



Make America Mongrel Again

By Carmen Gimenez Smith, April 19, 2018

We are here to say no. This is a statement of utter denouncement of utter refusal of white supremacist redeployment of the treatment of blackness, black murder as raw material for depraved pleasure.

—Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo

The moment the master, or the colonizer, proclaims “There have never been people here,” the missing people are a becoming, they invent themselves, in shanty towns and camps, or in ghettos, in new conditions of struggle to which a necessarily political art must contribute.

—Gilles Deleuze

In *Unexplained Presence*, a collection of essays that considers how black characters inhabit the edges of film and art, Tisa Bryant’s avid and incisive gaze describes the elided figures of black bodies. Bryant seeks identification with fleeting, troubling characters, even with peripheral bodies that appear merely as figures, statues, paintings. In the essay, “Under Cover of Darkness,” for example, two sisters watch the film *8 Femmes* while grieving the recent loss of their mother. Splayed in their mother’s room while the

video creaks along with its problematic depiction of the black character—a character who will be betrayed by her lover—Bryant describes the ambivalence she experiences as both a lover of film and as someone whose queerness and blackness is elided by the medium of film:

Love has two faces, she muses, one white, the others dark, each with an alibi. The mask of Art hides the devouring gaze, the vacant stare, the rapid blink in the face of History. The heavy cloak of desire drapes over impassioned bodies as they crawl, panting with slick teeth, toward the border of Custom and Taboo... who is protected, in narratives in which certain desire is deemed perverse? Who shields, when taboo is tinged with the threat of social or physical Death?

Reading this important collection evokes my own memories of looking for myself, of attempting to identify with characters who looked like me, through popular culture. I imagined Lynda Carter in *Wonder Woman* and Janet in *Three's Company* were Latinx, if only because they were brunettes; that's how desperate I was to see even faint representations. But I loved Charo the most because she spoke Spanish and danced salsa, and—despite being a caricature of Latinx identity—her affect and accent replicated/exaggerated/played with my family's own affect. She looked like my aunts, their glamorous and expressive bodies moving through a world that seemed tepid in comparison. Simultaneously, I came to understand that I would have this aspect of my identity contested and so I grew into this divided person, seeking out a space in which my love of U.S. culture

also accommodated the histories and influences projected onto me, with little regard for my lived life.

When I began my college education, I accepted the canon as is because I had implicitly accepted the U.S.'s narrow inscription of my identity. My idiom, my color, and the particulars of being raised the daughter of working class South American immigrants was part of my private sphere and poetry and art, what I crudely thought as civilized culture, was white. As I've grown older, I've begun to consider how my poetic training—when I rattle off my influences, they're so often white—reified the sense that work by artists of color is inferior, or, at best, marginal. This is a painful recognition I share with many contemporary poets and writers who went through the academy in the 80s and 90s feeling this same sense of indoctrination and its accompanying erasure. There were exceptions—I was lucky as an undergraduate to have been introduced to a handful of poets of color—but they were often accidental, miraculous exceptions. My formative years were, unquestionably, defined by the poets my teachers in graduate school valued. Many of these teachers located poets of color as a body of work outside of specific, recognizable schools of poetry, an amorphous group engaged in a poetic practice without genuine aesthetic value.

Still, by continuing to read that handful of poets and writers of color I discovered in college ([Juan Felipe Herrera](#), [Jessica Hagedorn](#), [Alurista](#), [Gloria Anzaldúa](#), [Marilyn Chin](#), [June Jordan](#), among others) I discovered the activist history of much of this work, particularly La Raza activism, which included the emergence of venues and presses that

highlighted Latinx art and writing. *Latinidad*, as Jose Esteban Muñoz posits, is an incoherent term used to define the polymorphous Latinx population of the United States—52 million people strong—but I'd like to suggest that the term doesn't necessarily emerge implicitly from within, but rather functions as a term created to confine the migrant identity of the Americas and its proximal colonies. The older term, Hispanic, reinforces the narrow view of our identity as connected to Spanish imperialism, so the term and identity is still in flux.

