Stitch & Split

Selves and Territories in Science Fiction

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Ghost in the Machine: *Marion C. Martinez's Chicanafuturist Art and the Decolonization of the Future*

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Écrit pour le projet *Stich and Split*. Corps et territoires dans la science fiction, un projet de Constant vzw, organisé par la Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelone, avec la collaboration de Universidad Internacional d'Andalucía-UNIA arteypensamiento, Sevilla.

Written for the project *Stitch and Split*. Selves and Territories in Science Fiction», curated by Constant vzw and organised by the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, with the collaboration of the Universidad Internacional de Andalucía-UNIA arteypensamiento, Sevilla.

Escrito para el proyecto *Suturas y fragmentos*. Cuerpos y territorios en la ciencia ficción, un proyecto de Constant vzw, organizado por la Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, con la colaboración de la Universidad Internacional de Andalucía-UNIA arteypensamiento, Sevilla.

In February 2001, the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, launched *Cyber Arte*, an exhibition of visual art fusing "elements traditionally defined as 'folk' with state of the art computer technology."[1] The show's four artists used computers to create 'traditional images,' such as those of religious figures (Van Cleve 2001, F1). Yet, some of the so-called traditional images, most notably Alma López's 1999 *Our Lady*, had a distinctly contemporary twist. This 14" x 17.5" digital print portrays the Virgin of Guadalupe as a young, athletic, self-confident Latina. It upset and offended some New Mexicans — most notably, a number of vocal Catholics and Hispanics — and sparked public debates concerning the value and purpose of art, the responsibilities of a public institution to its constituents, and, most interesting to me, the parameters of Chicana cultural identity in the twenty-first century.[2]

Like *Our Lady*, the visual art of Marion C. Martinez, one of *Cyber Arte's* three other artists, testifies to the dynamism and malleability of Chicana art and cultural identity. In this essay, I revisit *Cyber Arte* and *Our Lady*, the questions they posed, and the debates they prompted in order to examine Martinez's overlooked work. Martinez, a self-described "Indio-Hispanic," was born and raised in northern New Mexico in the shadow of Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL), birthplace of the atomic bomb and one of the most important nuclear weapons research centers in the United States and world. Her mixed media sculptures and wall hangings of Catholic images, nine of which were included in *Cyber Arte*, consist of discarded computer components (some of which the artist has acquired from a dump at LANL). Using the tools of the present, Martinez reproduces and transforms traditional Hispanic art forms and, at the same time, underscores New Mexico's history as a dumping ground for the remnants of twentieth- and twenty-first century technologies. In doing so, she challenges nostalgic and romantic visions of New Mexico as the "Land of Enchantment," provides new and complex meanings for Hispana cultural identity and cultural production, and offers work emblematic of what I term Chicanafuturism.

Between Heaven and Earth

The santo (i.e., image of a saint or other holy personage) is one of New Mexico's most scrutinized and highly marketed art forms. New Mexican santos are generally classified into two types: bultos, or figures in the round, and retablos, or panels. Traditionally, they are carved from wood, coated with gesso, then painted with tempera or other water-soluble, vegetable- or mineral-based pigments. Today, santos may still be found in numerous New Mexican homes, although they are usually made of plaster, tin, or plastic.

Beginning in the 1920s, members of Santa Fe's Anglo intelligentsia initiated what they perceived as a revival of the santo tradition. Inspired in part by the Arts and Crafts and primitivist movements, they turned not only to resuscitating what they deemed the "traditional arts" of New Mexico's native cultures, but to preserving them in the face of the drastic technological changes of the early twentieth century (Nunn 2001, 28). According to Lucy Lippard, "[f]olk art has been defined as art that reflects its surroundings" (1990, 77). However, "those surroundings are understood to be 'outside' everyday modern urban life, and therefore the objects are valued as artificial bonds to an idealized past" (Lippard, ibid.). To many Anglo art patrons in and beyond Santa Fe during the early twentieth century, the wood carvings, textiles, baskets, and metalwork of New Mexican Hispanos and Indians became emblematic of pre-industrialization, of a less complicated, more innocent time, place, and people, and of a "folk culture deemed to be in danger of disappearing" (Nunn 2001, 28).

