking" or "fucked" double-agenda of Lakra (and Paz) is suggestive of a postcolonial and specifically subaltern mindset coded in *Betty* and Lakra's other works. Against this backdrop, we have accessed aspects of contemporary Mexican identity, and by extension, the identity of any subject in a cosmopolitan society that observes imperialistic structures akin to historically colonized nations. Imbued with

markings that resist the notion of an absolute and stable identity, Lakra's pin-ups reveal a fractured, hybrid, and liminal contemporary self, which is ultimately multi-dimensional and endlessly complicated.

This breakdown of stable binaries is a denial of borders that embraces the possibilities of a hybridization of the subject. As we have seen, Lakra's pin-ups fill a variety of subject and object positions and manifests postcolonial identity as something that is constantly changing and morphing *only* to disperse re-combine in the form of something that is relentlessly malleable. This *something* is hard to define – hard to pin-down like smoke, waves, rays, webs, or flames – elements which are often provocatively featured in the background of Lakra's pin-up images. Consider, for example, the flicking

Figure 32: Dr. Lakra, *Untitled (VEA)*, 2007

fire that licks at the face of the woman in *Untitled (VEA)*, 2007 (Fig. 32), the bold colors of which seem to outweigh the pin-up and complicate the distinction between figure and ground. Especially poignant is her posture and relationship to the flames. She can be read as either the source of the fire (itself an agent of change), or as its victim, engulfed by its destructive power. Of course it is both readings that are conjured simultaneously, and relatedly, works like *Untitled* (*VEA)* (which postdate *Betty* by several years), allow the figure to fade as a focal point, instead sharing the stage with a *dynamic* (here symbolized by fire) that destroys and renews in equal measure. All told, a work like *Untitled (VEA)* stands for the idea of perpetual and multi-dimensional flux, which Lakra's work comes to symbolize in increasingly self-conscious ways.[119]

In light of Lakra's position as one who originates from a subaltern nation, his experiences at a local and international level, his presence in the system and yet against it, and his immersion in the ways and wiles of culture, his work – and perhaps especially, more recent works like *Untitled (VEA)* – offer an important perspective on contemporary forms of globalization. His pin-ups – the identities of which are purposely ambiguous due to their unclear racial and ethnic status and "monstrous" yet beautiful bodies – inevitably encompass the fluidity and power dynamics involved in the postcolonial subjectivity. [120] However, they also transcend, with increasing intensity, the identities of the colonist and the colonized – separate, yet amalgamated, viewpoints. Indeed, his work

[119] *VEA* is the title of the weekly pin-up magazine that was banned during its time in Mexico, the title was accompanied by the subtitle: "Mujeres/Politica/Toros y Deportes" … "Women/Politics/Bulls and Sports." "Vea" means "to see, watch, comprehend, understand, visualize" … (translation.babylon.com).

[120] A "monstrous" body is indicating both: 1) the "monstrous" female body – implicitly "grotesque" and scary, but also: 2) the re-evaluation of that body (as in Mary Russo's book *The Female Grotesque*) as powerful and as an agent of change. This argumentation is also present in: Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, "The Body," in *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art After 1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 129 – 159 as well as Joanna Frueh, *Monster/Beauty: Building the Body of Love* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

is ever-more attentive to the idea of an in-between space, which is new and continually morphing in conjunction with new ideas, people, technologies, and representations, only to dissolve and reform again.

Considering the plethora of dynamics at play in Lakra's imagery, it is sometimes hard to locate over-arching shifts in his work. Do Lakra's works reflect a "centre-periphery axis" of influence in which there is a clearly defined line between normative society and the Other?[121] Or do they instead reflect an increasingly globalized world which has become much more web-like – endlessly morphing on both international and local levels in complex and unpredictable ways?[122] Looking at his most recent works, might we say that they betray "chaotic patterns of integration and interaction" which are beyond the "motherland-colonial" thinking and involve new consequences and realities of living in-between?[123]

Although a work like *Betty* may be best read in terms of a colonial dynamic focused on issues of dominance and resistance, more recent works seem preoccupied with the idea of "global flows," which Arjun Appadurai (Indian cultural-anthropologist) associated with the notion of *–scapes*.[124] In his book, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996), Appadurai argues that in a globalized world there are erratic interactions between "fluid and irregular shapes" which reflect, like the near horizontal forms in *Untitled (VEA)*, a landscape rather than a linear, polar or in-between which follow "older, stable and more predictable notions of production, consumption,

[121] McLeod , *Beginning Postcolonialism, Second Edition*, 306.
[122] Ibid., 305.
[123] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.
[124] Ibid., 30. Appadurai discusses five *–scapes*: ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes. So, these concepts of globalization are only partially based in capitalism, as is the conventional way of discussing "global" influence.