The work of artists like [Ana Mendieta](#), [Guillermo Gomez Peña](#), [Cecilia Vicuña](#), and the art collective [Asco](#), seems to cut across intersections of Latin America, Spanish, and Portuguese cultures, perhaps because of shared cultural traditions and values. Although there are still deeply problematic racial, nationalist, and class-based differences among these 52 million that sometimes feel more immediate than the commonalities, as a poet I'm interested in Muñoz's suggestion that despite these differences, we should *embrace the affective stereotype*. "Rather than trying to run from this stereotype," Muñoz writes, "Latino as excess, it seems much more important to seize it and redirect it in the service of a liberationist politics." This idea was crucial for me in overcoming my perception that I was "extra"—loud, a culturally unacceptable hothead—leading to a new understanding that served to shape my poetics. My poetics are extra, as they should be; mine are extrapoetics.

Some of the most significant and "extra" work produced in the burgeoning art scene of the 70s was that of the Xicano collective Asco, who worked to

both inscribe Xicano identity and to call out the exclusion of the Xicano in the art world. Asco was a collective formed in 1972 and composed of Harry Gamboa, Jr., Gronk, Willie F. Herrón III, and Patssi Valdez. The word *asco* means disgust, which represented a reclamation of the aesthetic abjection of Xicano art. Like Juan Felipe Herrera, Asco spoke from a political positionality while also critiquing and intersecting high and low cultures, often in defiance of the exclusionary politics of contemporary art. Gamboa expresses this principle when writing, "I decided to learn English basically as form of defense, which then later I could refine into a weapon of offense."

Though their corpus is far-reaching, in my estimation *Spray Paint LACMA* (or *Project Pie in De/Face*) is a definitive work. The short version of the piece's background is that Gamboa and Valdez went to look at art at LACMA ([Los Angeles County of Museum of Art](#)), and when Gamboa noticed the paucity of Xicano art in a Los Angeles museum, he asked to speak to the curator, who told him that Xicanos made folk art instead of fine art. The story is a necessarily apocryphal text that foregrounds the subsequent political and aesthetic act: Gamboa and Valdez left the museum and then returned to spray paint all of the museum's entrances with an Asco tag. As Chon Noriega describes:

The artists understood that their gambit rested on the status the museum would give to their signatures, and whether they would be acknowledged as the signatures of individual artists authoring their work of art, or only as the illicit markings of an invisible social group of

Chicano graffiti artists. When LACMA whitewashed Asco's signatures, it simultaneously removed graffiti and destroyed the world's largest work of Chicano art, obscuring the inclusive notion of the public that underwrote its existence.

This performance was an act of insurrection, one existing outside of the market of a cultural-capital system that Asco's actions revealed as recapitulating the colonial hierarchies of knowledge and power that created the imbalances they were protesting. Asco's power resided in both their rejection of high art curation, but also their refusal to let high art disregard the work of Chicano artists. Jim Hinks writes, "They told off LACMA, flouted conventions of established Chicano artists, offended almost everyone and wound up at the high table of the very institution that once scorned them."

Asco's work was contemporaneous with the La Raza movement, an aesthetic that troubled Asco's members. In "Walking Mural: Asco and the Ends of Chicano Arts," Jim Hinch describes their critique:

[Asco's members] were just as incensed by what they regarded as the conceptual conservatism and crude ethnic stereotyping already hardening into a distinctive Chicano style. "I hated murals," Patssi Valdez told a magazine interviewer in 1987. "I was sick of them. We'd be driving down the street and I'd say, 'Gronk! Another mud painting!'" In his Smithsonian oral history Herrón recalled feeling offended by university trained artists using ersatz barrio motifs to bulk up their canvases' street credibility.

