

As a teenager during my first internship at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, a diversity initiative for inner-city youth, the education curator enthusiastically asked, “Who here would like to be an art historian!?” Like all the other Black and Brown inner-city kids, I laughed inside. My response was not due to a lack of art appreciation; I grew up in a family of refugees who were all self-taught artists back home in El Salvador, who taught me to draw before I learned to read. Nor was my response rooted in apathy for creative expression, for I was involved in art and theater from my elementary through my high school years. Art was such a natural part of my life that the idea of studying it seemed wasteful to me. The truth was, the internship was one of two jobs I was working to financially help my family and pay for my first year of community college. Hidden even deeper, though, I believed the museum world was not my world. I was a *guanaca* (the appellative given to people from El Salvador) whose family fled war and remained invisible in mainstream US Latinx history and culture. I was also from the hood—in my case Compton, California, a city made notorious by gangsta rap and police brutality. I believed that people like me guarded the art on the museum walls, cleaned the floors and bathrooms for visitors, and served the food at the high-priced café. People who looked like me, who came from where I did, did not determine what art could be, nor could we afford to buy it. We certainly did not write the history of art, for if we had, we would see ourselves represented on the walls.

How could I, a racialized, criminalized, Salvadoran youth from the hood, fathom a career in a field where the quotidian world I knew seemed nonexistent? And how could I fathom the decade-plus of higher education required for such a career, when I didn’t even know if my family could make rent the following month, and when for many of my friends the next five years were not guaranteed? These genuine questions stemmed from the battlefields I emerged from, where race, class, and cultural erasure intersect. Today, with a doctoral degree and an academic position in hand, I cannot begin to address the issue of diversity in art history without addressing first the

battlefields that weed out many others like me—that is, the systematic attacks on our being through institutional racism and white supremacy. For me, the issue of diversity in the profession begins there, in the battle to simply exist. These attacks include the erasure of our people’s history and cultural production and our physical displacement and elimination, which ingrained in some of us the idea that there are art worlds for the privileged to which we will never belong. It was those systematic attacks on my world that ironically led me to the field of art history, and shaped my scholarship and pedagogy, and which I recall here in response to the query of diversity in the profession.<sup>1</sup>

### A TALE OF TWO BATTLE ZONES

Two US government projects shaped my identity, which in turn shaped my work within the field of art history: the systematic violence in Central America as a result of US intervention, and the systematic violence in the hood as a result of US institutional racism. The first battle zone was mental, in the realm of familial relations and cultural memory. Like the thousands of Central American immigrants who arrived in the United States during the late 1970s and 1980s, my parents left El Salvador due to escalating military repression and economic pressures that culminated in twelve years of civil war (1980–92).<sup>2</sup> I thus did not physically live the US-funded civil war, but our home was the first stop for a surge of visitors and recently arrived family and friends looking for a safe haven. They brought

1. I extend my gratitude to the editors of this special issue on diversity in the profession, Ananda Cohen-Aponte and Elena FitzPatrick Sifford, for creating a space for subjective reflection on the topic. My approach here is a personal one, and is not representative of any monolithic identity or experience.

2. For more on Central American history, war, and migration from the 1980s and 1990s see Leisy Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love across Borders* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); María Cristina García, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006); Susan Bibler Coutin, *Exiled Home: Salvadoran Transnational Youth in the Aftermath of Violence* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

the latest news of the atrocities and aggressions toward our family, neighbors, and friends back home. Through them I learned of what happened at our next-door neighbor's house, where the military decapitated an elderly woman and her two grandchildren as a warning to her son; of an uncle who had disappeared until his body was found in a ditch, wounded and tortured; of my grandfather's death at the hands of military soldiers, who killed him and other men in town with a grenade blast, disintegrating them into pieces; of teachers and students persecuted, tortured, and disappeared; and of the need to hide in the mountains to evade death.<sup>3</sup> The brutal violence enacted on *campesinos* like my family instilled terror beyond El Salvador's borders. At a young age I understood from my family what extreme poverty meant, and persecution and death, and I knew to fear soldiers and governments because they viewed the poor with hate. These were stories that we kept inside the house and only discussed with other family members, for there was an unspoken rule that they were private and possibly dangerous matters. Yet these oral stories materialized in my brain as visual memories.<sup>4</sup> From that battlefield I understood the violence of war, refugee life, and forced silence as cultural erasure.