"The Land of Poco Tiempo"[3]

In addition to appearing temporally distant, New Mexico's Hispanos have been regarded as spatially remote and physically isolated. Colonial New Mexico has been described as "a lonely outpost of Spanish settlement," "the fringes of civilization," and "the farthest and most ragged rim of Christendom" (McWiliams 1949, 63; Espinosa 1967, 82; Steele 1994, 6). And even in the post-colonial twenty-first century, the state is still regarded as both physically and temporally distant from the "forces of modernity," as represented by capitalism and industrialization (Pulido 1996, 35). Despite its prominent role in establishing and maintaining the dominance of the so-called free world and its superpower champion, the United States of America, New Mexico in fact remains relatively economically underdeveloped. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, it ranks thirty-ninth in the nation for gross state product and 19.3% of its population lives in poverty (compared to 13.3% of the total national population).[4]

By virtue of hailing from, occupying, and/or representing the periphery, New Mexico's Hispanic population has, by and large, been barred from the present and future and fixed in a racialized past: it appears to have changed very little over the centuries and seems to occupy a world older than and separate from the white, capitalist, mechanized, and/or digitized world of modernity and post-modernity. In particular, by virtue of being associated with the pre-industrial and pre-digital, Hispanas and Hispanos are often deemed incapable of understanding, mastering, or even living with science and technology — signifiers of the present and future.

The tourism industry in New Mexico is responsible in part for manufacturing romantic myths about the state's putative temporal and physical distance from the modern world and for glossing over its demographic, socio-economic, and environmental realities. Tourism capitalizes on tradition as it produces, maintains, and markets ethnic identities in colonial or post-colonial situations. An adver-

tisement in *The New Mexico 2002 Vacation Guide* for Tierra Wools of Los Ojos in northern New Mexico illustrates the marketing of a rural and primitive Hispana ethnic identity. In this advertisement, a Hispana works at a wooden spinning wheel surrounded by colorful rugs and balls of yarn. As evidence of how little things have changed in the so-called Land of Enchantment, she wears what appears to be nineteenth-century attire, including a lace mantilla atop her head.[5]

Furthermore, New Mexico's tourism industry highlights the state's scenic landscapes and recreational activities. Yet, in addition to competing with and concealing the state's socio-economic woes, the image of New Mexico as a site of pristine natural wonders obscures its history and current role as a repository for radioactive waste. New Mexico became such a dumping ground on 16 July 1945 when scientists from Los Alamos National Laboratory detonated the world's first atomic bomb at the Trinity Test Site. It is also home to the United States' first subterranean storehouse for transuranic radioactive waste (located near Carlsbad Caverns, a popular tourist destination). Radioactive and hazardous waste was also deposited from 1959 until the late 1980s at Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque and is still stored at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Clearly, science and technology have had a profound impact on New Mexico's physical landscape. Narratives of the "Land of Enchantment" as a place of unspoiled natural beauty suppress histories of colonial exploitation and racial and ethnic conflict and displace the state's legacy of environmental transformation and injustice.[6]

Of Machines and Matachines

Challenging myths of and about the "Land of Enchantment," Marion Martinez's nine works in *Cyber Arte* underscore the effects of science and technology on New Mexico's environment and people.[7] These works are made with computer parts, although some also consist of wood and other materials. The matachines pieces resemble the elaborate headdresses worn by male dancers of the matachines, 'a ritual drama performed on certain saints days in Pueblo Indian and Mexicano/Hispano communities along the upper Rio Grande valley and elsewhere in the greater southwest' (Rodríguez 1996, 1). In northern New Mexico, the headdress that dancers wear typically consists of a miter, from which numerous, bright, multicolored ribbons hang. In her *Danza de la Matachine* series, Martinez has used circuit boards for the miters and cleverly replaced the ribbons with wires. Beneath each "miter" and behind the "ribbons" lies a second circuit board, which represents the dancer's face, complete with eyes, nose, and mouth.

For approximately the past twenty years, Martinez has incorporated computer parts into her visual art. She has gathered these parts from friends' basements and garages, as well as from the Black Hole, a dump at LANL. "Among other things, my work makes a stand about recycling technology," she told a reporter from the *Albuquerque Journal* on the eve of the opening of *Cyber Arte* (Van Cleeve 2001, F2). Indeed, Martinez's work points directly to New Mexico's history as a repository for high-tech trash. Moreover, as the only artist in *Cyber Arte* to use computer hardware — as opposed to computer software (with which the other three artists created their digital prints) — she raises difficult questions about the ways in which we throw away the tools of the information age, many of which are obsolete as soon as they are made available to us, but few of which decompose rapidly or safely.

