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## YOLANDA M. LÓPEZ

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## FOREWORD

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In the 1970s, Yolanda M. López produced some of the most iconic and widely circulated images of the Chicano civil rights movement, addressing pressing issues related to social justice and human rights while also producing conceptually grounded alternatives to the social and cultural invisibility of women within these struggles. These works include Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim? and the Guadalupe series (both 1978), which engaged pre-Columbian and Catholic iconographies that were already familiar in Chicano art and social protest. But López made several notable interventions. She introduced satirical humor as well as a sense of the female quotidian into political discourse, and she subverted the formal structures and techniques of both Mexican devotional art and American mass media. As Karen Mary Davalos notes about Who's the Illegal Alien, Pilgrim?, the poster's Aztec warrior figure appropriates both John Wayne in the revisionist Western The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962) and the "Uncle Sam" of Army recruitment posters, thereby insinuating the warrior's statement within U.S. political discourse itself. The Guadalupe series appropriates a religious icon used to sustain a Madonna-whore dichotomy in Mexican culture as well as to limit the scope of Chicana political participation to mere symbolism. Here, López uses la Virgen de Guadalupe as a template for Chicana portraiture, not as types (whether abject or active) but as individual women at work and play across generations and the life cycle. Because these and other works were based on photographic studies, López introduces an indexical underpinning in the creative process that tempers the works' iconic function by subtly cutting against the movement's own myth-building and cultural nationalism. Icons can be useful, but they also can be mistaken for the "real thing" rather than understood as a constructed image used for particular purposes. Davalos explains, "López's primary impulse as an artist is the investigation of images. She analyzes the production, function, and context of images that enter public culture."

In considering this primary impulse, it is important to note the diverse sources and influences that contributed to López's

Yolanda M. López, study for Free Los Siete, 1969.

artistic practice. Growing up as a Chicana in San Diego on the U.S.-Mexico border had a profound impact on López, although not necessarily in the ways that one might expect. For López, these experiences manifested a paradox: living next to Mexico, she nonetheless grew up understanding Mexican culture in negative terms, an impression based less on lived experience than on media stereotypes, tourism, and commodity culture. In addition, while her family provides a significant source for her art (expressed in terms of matrilineal genealogy), López's upbringing was in many ways a nontraditional one. She was raised in a nonreligious household by a single mother, then by her grandparents, and later by a gay uncle, and her familial identity focused more on working-class concerns and labor rights than on Mexican or Chicano culture. In the late 1960s, when she lived in San Francisco, López met Emory Douglas, minister of culture for the Black Panther Party. Douglas, whose radical graphic art appeared in the Black Panther newspaper, showed López quick and low-cost layout techniques. His visual style, a collage of mass media text and photographs, thick outlines, and declarative text, inspired her own efforts to develop an art of social protest within San Francisco's pan-Latino community. When López returned to San Diego in the 1970s to complete her graduate education, her teachers (notably Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler) helped her further develop the conceptual aspects of her work through a formal art training that engaged semiotics, deconstruction, and feminism. These experiences proved transformative: López emerged as a political artist concerned with the politics of representation rather than with cultural essence, nationalist identity, or the recovery of an "authentic" and lost culture.

López's *Free Los Siete* (1969) provides an excellent and early example of her commitment to a multivalent political art. She excerpts passages from the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance that foreground the flag as the emblem that unites citizen and nation, both "under God": "I pledge allegiance / to the flag of the United States of America / one nation under God with free." In the black-and-white poster, this text appears inside the representation of a frame with a padlock in the lower right corner, forming a "matted" border around an image of six Latino males imprisoned behind the stars and stripes of the U.S. flag. Below this frame is the title, written in boldface using the same style as the pledge: "Free Los Siete." Derived from an earlier color drawing, López's

poster circulated widely in *Basta Ya!* newspaper as part of an effort to defend seven Central American youths accused of killing a police officer in San Francisco's Mission District on May 1, 1969. Some eighteen months later, the youths known as Los Siete de la Raza were acquitted following accounts that police in the heavily pan-Latino neighborhood had used excessive force. The mass arrest and trial spurred mobilization of a defense committee, with support from the Black Panther Party, and also led to community-based programs and services through the newly formed La Raza Information Center. López's poster, created while she was a member of Los Siete Defense Committee, appeared early during the year between the arrest and the trial that started in June 1970. It expresses the fear that Los Siete would not have the very rights promised by the pledge: democracy, liberty, justice, and equality. Indeed, in the poster, these rights are absent, not so much implied as replaced outright by the word "free" (which is not in the pledge itself). This last word, which appears at the top of the poster, must be read two ways at once: as a promise that has been cut off mid-syllable (syntactically, one expects "freedom" to appear; symbolically, the word contradicts the image it helps "frame"), and as the first word in the bilingual imperative at the bottom of the poster that names the defense committee and the artwork: Free Los Siete. In order to secure liberty for Los Siete-that is, to bring together both articulations of "free," as pledge and as demand-the community will need to mobilize to defend its rights.

