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THE WORK OF TRANSLATION IN THE IMAGE-TEXT ART OF CELIA ALVAREZ MUÑOZ

Abstract:

Whether in her small-scale art-books and photographs or in her larger site-specific projects, mixed-media artist Celia Alvarez Muñoz employs linguistic surplus as a primary theme and as a means of communicating the aesthetic, semi-autobiographical, and socio-political concerns of her works. She draws viewers into the acts of translation and representation that drive her creative works and carefully stages for them the conflicts and confluences of identity that permeate the contested space of the US-Mexico borderlands. She adds bicultural legibilities to the various aesthetic movements that inform her works, including pop art, minimalism, book art, public art, conceptual art, postconceptual art, and other modes and movements. Translation functions as a guiding aesthetic and as a crucial means of signification in her works, and her works, in turn, reflect on the work of translation. Examining the projects of Alvarez Muñoz serves as a fertile point of departure for thinking about how the multilingual and multimodal negotiations of visual and performance artists provide alternative ways of conceptualizing translation and how the works of these artists magnify the transnational and bicultural aspects of aesthetic movements.

Keywords: Celia Alvarez Muñoz ♦ Chicana/o art ♦ image-text translation ♦ rasquachismo ♦ domesticana

Multilingual play has long been a mainstay of literature, music, and art by Chicana/o and Latina/o artists working in and around the United States. In their language negotiations and material creations, these writers and artists confound notions of a monologic national culture and highlight the manifold intersections between English and Spanish in the context of the US-Mexico borderlands. Their works have valences that are at once participatory and alienating, inviting and exclusionary toward publics who may not be able to sort out the double-entendres or unpack the

cross-cultural layers. By presenting multilingual jokes or puns, code-switching, or, at times, choosing not to translate, they draw readers and viewers into their assorted translation strategies and counter both the notion of a monolingual text or object and the idea of a static linguistic community.

The playful language choices of contemporary Chicana/o and Latina/o literary and musical artists provide ready examples. In *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, the eponymous “Chicana” author Michelle Serros declares that she will write under the name “Michael Hill” (2000: 44); Cuban-American writer Gustavo Pérez Firmat indulges in the puns, slips, and other surpluses that come of his two languages in the poems in his *Bilingual Blues*; and Puerto Rican author Rosario Ferré published competing versions of her novels in Spanish and English.¹ Likewise, performers such as Gloria Estefan, Selena, Ricky Martin, and Jennifer Lopez present versions of themselves to Spanish- and English-language publics, and artists as varied as Pitbull, Kid Frost, La Santa Cecilia, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and Chicano Batman freely move between Spanish and English in their songs and performances.² Whether they revel in the interplay between their various languages or employ primarily one or another of their languages, these artists find creative recourse in their assorted idioms and, also, the opportunity to assert and complicate their individual and transnational identities. For many of these artists, the multilingual gestures in and between their works are a means of normalizing the movement between their languages and foregrounding the frequent acts of translation that inform their lives and creative projects.

Polyglot artists such as Chicano performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, the Chicana/o artists associated with the Asco art collective, and Chicana mixed-media artists Ester Hernandez, Amalia Mesa-Bains, and Celia Alvarez Muñoz are among those visual and performance artists who productively foreground problems of translation and the ramifications of bilingualism and biculturalism in their assorted projects. When [Gómez-Peña](#) calls himself “Malcolm Mex” (n.d., video 5) or performs in “Robo-Esperanto” (n.d., video 3), when Hernandez recreates a box of “[Sun Mad Raisins](#),” or when the touring [CARA](#) (Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation) exhibit and collectives such as [Con Safo](#), [Asco](#), [Los Four](#), and the [Royal Chicano Air Force!](#) (a play on the Royal Canadian Air Force) creatively employ or coopt names and acronyms (or seeming acronyms), they mobilize linguistic surplus and assert the bicultural aspects of their works. While these artists and initiatives each have their own precursors and particular historical antecedents, all extend the parameters of their forms by prompting viewers to confront the fertile ambiguities and misrecognitions that arise from navigating multiple cultures and languages.