Because she draws inspiration and gathers materials from her surroundings, Martinez describes herself as a folk artist. She was born in Española, New Mexico, in the midst of the Cold War on 24 January 1954 and raised in Los Luceros, a small, rural, primarily Hispano community approximately forty-five miles from LANL. In an interview I conducted with her, Martinez stressed that the lab has had a profound impact on her family and the people of Los Luceros in general: it proletarianized, urbanized, and, Martinez added, anglicized many northern New Mexican Hispanos by replacing the agrarian livelihood upon which previous generations had depended with wage labor and enabling them to forge ties with people outside their communities. However, although it has offered them some physical and socio-economic mobility, LANL and the demands of working there have also left many of the people of Los Luceros with less time. '[We're] too busy,' Martinez explained. '[We] can't make tortillas anymore.' For better and for worse, LANL, she concluded, enabled 'us'to move away from who we are.'[8]

Change is an important theme of much of Martinez's work. Because folk artists' surroundings have changed with time, folk art, she insists, is far from a static category. Martinez's surroundings are filled not only with computer entrails, but with bultos and retablos as well. Like folk art in general, santo production in New Mexico has never occurred in a cultural vacuum and Martinez's work is evidence of this. It has been influenced by Mexican, European, and Native American art and by the forces of commerce and tourism. For example, until the late 1920s, the celebrated Córdovan santero José Dolores López generally finished items that he produced for friends and relatives with house paints, but the bright colors 'proved to be rather too gaudy for the Santa Fe market' (Briggs 1980, 53). López's Anglo patrons suggested that he leave his work unpainted, which probably gave it more of a rustic and (ironically) 'traditional' appearance.

Although Martinez does not consider herself a santera in the "purest sense of… what a santera is," her work falls into, draws from, and transforms the already dynamic New Mexican santo tradition.[9] In terms of content, her pieces are clearly linked to this tradition: they depict holy personages, including el Santo Niño de Atocha and Our Lady of Guadalupe, both of whom are very popular among Catholic Hispanos in New Mexico and figure prominently in santo production there. *Oratorio a la Virgencita*, for instance, consists of a 20" x 12" x 4" oratorio, a box containing an image of a religious figure. Martinez

has decorated her wooden oratorio, which dates back to the nineteenth century, with carved and painted lunette top- and bottom-pieces, a typical feature of many New Mexican retablos. Such retablos also often feature carved patterns and designs. In *Oratorio a la Virgencita*, the artist has replaced such carvings with two rows of embossed copper roses (one on the oratorio's left side and the other on its right). finally, with its multiple layers of ribbon cable and circuitry, the image of the Virgin inside the oratorio resembles a gesso relief — that is, a retablo in which "certain elements, such as the head, hands… and folds in the garments are built up with gesso to project from the surface of the panel, adding a three dimensional effect" (Gavin 1994, 81). While some of the materials that Martinez uses have been used by santeros for many generations (such as the nineteenth-century oratorio of *Oratorio a la Virgencita*), many are novel, unique, and unconventional. Nonetheless, in terms of both its content and form, her work is clearly situated in the New Mexican santo tradition.

Ghost in the Machine

Martinez was exposed to the santo tradition while she was growing up in northern New Mexico. She was raised Catholic and spirituality was and still is an integral part of her life and work, for she sees a close connection between human labor and the divine and maintains that her art is an expression of her love of god and life. Martinez believes that "god" or the "divine spirit" links humans to one another, as well as to the non-human, and manifests itself in the material world via the human and non-human. In her eyes, even a discarded circuit board is "pure god energy, it's spiritual energy" because of its "beauty," "order," and "symmetry."[10]