While acknowledging that Asco's response might be reductive, I also recognize an impatience for a more radical and complex practice against hegemony, perhaps one that engages with the liminal intersections of cultural production and doesn't base itself strictly within cultural inscriptions of the past. I think Asco wanted to express how their Xicanidad entangled with U.S. culture, and wanted to bring that possibility to their community. For instance, Asco's project "No Movies," according to David E. James, was an attempt to complicate La Raza's vision of a "singular imaginary polity" in order to counter Xicanx invisibility in popular culture and avant-garde film without the restricting tropes of La Raza nationalist recuperations. The "stills" and short films were situated in their community, reflecting their socio-economic status by means of the makeshift quality of the backdrops and props. They recreated scenes from canonical films against the backdrop of the barrio, where photographed stills were made for imaginary movies. The material components of their work aligned with the contemporary Cuban conception of provisionalismo, making do with what you have, but also centralized the trappings of Xicano "low" culture. Critic Tomas Ybarra-Frausto describes this work as *rasquachismo*, which "presupposes the worldview of the have-not." This sensibility is not unlike Sontag's concept of camp, but is more specifically *chillón*, funky, uniquely Xicano, and radically subversive in the context of the gaze of higher classes and whiteness. Finally, Asco's performances also asserted to Los Angeles that Xicanos *were* Angelenos.

Asco was the radical, agitational artistic force I had been looking for all my life, finally brought to my attention well after graduate school by art historian and poet [Roberto Tejada](#). I had long yearned for work that was both playful and transgressive. Though Asco situated themselves uniquely within inscriptions of a specific working-class Xicano identity, they also affirmed that my political cultural production didn't have to be limited by the proscribed terms of my identity, which was a pressure I often felt in the world of poetry, as well-established poets encouraged me time and again to write more about my family origin. [Paul Martinez Pompa's "The Abuelita Poem"](#) aptly portrays this conundrum, the pressure felt by a poet of color to write poems that are most acceptable or desirable to a white readership:

I. SKIN & CORN

Her brown skin glistens as the sun
pours through the kitchen window
like gold *leche*. After grinding
the *nixtamal*, a word so beautifully ethnic
it must not only be italicized but underlined
to let you, the reader, know you've encountered
something beautifully ethnic, she kneads
with the hands of centuries-old ancestor
spirits who magically yet realistically posses her
until the *masa* is smooth as a *lowrider's*

chrome bumper. And I know she must do this
with care because it says so on a website
that explains how to make homemade corn *tortillas*.
So much labor for this peasant bread,
this edible art birthed from *Abuelitas's*
brown skin, which is still glistening
in the sun.

II. APOLOGY

Before she died I called my abuelita
grandma. I cannot remember
if she made corn tortillas from scratch
but, O, how she'd flip the factory fresh
El Milagros (Quality Since 1950)
on the burner, bathe them in butter
& salt for her grandchildren.
How she'd knead the buttons
on the telephone, order me food
from Pizza Hut. I assure you,
gentle reader, this was done
with the spirit of Mesoamérica
ablaze in her fingertips.

Pompa's poem demonstrates and challenges the assumption that Latinx poets have a place, a specific job to do as artists: explain (and simultaneously make monolithic) a romantic and apolitical view of identity. Although poetry isn't a physical space, it is something like an ecology—or like a city—characterized by the presence of contested resources, gatekeepers, entrenched power hierarchies. And while many have argued in essays and books about the lack of “utility” of poetry—have suggested that the stakes of poetry are low—this is only true if we frame poetry's value through the lens of capital. I would prefer to argue that poetry reproduces the same layers of institutional racism as a city, and that the work of many of the most exciting poets writing today are fighting for Henri Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city:

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.

Hierarchies may be challenged in cities where supremacy is actively reified by its ruling institutions. Likewise, the poetic canon is a body shaped by the interests of an elite; regardless of the composition of this elite, gatekeepers emerge from an implicit hierarchy connected to the academy and the culture at large. The work of changing poetry and the work of changing

culture will always necessarily coincide. In *Sister Outsider*, [Audre Lorde](#) reminds us that “Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one that is most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material...” Poetry is a discourse for the disenfranchised. In spite of relevance or the size of the poet’s audience, the work is necessary: the world has to be changed from deep within its interior—the place where its secrets are held—and what better way than poetry, the art form that offers the most immediate access to interiority?