Yet, despite the fact that the translational negotiations of these multilingual artists are more patently *visible* than the linguistic maneuverings of literary and musical contemporaries, these artists’ sophisticated multilingual projects have received relatively little sustained critical attention. With some exceptions, including, perhaps, Gómez-Peña, Chicana painter and muralist

Judith Baca, and Cuban-American performance and mixed-media artist Ana Mendieta, Chicana/o and Latina/o visual and performance artists are still considered primarily as minority artists and, in academic forums, the aesthetic and multilingual aspects of their works are most often subsidiary to the surrounding socio-political context.³ Though now over ten years old, Rita González's 2003 survey of art historical index citations for Latina/o artists exhaustively illustrates the extent to which Latina/o artists have been historically excluded from the canons and critical forums of mainstream art in the US. González describes the "overwhelming tendency to introduce Latino visual arts traditions in a broadly drawn social history," documents the lack of attention toward the individual works by these artists, and indicates how Latina/o artists are most often positioned "in a cultural framework that reads their work as a social text and positions the artist in relation to a historical phenomenon or static group identity" (3). Meanwhile, in Translation Studies, little attention has been directed toward representations and practices of translation exhibited in works of visual and performance art, notwithstanding the fact that visual metaphors are commonplace when discussing the work and expectations of translation. I contend that investigating how individual Chicana/o and Latina/o visual and performance artists have depicted, conceptualized, and embodied problems of language and translation can enlarge discussions of twentieth- and twenty-first century art in the US and can open new lines of inquiry in Translation Studies.

In order to try to pinpoint some of the crossings between visual art and multilingual matters, I examine the intricate multilingual and multi-medial negotiations of the acclaimed but still extra-canonical Chicana artist [Celia Alvarez Muñoz](#). I use the term "Chicana" instead of "Mexican-American" in referencing Alvarez Muñoz because she has allied herself with other Chicana/o and Latina/o artists and with "el movimiento" particularly (2004: 42), and because she has embraced the political associations of the term in relation to her works.⁴ Moreover, in the case of Alvarez Muñoz the designation implies a consciously gendered corpus distinct from the works of many of her predecessors and contemporaries working from the 1970s onward. Alvarez Muñoz is one of the fortunate few Latina/o artists to have a full monograph about her art and to have received more than passing attention from art historians. In 2009, poet, translator, and art historian Roberto Tejada published the first book-length, single-artist study of her works, a product of the reparative "[A Ver: Revisioning Art History](#)" series, edited by Chon Noriega.⁵ In it, Tejada undertakes a careful, formal, socio-historical, and linguistic analysis of Alvarez Muñoz's individual projects, signals the vital interplay between "image" and "text" in her compositions, and, generally, brings to light the opportunities afforded from the recuperative and revisionary projects of the "A Ver" series. The sustained attention toward her projects is well deserved, not least because her works underscore the untenable polarization of aesthetics and politics in relation to the works of Chicana/o artists and capitalize on the happy accidents and surpluses occasioned by the interplay between Spanish and English, image and text, and, often, child and adult perspectives. Certainly, Alvarez Muñoz is not the only artist to engage the tensions relative to competing languages and

cultures, yet her works are particularly illustrative of how Chicana/o and Latina/o artists add transnational dimensions to the aesthetic modes and movements that inform their assorted projects. Different than Chicana/o contemporaries who reprise the epic, massive, and broadly historical projects of the Mexican “mural renaissance” (Vargas 2010: 20)⁶, Alvarez Muñoz undertakes projects which are often intimate, minimalist, and less sweeping in scale. However, the minimalist aspects of many of her projects stand in contrast to the linguistic excess and surplus that abounds in and through her works. I extend the scholarship done by Tejada and others by continuing the discussion of how Alvarez Muñoz’s projects productively blur the line between art and activism and by examining how she approaches and conceptualizes the event of translation. Through her inventive and recombinative strategies of multilingualism, she posits a linguistic corollary to the “defiant” (Mesa-Bains 1999: 157), “bric-a-brac” (160) aesthetic or posture of “Chicana rasquache” or “domesticana,” as famously articulated by her Chicana contemporary Amalia Mesa-Bains. Chicana visual artists who draw upon the “rasquache” sensibility challenge restrictive cultural and gender expectations by creatively reassembling or repurposing found objects and by presenting elaborate restagings of domestic or “feminine” spaces. Mesa-Bains describes ornate shrines, home altars, and gardens “[c]haracterized by accumulation, display, and abundance” and a “commingling of history, faith, and the personal” (160). Likewise, by piecing together fragments of English and Spanish, of history and autobiography, of popular and material culture, Alvarez Muñoz supplements her typically spare compositions and installations with an accumulative, “domesticana” praxis of translation.