My physical experience of war took place in the second battle zone, the city of Compton in Southern California. Though the suburban city was once populated by middle-class, white US Americans in the 1950s and 1960s—both George W. H. Bush and his son George W. Bush briefly resided there—by the 1970s a hopeful middle-class African American population changed its racial dynamic. The white population was not pleased. Anti-Black racism from white Comptonites fueled a series of scare tactics toward Black homeowners that ranged from vandalism to cross burning. The first gangs in Compton were comprised of white teenage segregationists who terrorized Black teens, and as a result, the first Black gangs emerged out of

self-defense.<sup>5</sup> As the Black population increased, the white flight that followed also meant a loss of businesses and tax base that left a then largely Black city in economic decline and inevitably in urban crisis. The “rising gang violence, dysfunctional schools, corrupt civic administrators, inadequate public transportation, excessive taxation, [and] poor law enforcement” that the Los Angeles County Grand Jury identified in Compton in the late 1970s were exacerbated with the introduction of crack cocaine in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> The highly addictive drug destroyed lives and entire families, and fueled a gang war over control of the drug trade in the city, inviting heavy police repression. By the 1980s Compton had a crack epidemic and was an epicenter of violence, just as my parents managed to buy their first home in the city. We were among the first Latino families in our neighborhood.

When I was growing up in the hood, our house was broken into multiple times. I had knives pulled on me in middle school, experienced Black-Brown race riots in high school, saw childhood friends forced into gang life for protection, witnessed subsequent gang violence and shootings, and experienced systematic harassment and repression by corrupt police. Death and imprisonment were constantly around us. The violence in the streets complemented the racial and institutional violence in Compton schools.<sup>7</sup> Our schools lacked science and math teachers, books, and other resources. In four years I tried numerous times but never got a meeting with my college counselor, yet there were constantly military recruiters on campus, and they came knocking at my home in the evenings.<sup>8</sup> An educational tracking system had already determined the fate of most Compton students: teen pregnancy, incarceration, and/or early death. While I was able to escape those fates, some close to me did not. After my first year of community

3. For an in-depth report on torture practices in prisons during the Salvadoran civil war see Human Rights Commission of El Salvador (CDHES), *Torture in El Salvador: From La Esperanza (Mariona) Prison, San Salvador, El Salvador, C.A.* (San Salvador: The Commission, 1986).

4. For a discussion on inherited memory and US Central American cultural production see Karina Oliva Alvarado, “Cultural Memory and Making by US Central Americans,” *Latino Studies* 15, no. 4 (November 2017): 476–97. For more on Central American history and memory through the lens of US Central American artists see Kency Cornejo, “Does That Come with a Hyphen? A Space?” *The Question of Central American-Americans in Latino Art and Pedagogy*, *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 189–210.

5. Josh Sides, “Straight into Compton: American Dreams, Urban Nightmares, and the Metamorphosis of a Black Suburb,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): 583–605.

6. Sides, “Straight into Compton,” 594.

7. See Emily E. Straus, *Death of a Suburban Dream: Race and Schools in Compton, California*, Politics and Culture in Modern America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

8. Karen Houppert describes the strategies Army recruiters use in high schools, especially low-income urban schools, including visible participation in Hispanic Heritage and Black History month activities, befriending student leaders, offering services to sports coaches, and more, with the goal of establishing early contact. Karen Houppert, “I WANT YOU! The Three R's: Reading, 'Riting, and Recruiting,” in *Security Disarmed: Critical Perspectives on Gender, Race, and Militarization*, ed. Barbara Sutton, Sandra Morgen, and Julie Novkov (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 213–22.

college, I had to identify my dead partner's body in the hospital when he fell victim to a gang shooting one summer night. The emotional toll that followed caused me to take a three-year leave from college.

These two seemingly oppositional geographies and battlefields—El Salvador and Compton—are in reality forcefully intertwined, rooted in colonial legacies and white supremacy. US imperialism is built on the idea that racialized peoples do not matter—not their lands, their cultures, their ways of being, or their existence. They are deemed sacrificial and expendable for the greater good of white domination.<sup>9</sup> The Reagan administration enacted this belief when it systematically disappeared, displaced, tortured, and killed thousands of Central Americans by providing millions of dollars for military weapons and for torture training in the School of the Americas, then located in Georgia.<sup>10</sup> As was later revealed in the Iran-Contra scandal, the Reagan administration illegally funded terrorist paramilitary groups known as Contras in Central America using the cash profits from selling weapons to Iran. And though the Reagan administration denied the accusations, testimonies from journalists and police officials indicate that the administration further funded counterinsurgencies in Central America by transporting and supplying crack cocaine into inner cities, specifically targeting African American communities like Compton.<sup>11</sup> Two battlefields, separated geographically, were truly one, shaped by the same colonialist logic of invasion and elimination of people deemed inferior and expendable. From the intersection of those two battlefields, I grew up with the understanding that fleeing one war zone for another is to live in an inescapable and perpetual nonhuman zone.<sup>12</sup>

9. For a collection on racial domination and violence in the United States see Moon-Kie Jung, João H. Costa Vargas, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, eds., *State of White Supremacy: Racism, Governance, and the United States* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* 21, nos. 2/3 (2007): 168–78.