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My love for Asco affirms my abiding admiration for the [Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo](#) (MCAG), an anonymous (and now defunct) collective that defiantly called out the poetry world’s systemic white supremacy and marginalization of poetry written by people of color, specifically the dearth of criticism existing in response to poetry by writers of color and non-binary poets (a condition or process MCAG termed Gringpo). I want to foreground how the aesthetic and political histories that emerged simultaneously with the Latinx civil rights movement (in all its iterations) are, in many ways, antecedents to the contemporary reparation work performed by MCAG, who created a poetics that challenged presumptions in contemporary poetry associated with my conception of the poetry world as an ecosystem, as a city. Our desire for our art and our politics to always be ethical or just overlooks the fact that art is human and that the art of social justice is connected to righting wrongs, toward the end of revealing difficult truths, to healing wounds.... Because MCAG rattled the gatekeepers, the

reverberations of their influence are still being felt today in the rapidly evolving face of poetry institutions who are very slowly and sometimes problematically working to address a focus on all-white cultural production as an aesthetic center from which all art radiates. In fact, I would argue that MCAG is the *signal* influence on how far we've come so quickly. MCAG scared the shit out of people—and maybe sometimes people need the shit scared out of them in order to recognize the folly of their ways. In this regard, they challenged the terms of how poetry institutions manage the terms of “identity politics,” by insisting that their identity is the source of their politics, in much the way Asco worked from within and *of* their community, and resistant to the narrow traditions gallery and museum art afforded them.

I believe that MCAG was composed of poets and artists from a wide range of gender, racial, and cultural identities; my use of a critical Latinx lens to describe the group is based on their resistance to colonization, some of their motifs, and, simply because I am a Latinx poet and thinker.

Contemporary critics rarely employ the important work of Latinx thinkers like [Urayoán Noel](#), Michael Dowdy, Jose Esteban Muñoz, Chavela Sandoval, and [Emma Perez](#), to name but a few, though their work could be incredibly useful in critiquing and defining exclusionary practices across disciplines and communities. Finally, MCAG's visual imagery leaned Pan-American, so I situate the work in the lineage to social justice's ties to art in the civil rights and labor movements of the mid-to-late 20th-century in Latinx communities.

While MCAG possessed a take-no-prisoners approach, they were also extremely adept at utilizing the (often humorous) argot of the internet. Poetry has always had a fraught relationship with humor and comedy. Although there have been a few poets who have been able to deploy humor without compromising their positionality, this work is often buffered by privilege, whether it's aesthetic, economic, or racial. MCAG represents an intriguing instance of the deployment of humor to political and poetic ends in contemporary U.S. literature because they attempted to rectify epistemic injustice by challenging, teasing, and calling out individuals and institutions who ignored or exploited people of color. They drew from the tradition of satire, shade, blast culture. Shade might be defined as teasing or "taking down" via virtuosic verbal escalation, which in many ways intersects with gestures most familiar to us through rap music, though gendered and queer. Performance studies scholar and poet, [Deborah Paredez](#), describes shade as follows:

the idiom and practice of the black diva shade/side-eye/read to comment on and revise/expand the space of representation for racialized women. The virtuosity is shown in the deployment of verbal play or performance of the "throw" or "reading."

This discourse is rooted in cultural traditions that are seen or read as loud, angry, or threatening, which tends to delegitimize such discourse in relation to the relative quietude, calm, and complacency often associated with white expression. I return to Jose Esteban Muñoz, who suggests that instead of defining Latinx (and I believe this concept would be applicable to many

different communities) against whiteness, we should consider whiteness as an *absence of affect*, one which necessarily neutralizes the imbalances and struggles of how the Latinx subject struggles to claim and embrace a genuinely felt “citizenship.” Some might argue that this is a form of reverse racism, but I would counter that whiteness represents a baseline or status quo of identity formation in our popular culture, through which people of color are necessarily defined through their difference to whiteness—and why must I and others accept “difference” as a fundamental quality of our identity? Again, if I must consider my identity in relation to whiteness—which I shouldn’t have to do, but which is very hard not to do in this culture—I’d much prefer to be “extra” than “different” in all of the ways that word/prefix is used.

A major critique of the group concerned their anonymity, but I would argue that white supremacy is equally anonymous in its collective liberal-humanist self-importance, and in its systemic, institutional protections from critique. In their defense, I would suggest that MCAG’s members must have realized how difficult, if not impossible, it would have been to perform this necessary reparative work while simultaneously attempting to participate, as known MCAG members, in the world of poetry, especially given that the poet of color already has to conduct an enormous amount of labor simply to exist and be seen as an equal in both the public and private spheres of poetry.