Arguably best known for her [Enlightenment #4](#), a series of photographs completed in the 1980s, and for her [Fibra y Furia](#), an installation relative to the still unsolved murders of over a thousand young girls in Juárez, Mexico (exhibited from 1996–2003), Alvarez Muñoz consistently recurs to the interplay between English and Spanish to enlarge and complicate her various projects. Whether in her small-scale art-books and photographs or in her large installations and other site-specific projects, she might succinctly be described as an “image-text” artist (Noriega 2009: xi) who employs linguistic ambivalence as both a theme and as a means of communicating the aesthetic, semi-autobiographical, and socio-political concerns of her work. As Tejada argues about her wordplay in his seminal study of her art: “The smallest syllables intone a larger challenge. If the governing systems of nations have standardizing consequences for the places inhabited by citizens, local narrations render them makeshift with additions that are multiply accented and complex” (2009: 5). Alvarez Muñoz coopts her viewers into the various acts of translation and representation that drive her creative works and carefully stages for them the conflicts and confluences of identity that permeate the contested space of the US-Mexico borderlands. She wields her linguistic prowess as an opportunity for engaging and challenging her respective audiences, and she adds bicultural resonances to the various forms and movements that she draws upon in her works, including pop art, minimalism, book art, public art, conceptual art,

postconceptual art, and several other modes and movements. Translation functions as a guiding aesthetic and as a crucial means of signification in her works, and her works, in turn, reflect on the work of translation.

Born in El Paso, Texas, in 1937 to Mexican-American parents and nurtured by a vibrant network of extended family members, Alvarez Muñoz navigated cultural divides from a young age—growing up bilingual and encountering a contrastingly Anglo-centric education in primary school and later at El Paso High (the more affluent and white-identified out-of-district high school, 2010: 10). Her biography is, in many ways, cosmopolitan: she later lived in New York, the DC area, and in other major US cities; she completed large-scale installations and public art projects all over the US; and she attained an advanced degree in fine arts at a time when women were mostly defined by their activities in the domestic sphere. Notwithstanding, most of her works center on the dissonances and felicitous convergences between English and Spanish and the ever-simmering tensions between Anglo, Mexican, and Mexican-American constituencies local to El Paso-Juárez. She adds to this decidedly regional emphasis a panoply of influences and precursors.⁷

Alvarez Muñoz brings her bicultural background and other formative life experiences—her mother’s experience as a seamstress, her own work as a fashion illustrator at The Popular Dry Goods Company in El Paso, her courses in advertising at Texas Western/UTEP, her experiences as a mother and school teacher, and her exposure to the culture wars of the 1960s and the burgeoning Chicano movement—into conversation with a number of aesthetic trends and political concerns. As Tejada argues:

[H]er art located ethnic heritage in an expanded field of meanings. By joining camera technologies to language, wall drawings, works on paper, and sculpture, as well as to the broader relational claims of site-specificity, her work was consistent with the overarching concerns of postminimalist and postconceptual art making. In an idiosyncratic style defined by a spirited mood and quick intellect, Alvarez Muñoz found ways to make personal content relevant to art history. (2009: 3)

For instance, in her 32-page black-and-white art book, *If Walls Could Speak/ Si las paredes hablaran* (1991), she frames assorted historical photographs, whimsical illustrations, insignia associated with labor unions, and snippets of dialogue between factory workers (all set against plain white backdrops) with two distinct storylines that unfold in both English and Spanish. The first narrative runs along the top of each page and provides (first in English and then in Spanish) a commemorative history of the women associated with the labor unions that gathered at the Embassy Auditorium in Los Angeles in the 1930s and 40s. The second narrative runs along the bottom of each page (with the same bilingual presentation) and consists of the perspective of an adult, presumably Alvarez Muñoz herself, recounting childhood memories of her mother going to