While Martinez's work comments on the deification of science and technology, it also recognizes that the sacred and divine may be found in the everyday, material world, even in objects dismissed as trash. And just as saints, according to Catholic doctrine, mediate between heaven and earth, Martinez's works link science and religion. Some, such as *Jesus con la Cruz*, merge the sacred and quotidian, as well as the old and new and organic and inorganic. This 20" x 13" x 4" wall hanging is made with a combination of worn wood and shimmering computer parts, as well as with fence wire, which represents Christ's crown of thorns. As a symbol of Anglo-American encroachment upon and expropriation of land in New Mexico and the western United States, the fence wire may also be read as a technology of conquest. Martinez has fashioned Christ's profile from a circuit board, above which she has placed a disc (representing his halo). The circuit board and disc lie on top of two pieces of wood, which constitute Christ's cross. Like the saints, Christ bridges the ethereal and earthly, for Catholics believe that he is god made flesh. Similarly, the Pentium chip at the top of his cross represents a merging of the ethereal (qua cybernetic) and material, as well as a blurring of the local and global and the Third and first worlds. Intel, maker of the Pentium chip, owns and operates a plant in Rio Rancho, a suburb of Albuquerque. The chip illustrates that the local is often that which is left behind by larger economic processes. In the case of New Mexico, the local is sometimes literally refuse: that which is physically left behind. Like many Third World factories that manufacture the products that make the first World "modern" or "post-modern," Rio Rancho's Intel plant helps to sustain the United States' high-tech economy by providing low-tech manufacturing jobs in an economically depressed region where wages are relatively low and environmental protections are relatively lax. The Pentium chip in *Jesus con la Cruz* locates New Mexico in the global economy, linking it to distant and not-so-distant places where information technologies and, subsequently, e-waste (i.e., discarded information technology tools) are produced. At the same time, it, along with the fence wire, speak of local histories of injustice and struggle.[11]

Chicanafuturism

If "folk" art and practices are defined as "artificial bonds to an idealized past," then Martinez's work also merges some of New Mexico's ostensibly competing narratives — namely, those that pertain to its past, as represented by Indo-Hispanic "folk" art and practices (e.g., santo production and the matachines ritual), and those that concern its present and future, as represented by its role as a dumping ground for the technological detritus of modernity and post-modernity. In doing so, it challenges stereotypes of the technophobic woman of color, stereotypes that primitivize us, that exclude us from the domain of science and technology, and, by extension, that bar us from the future and the ways in which it is imagined.

In recent years, scholars in African American studies have closely examined the relationships of African Americans to science and technology via the concept of Afrofuturism. According to Alondra Nelson, Afrofuturism reflect[s] African diasporic experience and at the same time attend[s] to the transformations that are the by-product of new media and information technology. [It] excavate[s] and create[s] original narratives of identity, technology, and the future and offer[s] critiques of the promises of prevailing theories of technoculture (Nelson 2002, 9).

Like African Americans, Chicanos and Chicanas have been barred from Western definitions of the human and denigrated as, to use Paul Gilroy's term, "infrahuman" (i.e., subhuman) (Gilroy 2000). They, too, have been excluded from and/or objectified by discourses of science. And they are also generally associated more with a primitive and racialized past than they are with the technologically enhanced future. Yet, new technologies have transformed Mexican Americans just as much as they have transformed African Americans and they have enabled us to articulate (i.e., enunciate and link) past, present, and future identities.

Drawing from Nelson's definition of Afrofuturism, I define *Chicanafuturism* as Chicano cultural production that attends to cultural transformations resulting from new and everyday technologies (including its detritus); that excavates and creates original narratives of identity, technology, and the future; that offers critiques of the promises of science and technology; and that redefines humanism and/or the human. Martinez's work does not privilege science and reason over religion and spirituality. Instead, it merges them and, thus, offers an ontological and epistemological alternative to that of the Enlightenment (i.e., rational) subject. Moreover, while Afrofuturism reflects diasporic experience, Chicanafuturism articulates colonial and post-colonial histories. By linking New Mexico's Indo-Hispanic traditions (i.e., santo production and the matachines ritual) and its current role as a repository for high-tech trash, Martinez's work accomplishes this. Additionally, it comments on the ways in which technology — from Los Alamos National Laboratory in its entirety, to a single computer chip — has transformed Hispana cultural identity. In recounting the social, cultural, and economic changes that her family and community underwent as a result of the expansion of LANL during the second half of the twentieth century, Martinez remarked that technology forces a people to alter its ways. At the same time, she pointed out, technology and its "remnants… can be the vehicle [for]… hold[ing] on to who we are."[12]