and migration."[125] Appadurai's *–scapes* begin to track the ways history, politics, and language are inflected by the new "actors" of multinational corporations, diasporatic communities, the new nation-state, sub-national groups (religious, political, economic), and face-to-face groups (villages, neighborhood, families).[126] He contends that even though some of these groups have roots in older forms of interaction, that they have changed at a core level due to the changes of how global and local relationships interact. Appadurai outlines a more specific reading of the present reality of "global flows" in *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (2006). Here he identifies two frames of global systems *vertebrate* and *cellular*.[127] The continued presence of the older world organizations of the *vertebrate* system locks together in an international body where the each nation's sovereignty is still paramount. This is largely due to international societies clinging to the past allegedly stable arrangements. However, in the *cellular* landscape the world is "clearly linked up by multiple circuits along which money, news, people, and ideas flow, meet, converge, and dispense again."[128] In an age not quite interested in a complete *loss* of stable "ground," contemporary global systems fuse both steady operations with one clearly operating in an unpredictable, constantly mobile, and complex fashion. This type of *cellular* arrangement contrasts to those depicted in *Betty*, a work which is in some sense all posture, stable, and discrete from the "ground" or – *scape* that surrounds her.[129]

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[125] McLeod , *Beginning Postcolonialism, Second Edition*, 306.
[126] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 33.
[127] Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 21.
[128] Ibid., 25.
[129] Earlier pin-up works seem to be "fixed" in the picture-plane (especially Betty with the white-wash framing), while newer works seem to embrace forms outside of these confines more readily (like murals, *Untitled (VEA)*, etc.).

Some critics, including Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000), view globalization as a new form of imperialism, and a system that exploits power relations "more brutal[ly] than those it destroyed."[130] The First World wealth uses low-pay, high-interest loans, and the increased mobility of workers to serve self-interested authorities in the guise of servicing peace and equal-opportunity for the multitude.[131] This all seems quite grim, but Hardt and Negri insist the solution to contemporary imperialism lies in international initiatives to oppose the new colonialism and set up channels of solidarity and inspiration.[132] Perhaps, then, our salvation from this new severe system is seeking a global commonality – an appeal for some kind of universal.

As we have seen, these types of global flows and amalgamations, and the volatile changes within them, are significant to this paper's consideration of Dr. Lakra's pin-ups, which express a contentious identity that is at once fractured and hybrid, liminal and global – even as that identity stays connected with the "primitive" universal urges of pain and pleasure. For, whatever shifts one can detect in his pin-ups, the body and its skin (links between all human beings) are necessarily at the forefront of Lakra's *entire* collection of works. The focus, herein, has been on Lakra's primary figure: the pin-up, nothing if not a meditation on the body and its skin. In this segment of his work, Lakra uses the body as a canvas in order to convey the complex notion of a postcolonial identity, in which the traditional boundaries and borders of selfhood no longer exist, and one is instead faced with the reality of a self in constant flux. Moreover, Lakra's bawdy humor and violent intrusions on the body help to presence the struggle inherent in finding

[130] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 43. John McLeod (*Beginning Postcolonialism, 2nd Ed.*) describes globalization as the "new imperialism by remote control (307)."
[131] Ibid., 134.
[132] Ibid., 43.

a new sense of Mexican nationhood – and by extension other groups in the ever-changeable landscape of globalization. Central to the understanding of Dr. Lakra's art is that he not only attempts to personify the complexities of the postcolonial self in metaphors of "penetration," but that he *pictures* both domination and resistance simultaneously by showing on the surfaces in which he works the evidence of hybridity and the continuous movement of subjectivity as the in-between (oscillating between dominant victories and subaltern resistance) "gone global."