In their manifesto “Electronic Civil Disobedience,” the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), an anonymous “collective of five tactical media practitioners of

various specializations including computer graphics and web design, film/video, photography, text art, book art, and performance," argues for anonymity in the work of online political work and also situates the internet as a space for insurrection:

As far as power is concerned, the streets are dead capital! Nothing of value to the power elite can be found on the streets, nor does this class need control of the streets to efficiently run and maintain state institutions. For CD [Civil Disobedience] to have any meaningful effect, the resisters must appropriate something of value to the state. Once they have an object of value, the resisters have a platform from which they may bargain for (or demand) change.

The internet has often been conceived as an equalizing, democratizing presence. Many early television commercials endorsing the internet were highly multicultural, including "scenes of empowerment," which, according to Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "have driven access-based definitions and solutions to the digital divide," that make race simultaneously a consumerist and pornographic category:

[The internet's] erasure and consumption of race, however, does not make the Internet irrevocably racist; but to fight this trend, antiracist uses of the Internet make race both visible and difficult to consume.

For many of us, the internet has become our primary everyday space for communication, and MCAAG created an algorithm of pique and critique in this common space. Bypassing the usual academy-based processes critics

required to define an aesthetic or a movement, MCAG was born in the same way so much of the internet was born—in what James Holston would call a space of insurgent citizenship, the work of defiantly claiming positionality in a city. While the internet created community, it also built enormous capital on creating difference. In this regard, the idea of aesthetic palatability is judged by privileging very specific counter-performances of transgression and the veneration of the singular artist, like a cowboy's sensibility of manifest destiny. With a few exceptions, the contemporary avant-garde only creates aesthetic insurrection through anti-aesthetic strategies, which then get valued as extra-aesthetic. It's a win-win for the Old World Cycle of Critical Life in the avant-garde, much like the louche effect and appropriation of the boy who pays 70 dollars to touch up his Mohawk every three weeks. Conceptual art in the early teens of the 21st century deployed laconic or moronic representations of race that merely replicated the capitalistic ventures they were critiquing or ignoring or whatever it is that they were (not) doing because of their neutral positionality, and there's an incredible body of work built around this work as both infrastructure and forcefield.

Although MCAG no longer exists (their digital trace has been almost completely erased), to this day I consider MCAG's work exemplary and nonpareil in its animation of a poetics engaging Black, Latinx, Asian, and queer communities. MCAG's poetics was insurgent, defiant, hilarious, uncompromising, and, perhaps most importantly, inflected by polyphonic discourses that exist outside of the academy's lyric and narrative poetic

traditions. I deeply respect MCAG's use of the term *mongrel* because it reappropriates the language of the white supremacist while simultaneously celebrating the intersections that connect people of color. I am a mongrel poet. Those of us who are invested in dismantling the hegemonic, white-supremacist valuation of poetry are also mongrel poets. I want us all to be mongrel poets, irrespective of the color of our skin, our gender, our aesthetics. In an interview between Lisa Lowe and Angela Davis cited in Eunsong Kim's essay "Without War: A Conversation with Transnational Jungmin Choi," they state:

In my opinion, the most exciting potential of women of color formations resides in the possibility of politicizing this identity—basing the identity on politics rather than politics on identity.

This radical reconception of identity and politics can be applied to how poetry confines writers of color to certain practices, while dismissing or actively targeting work that directly challenges racism. There's a robust body of work that critiques MCAG, which I counter is not critique, but policing by gatekeepers who 1. Didn't see this insurgency coming, and 2. Wanted to maintain the narrow passage into the canon offered to artists of color. MCAG sought to take the matter of critiquing exclusionary art into its hands, which an entrenched system picked apart using their old tools of oppression and exclusion, a Ponzi scheme of art.