10. Lesley Gill, *The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas*, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

11. Gary Webb, *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion* (New York: Seven Stories, 1998).

12. Nelson Maldonado-Torres explains, "The zone of subhumanity is the zone of endless war." Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality," Frantz Fanon Foundation 2007, 1–37. [http://fondation-frantzfanon.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/maldonado-torres\\_outline\\_of\\_ten\\_theses-10.23.16.pdf](http://fondation-frantzfanon.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/maldonado-torres_outline_of_ten_theses-10.23.16.pdf).

## RAGE, LOVE, AND WORLDING

The politics of knowledge ingrained in my body—from which I am, think, and write—emerged at the crossroads of these two battlefields. But first, as is the case for many youth surviving war zones with no words to articulate personal tragedies and loss or the tools to make sense of injustice and violence, it manifested as embodied rage. That rage, however, could not exist without love—love for my family and my communities who were constantly denied their humanity. I later came to know from the observations of Frantz Fanon, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, and Chela Sandoval that rage and love are sources for social change even when stemming from a colonial wound. My love was, as Cuban musician Silvio Rodríguez described in a song he dedicated to the Salvadoran people, *un amor de abajo* (a love from below).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as Nelson Maldonado-Torres reminds us, with the systematic negation of humanity, the colonized are forced to ask, as Fanon did: "Who am I in reality?"<sup>14</sup> For me this inquiry probed both my personal family history and the systematic injustices imposed on communities like mine, in El Salvador and in Compton. Never did I consider art history a field or tool for such inquiry or social change, until as an undergraduate student I decided to research the art of Emory Douglas. For the first time I saw my worlds collide and understood the testament to existence that art can provide.

As the official revolutionary artist and minister of culture for the Black Panther Party and artistic director of the Black Panther newsletter, Douglas's art represented the plight, struggle, and liberatory spirit of the Black community in the 1960s and 1970s, one that closely resembled my community in Compton. Though he represented revolutionary icons and leaders, his main subject matter was the everyday people in the community, whom he depicted in an empathetic and empowering manner, not as victims but as agents of change. He exposed police brutality and inequality and the rage of the community, but also highlighted the Black Panther Party community programs that ensured children had breakfast before school, and that elders had groceries in their homes, emphasizing the love in the community as well. Importantly for me, Douglas aligned the Black Panthers with worldwide liberation

13. I am referring to Silvio Rodríguez's "Por quién merece amor," from the album *Unicornio* (1982).

14. Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality," 25.

movements, decolonization, and anti-US imperialism by condemning US military intervention in places like Central America, thus linking domestic and international liberation struggles as one.<sup>15</sup>

This was the first time I saw my worlds—the domestic terrorism of racialized inner cities where I grew up and the military intervention of Central America that displaced my family—represented in art, revealing, as I knew, that in reality they were always connected. I felt my rage and love validated as just and necessary, and my hope for radical change as a natural action. Writing that research paper as an undergraduate student was a visceral process, as the words seemed endless, not because they derived from theories or books but because I physically felt them emerge from the archive of my body, from the corporeal love and rage I carried for years. There was a transformative power in seeing my worlds (experiences, struggles, hopes) in art, and I knew that if our stories are not told, we must write them and teach them “by any means necessary,” as Malcolm X put it. To me this was another form of reasserting our histories, struggles, cultures, and thus reasserting our humanity and dismantling the nonhuman zone where many of us are relegated. I chose to research Central American art, but specifically to think and write *from* the battle zone, from *below*. My choice to enter the field of art history was a political choice. And I was fortunate to be supported by the Ronald E. McNair scholars’ program in which the importance of first-generation people of color in academia, and the power of scholarship as activism, was well understood.<sup>16</sup>

#### GUANACA-HOOD POINT OF DEPARTURE

For some, surviving the nonhuman zone is the first barrier to anything; to choose a field built on Eurocentrism and colonial projects as a way to disrupt the very coloniality that still represses, erases, and dehumanizes our communities is to enter yet another battle zone. I willingly entered this new (battle)field for the love of art and humanity, not for the purpose of diversifying the discipline. I quickly learned, however, that our very presence as academics of color can be a site of contestation if we choose not to uphold the Eurocentric ideas of art and aesthetics upon

15. For more on the art of Emory Douglas and the Black Panthers see Emory Douglas, Bobby Seale, Sam Durant, and Sonia Sanchez, *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007).