work in the factory. The first storyline is more general and socially-oriented than the personal and somewhat eccentric observations of the child, who recalls particulars such as the “threads of varying colors/ *hilos de varios colores*” (1991: 5) and the workers’ daily “Coca-Cola breaks/ *descansos de Coca-Cola*” (12), and morbid details such as her mom’s “big scissors/ *tijeras grandes*” (19) and the workers who “sewed their fingers on the monster machines/ *hasta se cosían los dedos en las maquinas monstruosas*” (16–17). This bifurcation of perspectives is doubled by the continual interplay between English and Spanish, the very loose translation praxis that is everywhere displayed in the book. Alvarez Muñoz’s Spanish versions of the two storylines are a bit more playful, inventive, and attuned to the specific vernacular of the border. She translates one worker’s statement that “I come in the morning, punch my card” as “Yo vengo en la mañana, poncho mi tarjeta” (10), utilizing the border-specific coinage of “poncho.” Likewise, her Spanish is often more evocative and flowery: she, at one point, renders “machines” as “*máquinaria*” [sic] (2), “cannery workers” as “*enlatadoras*” (14), and engages in wordplay about the intrigue surrounding the workers who conspire with “*Maria Fulana*” (10) or “*Maria Mangana*” (11). These evasive descriptors are flattened in English as simply “Maria F.” and “Maria M.” (10). Moreover, the varied storylines and perspectives are also intertwined with the central images on most every page: photos of individual workers and organizers, pamphlet-type images, and photos and drawings of material objects such as a sewing machine (12) and a “peach-slicing machine” (19). “Translation” is an inadequate description of what Alvarez Muñoz accomplishes in this small art book—as we do not know which language constitutes the “original” or source text—and she is, at once, author, translator, and illustrator. The title page specifies that the “Design, Narrative, & Translation” are all by Alvarez Muñoz. She presents a decidedly bilingual take on book art or the artist’s book, in which translation merges with design, display, and reassembly.

Part of Dolores Hayden’s LA-based “Power of Place” public art initiative and the related “Empire Project” to memorialize the strikes of garment workers who gathered at the historic Trinity / Embassy auditorium (Tejada 2009: 55–56), [*If Walls Could Speak / Si las paredes hablaran*](#) prefaces Alvarez Muñoz’s searing critique of the garment industry and the concomitant sexualization and brutalization of young female factory workers in her [*Fibra y Furia: Exploitation Is in Vogue*](#), the 1996 installation for the San Francisco-based Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Likewise, *If Walls Could Speak* is in conversation with [*A Brand New Ball Game*](#) (1994), an installation at the Capp Street Project in San Francisco, in which Alvarez Muñoz pieces together the stories and concerns of vulnerable LGBTQ youth in and around San Francisco and, also, the stories of her own uncle and nephew (Alvarez Muñoz 2004: 36). In each of these projects, she translates between English and Spanish, she moves between both visual and narrative forms, and she also endeavors to translate childhood memories, family history, trauma, and the histories of marginalized groups and communities. Her flair for conveying the humorous surpluses of language

runs through her socio-political concerns and connects her array of projects. As Chon Noriega summarizes in his introduction to Tejada's book:

Rather than elicit an open confrontation, Alvarez Muñoz prefers the *indirecta* (innuendo), bilingual pun, and structured absence, modes of address that she uses to engage viewers—or, rather, to disengage them from partisan affiliations based on one language, one culture, one way of being, or one approach to modern art. Her mode is to “negotiate” and “straddle” existing binaries, whether it be through visualizing the liminal space between two cultures, inserting personal content into art history, or mixing media in a way that both participates in and challenges postconceptual art. (2009: xi)

Her works are not merely bilingual so much as they coopt the viewer / reader into translating or, at least, noticing the activity and after-effects of translation. As Lawrence Venuti argues in his well-known “[How to Read a Translation](#)” essay, typically translation becomes apparent “only when we run across a bump on its surface, an unfamiliar word, an error in usage, a confused meaning that may seem unintentionally comical” (2004: n.p.). He claims that the “bad English translations [. . .] encountered abroad” (2004: n.p.) are prime opportunities to reflect on the gains of translation, that in these moments,

something more instructive is revealed: we laugh only because we have sorted out the confusions, demonstrating quite clearly that readers of translations can perform several mental tasks at once. In reading to comprehend, we focus on both form and meaning, so that when the meaning turns obscure or ambiguous, we instantly clarify or untangle it by correcting the error in form, in word choice or grammar. (2004: n.p)

Particularly in her image-text or book-art projects, Alvarez Muñoz draws attention to the bumps or collision points that refer back to the event of translation. She presents her viewers / readers with visual and verbal clues such that they can, at least partially, envision a previous encounter between languages.⁸ She involves her audiences in the problems of language and engages the semiotics of language to explore recurrent concerns about gender and sexuality, cultural and social mobility, and the marginalization of extra-national communities.