Martinez's work underscores technology's dual function: it "preserves at the same time that it mediates (or distorts) ethnic identities and cultural traditions" (Foster 2002, 59). In many ways, it uses technology to preserve the santo tradition. If it deviated too far from this tradition — that is, if Martinez produced pieces that were not sufficiently santo-like, she might not be a successful professional artist. At the same time, Martinez's high-tech santos break from and challenge New Mexico's santo tradition precisely because they are a legible part of it. In doing so, they distort and complicate Hispana and, more generally, Chicana cultural identity and traditions by enabling us to enunciate the "who we are" of the past (or the "who we are" that we of the present imagined ourselves to be in the past) through the tools of the present. However, her work also begs the questions: Where does the "who we are" of the past sever from or blend into the "who we are" of the present and future? That is, when do "we" stop being "us" and become something or someone else ("them"?)? In short, where do the boundaries of culture and identity lie? Are we still Chicanas if we no longer make (or *never* made) tortillas by hand? If we work at a computer, rather than at a spinning wheel? If we alter or drift from Roman Catholicism to shape our own universalist spirituality? Such queries are difficult, if not impossible to answer. Still, clues to their answers may be found in the hybrid cultural products and practices that men and women have actively created and/or enacted over time, such as santos and the matachines ritual. These syncretic products and practices underscore the resilience and malleability of culture and cultural identity and reveal the simultaneity (as opposed to linearity) of past, present, and future. Above all, they pose new, more interesting questions, such as: What does change mean (and to whom)? Who benefits and who loses with change? Which changes do we struggle against and mourn? And which do we embrace and celebrate?

Martinez strategically retains and redefines aspects of the old and embraces the new to forge an affirming cultural identity. Her work preserves what she sees as the beauty of an Indo-Hispanic past 'its Catholic icons and rituals' while offering new meanings for them. In ascribing new meanings to these long-standing forms and practices, Martinez inserts what is generally regarded as the archaic and/or the primitive into present technoculture. New Mexico's Hispanos have been excluded not only from the present by being viewed and/or described as backward 'Spanish' villagers; they have been eliminated from its future as well. Nelson asserts that the 'technologically enabled future is by its very nature unmoored from the past and from people of color' (Nelson 2002, 6). That is, visions of a bright, white future in which 'burdensome social identities' are meaningless and/or donned and shed as easily as an article of clothing typically exclude people of color (ibid., 2). Martinez's work claims both the present and future for people of color, specifically Hispanas, as it merges New Mexico's narratives of ethnic identity and 'folk' art with its history of scientific research and environmental destruction. However, like the copper and nickel in her wall hangings and sculptures, the present and future may sparkle, but they are far from unproblematic. Her luminous pieces illustrate the beauty of change, but they do not naïvely celebrate it, for they offer a critique of technology's detrimental impact on the environment. In short, Martinez's work, like the controversy surrounding Alma López's *Our Lady*, reminds us that for someone somewhere, change comes at a cost.

Conclusion

Although much of the criticism directed at *Cyber Arte* and *Our Lady* was blatantly sexist and homophobic (and, therefore, groundless), some of it revealed anxiety over very real demographic and economic changes northern New Mexico–in particular, Santa Fe — has undergone in recent years.[13] For example, the *Albuquerque Journal* reported that *Our Lady* upset some "native New Mexicans" because, like "their ancestors [who] saw the land taken by invasion," they "[n]ow… are seeing Santa Fe invaded again by coastal elites, followed by Starbucks and skyrocketing real estate prices" (Gurza 2001, F2). Additionally, the newspaper quoted protesters at a march who said that they were "sick of newcomers disrespecting their culture" (ibid.).