CONCLUSION

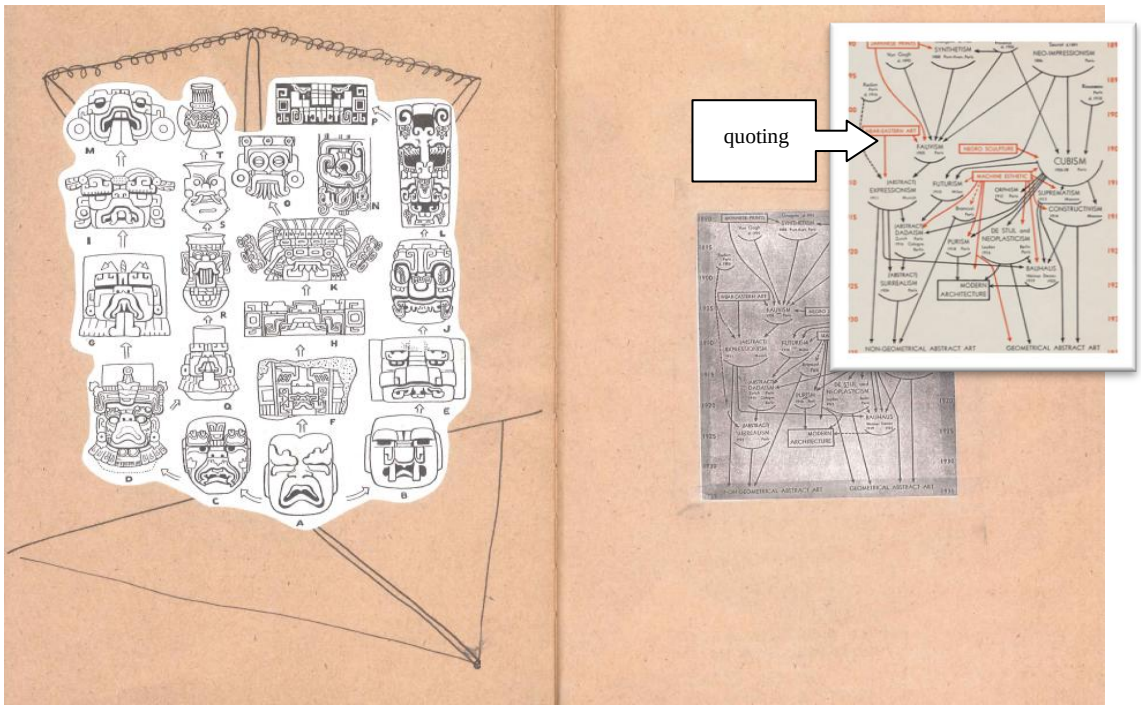

Figure 33: P.50 of Dr. Lakra's "look book:" *Los Dos Amigos* w/ Barr's cover (1936)

The works considered in this thesis are suffused with surreal, erotic, and devilish entities that erupt with visual noise and vulgar humor, as rare in a "fine" art setting as they are intimidating and stimulating. Farting, slurping, copulating imps surround seductively posed tattooed women. Snakes and skeletons mock, miniature demons coil, bite, touch, and sniff the body's intimate recesses. Wild-eyed voluptuous temptresses with fangs and claws threaten. Solitary figures of women are poised for sexual availability all while displaying tattoos reflective of agency – a dizzying multiplication of

images and tattoos canvas nearly every inch of Lakra's pin-up works and thereby conjoin a variety of viewpoints reflective of a postcolonial hybrid and liminal identity.

As we have seen, by not shying away from overt sexual references and sometimes controversial subject matter, these representations handle cultural material that has the possibility to arouse disgust and curiosity, pain and pleasure, knowledge and ignorance. In order to re-scribe stagnant binaries, Lakra produces imagery based in both "civilized" dominant culture and "uncivilized" subaltern cultures. Inevitably, this imagery restages a collaborative and resistant cultural mélange (pin-up, punk rock, gangs, nationalism, Mexico, Tibet, U.S., Māori, Aztec, Catholic, Hindu, …) that considers the fissures present in contemporary identities. The viewer is put in a disorienting position – reacting to visual stimulation from a binaristic point-of-view that conditions us to view "low" material as a visual sign of an identity unable to rise above ignorance, innocence, and the impulses of the body. In the same moment, Lakra presents material considered "high." In "fine" art form (drawing, painting, sculpture), he uses symbolism derived from cultures with rich histories, traditions, and spirituality of both the Western "center" and the subaltern "periphery." Lakra's images, then, express anxiety-ridden border-crossings of a global urban world faced with a multiplication of cultural enclaves in which these kinds of interactions are present in everyday life. These realities involve expanding ethnic diversity, escalating information flows, re-imagined corporate-dominated financial systems, increased geographic mobility. Lakra's images combine these juxtapositions on the surfaces of his pin-up works – ultimately making the female body a site on which to work out the convolution of ideologies present in contemporary society.