In *Free Los Siete*, as with López's subsequent artistic production, the work's political message is clear and purposeful. At the same time, the work cannot be mistaken for art that merely illustrates a position, both because of the work's formal complexity and because it is engaged in a more complicated project of repositioning the viewer with respect to language and representation. López's *Free Los Siete*, and other artwork from this period, was arguably even more radical than the political art of her mentors, teachers, and peers in that it was unsigned. The artist actively withholds her authorship in order to have the poster circulate as an expression of the community itself, as a critique of the failure of the nation-state to secure "liberty and justice for all," and as a free-floating icon within a social movement. Consequently, these images often reflect upon the movement itself but not upon the artist who created them. López's political commitment,

A young protester holds López's Free Los Siete poster. Printed in ;Basta Ya!, no. 10 (June 1970).

combined with the masculine framework for recognition within the social movement, served to obscure critical attention to her distinctive visual style, conceptual framework, and provocative investigations into what has been called a "politics of the signifier." Indeed, as Davalos argues, "López is simultaneously a feminist artist, a conceptual artist, a political artist, and a portraitist working in and against the modernist tradition." As the first major publication on López, this book explores the artist's ongoing commitment to an art of social protest, elaborates the social and cultural history and intellectual currents within which she has worked, and brings much-needed attention to the artist in all her complexity.



Siete

mantenidos prisioneros en la carcel del Condado de San Francisco por todo un ano, sin fianza. Durante todo este ano, ellos han sido deprivados de oportunidades de ejercitar, de asolearse, tambien han estado bajo un cui-dado medico inadecuado, se les han restringido sus privilegios de visita, y se les ha sido insultados y maltratados tanto fisica como racialmente. Tam-bien, durante este ano, los abogados de defensa de Los Siete han presentado proposiciones de gran importancia, no solo en relacion con su caso, pero en relacion a toda la gente latina de los Estados Unidos.

Una de las primeras proposiciones fue la de cesar todas las accusaciones por falta de evidencia. Pero aunque no hay testigos que vieran a ninguno de los seis hermanos disparar el arma, todavia los seis se les mantiene deten-idos. Y aun cuando el testigo principal del estado-el oficial McGoran- es culpable de prejuicios y de mentiras en sus propias declaraciones bajo jura-mento, la corte no aceptara proposiciones para cesar los cargos contra nuestros hermanos. El official Mc-Goran ha dicho, "Toda persona latina, negra o chila es sospechosa." El tambien reclama haber visto un grupo de cinco a ocho personas en la escena del incidente, y todavia el consistente-mente escoge los siete como los culpables. Tambien dice que no saco su arma de la fonda, y tampoco que nadie se la quito, pero de alguna manera aparecio en la escena. Es obvio que el testimonio de McGoran tendra mas contradicciones durante el jujcio.

Los movimientos de parte de la defensa hechos para examinar la com-posicion de la Gran Junta de Jurados diferente, porque los testigos son ioi-zados de testificar en secreto, sin el consejo de los abogados. A los abo-gados de la detensa no

les trae y les presenta los casos, el que les aconseja y les presenta testigos. Asi que en este tipo de sistema el acusado no tiene ninguna clase de recursos legales

Legalmente, de acuerdo con la constitucion, la gente tiene el derecho de ser juzgada por sus companeros, que representen su propia clase, que tengan un nivel educacional parecido y que tengan tanto en comun un fondo cultural, social, y economico. El juez Karesh ha dictado que aunque la Gran Junta de Jurados no representa la gente de San Francisco, no es necesariamente ilegal. Y porque no? Porque en ningun punto de la ley se extipula quien los juezes deben de nombrar.

El jurado de el juicio fue el tema proximo de los abogados de defensa. Este jurado es reclutado de la lista de votantes de la ciudad de San Francisco. Aunque es supuesto a ser un grupo representativo, excluye muchos San Franciscanos, por el hecho que recluta exclusivamente votantes, y que paga solamente \$5.00 por dia de deber de jurado. Latinos tienen grandes dificul-tades en registrarse a votar. Tambien muchos no son ciudadanos. Y todavia personas que son ciudadnos, tienen grandes dificultades tratando de llenar los requisitos de capacidad de leer y escribir en ingles. Bajo el Tratado de Guadalupe-Hidalgo, gente de habla espanola en el Suroeste se le es garantizado su derecho de mantener su lengua materna. California (mas Utah, Colorado, Nuevo Mejico, Tejas, Nevada y Arizona) es un estado bilingue. Esto significa que negocios oficiales estan



held, without bail, for the last year, in the San Francisco County Jail. During this year they have had no sunshine, no exercise, inadequate medical care, restricted visiting privileges and much harrassment, both racial and physical. During this year, also, the defense attorneys for Los Siete have presented motions significant, not only to their case, but for all brown people in the United States

-----One of the first motions made was to drop all the charges based on lack

ness. The District Attorney has absolute control over the functioning of the Grand Jury because he is the one who brings cases before it, advises it on the cases, and presents witnesses. The defendant has no legal recourse at all in this type of this system.

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Legally, according to the constitu-tion, people are entitled to be judged by their peers, people who are repre-sentative of them. Judge Karesh ruled that even though the Grand Jury does not represent the people of San Fran-