One of the most arresting examples of such a “semiotic” encounter is Alvarez Muñoz's [Enlightenment #4: Which Came First?](#) (1982), part of her ten-part Enlightenment Series which she completed in the 1980s⁹, and part of the permanent collection at the Blanton Museum of Art at University of Texas at Austin. *Enlightenment #4* consists of five photographs of five seemingly identical eggs in a crisp line or row, set against a solid orange backdrop, mounted onto approximately 22x15-inch sheets of white loose-leaf paper, and encased within a small wooden box. The photographs of the eggs are affixed above two lines of text, the first in a sans serif typeface and the second in what appears to be school child's cursive script:

Learning to speak English and understanding chickens were the hardest things for me during the primary grades.

1. *The chicken will lay an egg today.*

I would always ask, “How does a chicken lie a egg?”

2. *The chicken laid an egg yesterday.*

I was always corrected and told, “A chicken lays an egg through its mouth.”

3. *The chicken will lay an egg tomorrow.*

I would sit attentively for hours in front of the chickens in hopes of witnessing the event.

4. *The chicken has laid an egg already.*

Unfortunately, they were always too fast for me.

5. *The chicken lies every day.* (Tejada 2009: 44–45)

Presumably, the first line of text in each pair represents the perspective of an adult thinking back on her primary school education. In the second line of text, we don’t get a child’s perspective so much as the recreation of a child’s transcription of an assigned script, the handiwork of a child completing the rote assignment of copying sentences in order to practice using the irregular English verbs “lay” and “lie.”¹⁰ The series employs a number of visual and linguistic cues to reflect on translation, reproduction (in both a mechanical and a biological sense), mass production, and assimilative pedagogy. As Tejada argues, “*Enlightenment #4* is a work that submits a perverse etiology of visual cause and verbal effect—interchangeable terms” (2009: 46).

The secondary title of *Enlightenment #4*, “*Which Came First?*”, alludes to the age-old question about the chicken and the egg, a somewhat exasperating and recursive reflection on origin. Alvarez Muñoz extends this question by emphasizing the role of perception in determining precedence and equivalence. While the eggs in the first of the five photographs appear identical, the final image reveals that they are not as they appear. Alvarez Muñoz explains:

The picture presents a row of eggs that are in line, one behind the other, and you take it for granted that you are seeing a row of eggs of equal size. Here perspective comes into play. [. . .] you think you are looking at just a line of eggs that come from one carton, but in the last image you will see that they are, in actuality, of different sizes. So, you know, what is real? *Which came first?* (2004: 44)

The verbal duplicity of the “Which Came First?” images reinforces the visual insinuation that one’s vantage point is always mediated and can occasion misreadings or misrecognitions. The underlying verbal play derives from the adult narrator’s emphasis on the difficulty of the verbs “to lay” and “to lie” for a Spanish-speaking child, for whom “lay” and “laid” would sound like “lie” and “lied” when read phonetically in Spanish. The confusion is further compounded by the fact that (according to the third photograph) the child was told that “A chicken lays an egg through its mouth.” Alvarez Muñoz explains that when, as a child, she asked how a chicken laid an egg, her

grandmother responded or redirected by saying that the egg “came from its mouth, its beak” (2004: 44). Thus, Alvarez Muñoz adds a skein of a playful perversity to an already entangled scenario. As Tejada indicates, the constructed series of images and texts “informs about the misrecognition that can take place in the classroom when language acquisition warps with the sexual curiosities of childhood” (2009: 47). He adds that “[t]he orange-yellow backdrop in the photographs activates a visual-bicultural quip, as ‘yolk,’ intoned by a speaker of Spanish-accented English [. . .] could well be misconstrued as ‘joke’” (2009: 48), and, he argues that the whole series of photographs is framed by “the elision that threatens to capsize the term ‘Chicana’ into ‘chicken,’ as though to convey the ambivalence with which some Mexican Americans regarded the designation” (2009: 48). This image-text series of photographs makes visible the endemic and, often, humorous moments of interlingual communication in a transcultural setting.