Clearly, criticism of *Our Lady* and *Cyber Arte* stemmed not only from outrage, but from injury and anxiety. This anxiety was about much more than what the Virgin of Guadalupe "really" looks like. Rather, it concerned the changing roles of women in Mexican and Mexican American culture; access to public space in state insti-

tutions; and the impact on New Mexico of the homogenizing forces of development (for which Starbucks has become a metonym). While I do not feel that they were justified in demanding the removal of *Our Lady*, I wish to stress that many New Mexican Catholic Hispanos criticized López and her work because they felt that their culture was under siege. In response, they attempted to ascribe a single, monolithic meaning to 'Our Lady of Guadalupe' a complex, polysemic sign borne of social and cultural transition. What's more, they delineated a rigid, narrow, and static definition of Chicana cultural identity. This cultural identity was oppositional vis-à-vis the state (as represented by the Museum of International Folk Art and the Museum of New Mexico) and the metropolis (as represented by López, the so-called California artist). However, it denied the diversity among women who self-identify as Chicana, Hispana, and Latina by conflating 'Chicana', 'Hispana', and 'Latina' with Roman Catholicism and New Mexican; with subservience; and with heterosexuality (if not asexuality). In short, many of López's Catholic Hispano critics tenaciously clung to an image of themselves that bore an uncanny resemblance to the stereotypes or caricatures that the dominant culture (including New Mexico's tourism industry) has imposed upon them (and upon Hispanas in particular) for many years. Ultimately, they locked themselves in an imaginary, impossibly unchanging past.

Both *Our Lady* and Martinez's Chicanafuturist art demonstrate the significance, value, price, and necessity of change. Martinez's work turns to the past by taking its inspiration from traditional forms and practices. At the same time, it looks to the present by locating such forms and practices in the technologies of the information age. And it dares to imagine new ways of being for the future, at which it takes a good, hard look by confronting the growing problem of the disposal of e-waste. Via technology, Martinez blurs New Mexico's competing narratives; rejects hackneyed and nostalgic visions of the "Land of Enchantment" and its Hispana residents; expresses and transforms Indo-Hispanic traditions and Chicana spirituality; decololnizes the future by inserting people of color into it; and, finally, underscores the malleability, dynamism, and width of Chicana cultural identity in the twenty-first century.

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Notes

1 I have drawn this quote from a flyer distributed by the Museum of International Folk Art for *Cyber Arte's* 25 February 2001 opening reception.

2 To view López's Our Lady, see http://www.almalopez.net. The terms Chicana, Hispana, Hispanic, Latina, and Mexican American were used in the debates concerning López's work and Cyber Arte. Like numerous other scholars of New Mexico, I also use Hispana or Hispano to refer to the subgroup of Mexicans and Mexican Americans of the upper Rio Grande valley and adjacent regions of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

3 The title of this section is from Charles F. Lummis' 1893 novel about New Mexico *The Land of Poco Tiempo.*

4 For U.S. Census data, see http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/35000.html.

5 This advertisement is on page 8 of The New Mexico 2002 Vacation Guide, which is published yearly for the New Mexico Department of Tourism by New Mexico Magazine (495 Old Santa Fe Trail, Santa Fe, NM 87501-2750). The illustration was also available at Tierra Wools' website (www.handweavers.com). In contrast with the image in the advertisement, this website demonstrates that Tierra Wools is no stranger to twenty-first century information technology.

6 For more information on New Mexico's underground radioactive storehouse, see http://www.wipp.carlsbad.nm.us. Regarding Sandia National Laboratories' landfill and dumping at Los Alamos, see Ludwick 2001 and http://www.lasg.org.

7 For the sake of brevity, I do not discuss all nine of Martinez's works featured in *Cyber Arte* in this essay. For a more in-depth analysis of her work, see my essay, "*Deus ex Machina:* Tradition, Technology, and the Chicanafuturist Art of Marion C. Martinez" in the fall 2004 issue of *Aztlán*. To see some of her work, visit http://www.marionmartinez.com/.

8 Martinez interview with author (Glorieta, New Mexico, 26 June 2001).

9 Ibid.

10 Martinez interview with author (Glorieta, New Mexico, 26 June 2001).

11 For more information regarding Intel's environmental impact on Rio Rancho and its surroundings, see SouthWest Organizing Project 1995 and http://www/swop.net/intel_info.htm.

12 Martinez interview with author (Glorieta, New Mexico, 26 June 2001).

13 Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe described *Our Lady* in sexist terms when he criticized López for portraying the Virgin Mary as 'a tart or street woman' (Sheehan 2001, 7). On 24 April 2001, a Los Angeles group by the name of La Voz de Aztlan circulated a homophobic e-mail about López and *Our Lady* with the alarmist subject heading "Lesbians Insult Virgen de Guadalupe." I possess a hardcopy of this e-mail.

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