After an extended look at Lakra's pin-up works, in conclusion, it seems necessary to briefly mention his current work (2010 – 2012), which extends themes explored in his pin-up works into a different media.[133] Painting elaborate site-specific works for museums and commissioned street art, Lakra's murals extend the themes explored in his earlier pin-up works – cultural amalgamations, sex, and violence – but move beyond the anchors of history-laden (found) objects toward a more Surreal style that better exemplifies the structures of globalization.[134]

As the "look book" *Los Dos Amigos* from 2006 suggests (Fig. 33), Lakra has been thinking about history less as a linear and progressive model and more of a circular and arbitrary model. Juxtaposing clip-art "native" totemic heads and Alfred Barr's more ordered diagram of "fine" art influence (from a 1936 MoMA exhibit *Cubism and Abstract Art* (Fig. 33)), correlates the two in order to establish an alternative to conventional models of interaction.[135] The totem clip is cut into an amorphic organic shape, the arrows pointing up and out, side-to-side; the graphic iconic heads almost seem to mouth different voices. One seems to be sticking out its tongue and another is not connected into this cyclical system by an arrow at all. In contrast, an aged, grayed-out photocopy of Barr's famous chart is cut-out in a regular square, and is all words and long directional arrows. All of these arrows seem to be pointing down, with the text labels of each entire movement category dryly stating their claim as the date of each year chaperones the whole process from the side. This juxtaposition by Lakra in his "look

[133] One of these murals was mentioned very briefly in the introduction, as well.
[134] Lakra has not abandoned his earlier strategies. He still works with directly tattooing found objects, paint on canvas, and other media simultaneously to this "new mural style" – one which partially was influenced by his friend, former Orozco workshop peer, and representative at Kurimanzutto (José Kuri) pushing him to expand his work.
[135] This is this author's translation of this juxtaposition, the "look book" (again author's label) refers to an exhibition book that is composed primarily of images and next to no text that involves context, analysis, or authorship. This "look book" requires the viewer/reader to rely on their visual associations.

book" positions the Other as resistant to outdated conventional models of thought. The visual cultural material and web-like progressions perhaps reflect a more closely the urban-based global structures of today.

So too, Lakra's murals from "Viva La Revolucion: A Dialogue with the Urban Landscape" at the San Diego MOCA, 2010 (Fig. 34), and the Day of the Dead festivities in Etla, Oaxaca, 2011(Fig. 35), emphasize circular, web-like, and circuitry-based forms (where images ostensibly "plug-into" each other) which ebb-and-flow in liquidy, shadowy, and smoky states. These types of formations seem much more connected to Appadurai's description of new global forms (*–scapes* and *cellular* mentioned in Chapter 5) that "flow, meet, converge, and disperse again" in irregular flows than his past works.[136]

Figure 34: Dr. Lakra site-specific mural San Diego MOCA, 2010

The swathing of the mural across the wall and around the corners in the San Diego MOCA, along with its surreal hallucinogenic images intertwining and dissipating into each other, show Lakra's mural as beyond conventional states of consciousness and

[136] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 30 – 33. And: Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers*, 21 – 25.

rectilinear framing. The associations we make are sometimes hard-pressed and endlessly different from person to person. What does a Black Metal guy have to do with a bunch of naked people around a fire? Is that even a Black Metal guy or is it a Goth reference instead? Is it even a guy? Lakra and Baglione's mural in Etla follows similar patterns. Lakra's characters are multi-headed freaks with nails pounded into their heads, hairy and sweaty and also one with a both cloudy and watery face simultaneously. Shadowed figures painted to interact with the walls descend to the ground and interact with urban features like grounding cables for electricity. This "street art" work has silhouettes of ethnographic body parts mixed with graffiti font, cartoony characters, and a gutted double-corpse. Lakra works within the "fine" art refinement of mural work and slides easily into a rougher urban graffiti project. These kinds of projects combined with his pin-up works, as well as the variety of other media Lakra works in, seems to clinch his extraordinary ability to keep connected to the pulse of contemporary existence, yet employ an extensive knowledge of historic references. Moreover, this applicability of his treatments to postcolonial globalization implores for further and more thoughtful study as Lakra continues his career in the art world.

Figure 35: Dr. Lakra and Herbert Baglione, Oaxaca (November 2011)

Maybe the famous Oscar Wilde trope that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life"[137] is true, and Lakra's example of appealing to universally base instincts anchored in the human body can delve deeper into understanding the structures of sex and violence in our culture. Perhaps, equally inspiring, Lakra can answer Donna Haraway's call "for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction …"[138] Indeed, Lakra does call for pleasure – and not just the "garden-variety." Lakra seems to suggest room to be made for the pleasure of pain, the pleasure of sex, the pleasure of humor, the pleasure of knowledge, and the pleasure of difference. And he seems to propose a willingness to explore new forms of inquiry into all cultural constructions and utilize new "global flows" which are beginning to let go of the lingering ways we structure existence and form our identities.

[137] Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, [1889] 2004), 18.
[138] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late-Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 150. Haraway is a vital and progressive postmodern cultural theorist with neo-Marxist and feminist leanings.

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