I also still struggle with racism, with being both the subject and the object of racism's biases. I'm a product of the frictions between Black, Asian, and Latinos in California working class communities, and I have participated in

the horizontal oppression of those spaces. My parents came to the United States and replicated some of the denigration of indigenous people, a troubling but pervasive issue in Latin America. Perhaps it feels safer for me to admit it because people of color can recognize that we're victims *and* participants in a relentless hegemonic system. People of color themselves casually and unknowingly replicate deeply problematic stereotypes. I am occasionally judged by people of color for my seemingly curious dislike of spicy food, just as people of color often assume that I'm a Xicana. I still have a lot to learn, still a lot of work to do to continue challenging myself, and I'm doing it, every day in my work as an activist and poet. I admire the efforts of allies to support writers of color, but I'm also concerned about the lack of self-interrogation many allies fail to undertake or the premature self-congratulation for merely having begun to read people of color, or for posting articles about race on Twitter. White supremacy requires an active dismantling and it requires failure and the risk of marginalization. While the artists that MCAG critiqued experienced some discomfort, they are still making a living, still being celebrated by an aesthetic establishment that has dug in its heels about the legitimacy of their critical lens, without taking into account the racial imbalances that lens is built on.

MCAG represented an intersection of art and social justice that foreshadowed, or perhaps even precipitated, much of the contemporary poetry being written both by people of color and their allies that attempts to underline and rail against white hegemony. MCAG wanted what most artists

want: to shape the world, to give form to the world. Poetry is a business, a calling, an art, all sorts of different things for populations with unfettered access to it. When I was young and reading poetry anthologies, I was the girl looking into the window of a store in which I could never afford to buy anything. For how many young poets of color did MCAG represent the bull in that store? MCAG's strategies changed the landscape of poetry in ways that I've long wished poetry would change. They created a new awareness and sensitivity around racial inequity, not unlike the way [VIDA](#) did for gender inequity. MCAG's emancipatory aesthetics and politics is undeniable. Poetry hadn't changed in a long time, and we should never forget that the shockwave created by MCAG. As we call out the sexual harassment and predation in the poetry community, we should also be calling out institutions and individuals actively engaging in giving white supremacy a pass at the expense of writers of color; in both cases oppression thrives where imbalances in power have been normalized. Poetry is still a potent psychological zone, a social imaginary that has to change in order to be ready for the world that awaits us in ten years, in twenty, in a hundred. MCAG was always in progress, testing the limits of its force. Performing new forms of resistance is always accompanied by risk, but this was a risk poetry should have been able to live with, especially with its long history of housing racist and exclusionary poets and poetry. What we call the poetry world may be small, but MCAG changed it in a big way.

The world feels more urgently perilous than ever before. I feel like I'm writing science fiction when I write Donald Trump is president of the United

States, a man financed by a vampiric oligarchy and the most likely outcome of the corporate-run GOP and insidious white supremacy, which is in the DNA of this nation's conception. The matter is not simply who runs the country, but how quickly basic needs will become monetized and how quickly we'll become dehumanized. There is no historical wealth or power foregrounding a person of color's cry against injustice. Contemporary poetry's outsized outrage about these artists makes that abundantly clear. The occasion to write this essay, to consider the historical parallels and the inequities being addressed in such a bold way, not just by the collective itself, but also a stunning new generation of poets, such as [Juliana Huxtable](#), [Danez Smith](#), [Morgan Parker](#), Manuel Paul Lopez, [Javier Zamora](#), and Wo Chan, is an amazing moment for this Gen X poet who lived in a complex exile on the periphery of art for so long. These poets may or may not be mongrel in their minds; I honestly don't know, but they share a commonality insofar that Mongrel is multiplatform art that critiques, high and low culture, and deploys a pointed critique borne of dismay and urgency. In this regard, I return to the concept of extrapoetics, which expands on Muñoz's scholarship but also acknowledges the ways in which many contemporary poets have adopted the idioms of contemporary culture, while also acknowledging the implications of imperialism by inscribing the experience of conceptual, historical, and literal borderlands. Extrapoetics relishes in its resistance to the formal and aesthetic traditions that have until only recently excluded their experiences. Extrapoetics is also outside of poetry, outsized poetry: a poetry on a continuum in its resistance to the late-20th-century canon. Extrapoetics relishes in the multi-platforms

of cultural excess while also interrogating cultural, social, and political exclusion, and particularly the evolving academy in which poetry has been housed, an institution that produces more poets than there are positions. MCAG is gone; long live the MCAG-activated and simultaneous poetics invested in changing the face of contemporary poetry by contesting hegemony.