16. I extend my gratitude to the Ronald E. McNair program, and especially Dr. La’Tonya Rease-Miles, aka LT.

which the discipline was built, and instead write our own art histories from below.

This was first made clear when a faculty member explained that I had been rejected from a graduate program because, as they expressed, the department did not view my work as *art history*, but rather that it belonged and would be better supported in ethnic studies or area studies. I took three points from this statement. One, that there was an already-established definition of art and art history, and that the subject I wrote about (art from Central America, art of resistance, art that exposed US intervention, institutional racism, and coloniality), art in which I saw my world reflected, did not fit within it. Two, that my work could only exist and be allowed to develop in designated areas (disciplines) for the “othered.” Three, considering that white male art historians had already taken up the subject of Central American revolutionary art, the statement raised the question of a writer’s positionality. Axiomatically, if written by white male art historians, Central American art was *art history*, but if written by a Central American woman it could only reside within the fields of ethnic or area studies, thus suggesting that the geopolitical location from which one thinks determines the discipline.

This last point revealed to me the Eurocentrism relevant in the field of art history, which I later better understood through what Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez describes as the “hubris of the zero point.” This zero point refers to the geopolitical grounding from which one thinks and produces knowledge, but which in European modernity and imperialism is imagined as an invisible location. Like the prime meridian that cartographers use to divide the Earth into East and West, from which all is measured, the common zero of longitude, European cartographers conceived this central point as the only perspective dissociated from an ethnic center—the only position from which to produce scientific and objective representation.<sup>17</sup> Making European positionality as a point of observation invisible was passed off as a “universal” point of view and is still enforced in Eurocentric fields as *objectivity*. The problem, then, which reemerged on several occasions throughout my graduate studies and subsequent entry into the profession, was not my presence in the field of art history, since I brought “diversity.” It was my refusal to write from

17. Gregory A. Lipton, *Rethinking Ibn ‘Arabi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 153.

the hubris of the zero point—the invisible, universal point of view. Nor was the issue related to inserting Central American art into an art historical canon. It was doing so while making my *guanaca*-hood ontological point of departure visible. The problem was not even about addressing inner-city racial inequality through art. It was embodying and still having love for the hood. The problem was not being a product of military intervention, class inequalities, and racism. It was grounding my art historical analyses and thought *from* those points of departure instead of “overcoming” them as a scholar. It seemed my inclusion into the field required that I leave the world from which I emerged at the proverbial door, as if I had ascended into another world and now needed to play the part. The former could now only serve as past-tense reference whenever proving my diversity was necessary or useful.

#### AGAINST SUPERFICIAL INCLUSION

One of the times my *guanaca*-hood positionality was overtly encouraged as useful was during a graduate seminar when discussing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s iconic article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”<sup>18</sup> The instructor asked me, the only person of color in the class, to explain the concept of the subaltern to a confused white student by using my life background (El Salvador to Compton and more) as an example. As my classmates turned to me with blank stares, awaiting my response, my entire life flashed before my eyes. I wondered, how can I possibly explain my life story in thirty seconds to this student whose impatient stare tells me she only wants a quick, simplified answer for her notes? I could not figure out how to condense and convey the erasure, violence, racism, precarity, resistance, and survival. With the uncomfortable feeling of being on display, I was at a loss for words. Ironically at that moment, put on the spot as the subaltern, I could not speak.

The anecdote of my writing on Emory Douglas, and the anecdote of being asked to speak for the subaltern, are significant to compare, as they revealed to me the dangers of superficial inclusion. In the first, when I recognized my ontological self and had the agency to think, theorize, and write from my own geopolitical embodiment, thus giving

18. First delivered as a lecture in 1983 and different versions published in 1985 and 1988. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” reprinted in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

meaning to *my* world, it was rejected as outside the discipline. And in the latter, when my presence was welcomed, it was to benefit someone else; as a spokesperson for the other I could bring to *them* a diverse perspective and thus enrich *their* education and understanding of *their* world. The question of “diversity for whom?” persisted as a visible dilemma far into my profession as an art historian and professor, as I continue to experience and witness micro aggressions and overt racism in the field. But as I hope to point out with these anecdotes, the matter of diversity in the profession does not begin with the PhD in hand and an academic position at an institution. Rather, it goes further back, to the racism, elitism, and silencing of undergraduate and graduate students of color in their professional development, which can impede their entry into the field or produce self-censoring barriers carried over into the profession. For some of us it extends even further back to the battle zones from which we emerge—in my case, the US military intervention and domestic terrorism that placed my humanity under scrutiny and attack.

Diversity is but a superficial task if its main function is to benefit the already overrepresented group in the field. In academia, the dominant group benefits from diversity when *it* gets to learn from outside cultures and outside perspectives, while marginalized peoples are tokenized and exploited. The overrepresented group benefits from diversity when *it* is freed from responsibility of mentoring students of color, or freed from the excess volume of service on committees requiring a diversity quota. Studies prove that these tasks are consistently relegated to faculty of color, creating an exhausting workload that inhibits work-life balance.<sup>19</sup> Diversity as a practice that ultimately only benefits the overrepresented group at the cost of the physical, intellectual, and emotional labor of people of color is a delusion, in any profession.

The mere inclusion of “othered” geographies or racialized artists as subject matter, or/and of Indigenous peoples and people of color into the profession, does not suffice if the colonial underpinnings of knowledge production that maintain academia—a Eurocentric, elitist institution—remain intact. Beyond mere inclusion and acceptance of marginalized perspectives, the profession of art history requires a dismantling of the foundational structures that

19. Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. Gonzalez, and Angela P. Harris, eds., *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012).

still perpetuate a universal art historical world where “others” are primarily included to assuage Eurocentrism and white guilt. While diversity initiatives are important and necessary, only when they are intrinsically designed to combat and end settler colonialism, coloniality of knowledge, and the systematic dehumanization of Indigenous people and people of color will they cease to function as cosmetic solutions for the benefit of dominant groups, and truly benefit all.

### CON UN PIE AQUÍ Y OTRO ALLÁ

Some of us hold on tight to our worlds because we still live in them. At the time of writing this essay I am in El Salvador, where several caravans of Salvadoran asylum seekers have just departed for the United States. They follow an even larger caravan from Honduras that departed a few weeks prior. The desperation of these Central Americans has led them to seek safety in numbers to protect themselves from abduction, rape, forced slavery, sexual trafficking, disappearances, and death, which many Central American migrants face as they pass through Mexico.<sup>20</sup> As a response, the president of the United States has deployed thousands of US active-duty troops to the border to prevent entry for migrant women, children, babies, and men of all ages, or what he describes as an “invasion.” These events reveal to me that no doctoral degree, academic position, or cultural capital that comes with the profession undoes the fact that some of us, despite “making it” into the field, emerged from a world that is still under attack. In fact, some of us live in both worlds, *con un pie aquí y otro allá* (with one foot here and one foot there).

For me as a Central American student, visibility and invisibility extended beyond exclusion from the canons of art, and into the denial and erasure of my existence. Art was therefore not just a way of sensing the world in optical terms, but of telling and attesting to the stories that shape our existence through art making and the images

20. For an in-depth investigation on the migration experience for Central Americans through Mexico and the causes of migration from Central America see Oscar Martínez, *A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America*, trans. John Washington, Daniela María Ugaz, and Jon Lee Anderson (London and New York: Verso, 2016); Oscar Martínez, *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* (London: Verso, 2013).

that are left behind to circulate. Hence from undergraduate and into my graduate studies I researched Central American art and politics within the field of art history. I now write and teach Central American art as an art historian and professor. But my political choice to enter the field of art history was not to seek validation or acceptance from institutions, but rather to reach out to those who already feel the pain of erasure by making another world visible and recognizing its agency. Therefore, when our communities and relatives are still among the Black and Brown youth who cannot imagine surviving the hood, or among the detained or deported, or among the Indigenous women whose disappearances remain uninvestigated, or among the citizens with no clean water in Flint, Michigan, or no electricity in Puerto Rico, or among the Central American asylum seekers forced into exodus, meager inclusion in the profession does not suffice. Some of us seek a dismantling of the institutional racism and colonial logics that still perpetuate the idea that this world (the academic and/or institutional art world) belongs only to a few, or only to those who can survive the nonhuman zone. Some of us seek to dismantle the nonhuman zone. We hope that our presence in the profession is not simply limited to serving diversity quotas at the expense of our emotional and physical well-being, but that our colleagues become our allies in un-disciplining the field and decentering its Eurocentric position by making way for a multitude of art histories from below in an effort to decolonize knowledge and its institutional structures.

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