While it is clear that in this series of photographs Alvarez Muñoz channels concerns of pop art and conceptual art—preoccupations with commodification, mass production, and mechanical reproduction—she engages these concerns via the context of Mexico-Texas borderlands. As prominent art historian Bryan Wolf argues about the Enlightenment series, “Like many minority artists in postmodern America, Muñoz restages the formal claims of most canonical art as a series of political gestures. She is interested not in aesthetics but in ideology, and she links eggs, children, and writing into a single field of cultural production” (1995: 95). I contend that she is interested in both ideology and aesthetics, that she emphasizes the accompanying social ramifications of seemingly apolitical forms that reflect on the technological advancements of society and culture. Even as Wolf claims that “Muñoz’s agenda is to render visible the processes of cultural invisibility” (1995: 20-21), his assertion that the political aspects of her work place her outside of the canon reinforces the polarization of art and politics that often contributes to and perpetuates the invisibility of Chicana/o and other minority artists. In her *Chicana/o Remix*, Karen Davalos calls for a move away from delimiting classifications of Chicana/o art as “parochial, separatist, political, ‘too ethnic,’ or not ethnic enough” (2017: 4) and asserts that, rather, “the power of Chicana/o art originates in its ability to access local meaning” and “its ability to register with viewers who are outside the immediate context of Chicana/o experiences” (14). In Alvarez Muñoz’s assorted projects, aesthetic concerns and cultural and identity politics are inescapably intertwined on both linguistic and visual planes. On the level of form and content, she implicitly rejects the polarization of aesthetics and message; her vocation as an artist is closely tied to her social and political activism. As Terezita Romo posits about contemporary Chicano artist Malaquias Montoya, “Montoya’s integration of formal artistic principles with ‘political’ content rose above the mere illustration of a political position to contest the very foundations of mainstream academic discourse” (2011: 7). Like Montoya, Alvarez Muñoz’s projects contest the very idea that “art is” or can be “autonomous” (Davalos 2017: 3).

Alvarez Muñoz portrays the literal and figurative integration or “intersection” of some of her guiding social, linguistic, and aesthetic concerns in [Postales y Sin Remedio](#), an installation for the Tyler museum of Art in Tyler, Texas, completed in 1988. In this installation, Alvarez Muñoz adopts a similarly two-fold, image-text centered approach. The opening tableau of the installation consists of a front porch setting—with three brightly colored metal tulip chairs, a scroll backdrop that looks like a page from a children’s storybook, and (overhanging the setting) two perpendicular or intersecting street signs, one that says “N Marteenes St” and another that says “S Martinez St.” Similar street signs and backdrops are hung throughout the gallery: “Guadaloop” intersecting “Guadalupe,” “Il Paso” intersecting “El Paso,” “Esproos” intersecting “Spruce,” and “Muertos” intersecting “Myrtle” (Tejada 2009: 25–27). The dissonant orthography of the street names immediately signals the bicultural aspects of the installation. As Tejada indicates, “Alvarez Muñoz set the Anglo-American ideology of ‘home sweet home’ against the welcoming if equally ambivalent logic of ‘esta casa es tu casa.’ Street signs were meant to indicate how the space of an imagined residence can involve modifying speech behavior so as to submit one’s tongue to new patterns of communication” (2009: 27). She playfully approximates how a gringo or *gabacho* pronunciation might overlay a Spanish (or once-Spanish) street name and how a Spanish speaker might contort an English street name like “Myrtle,” and in doing so she underlines the literal, visual, and linguistic intersections between English and Spanish and Anglo- and Mexican-identified communities. In *Postales*, she underlines the arbitrary character of language, revels in the differential interplay between English and Spanish signifiers, and evidences the extent to which multilingual play can create a generative, accumulative, and socially-minded aesthetic.

While this installation took place in Tyler, Texas—in East Texas and an almost eleven-hour drive from El Paso!—it had its antecedents in the Chamizal dispute between the US and Mexico. Alvarez Muñoz describes the “one-hundred-year dispute” that arose when over 600 acres of land on the border that was originally Mexico’s became part US because of how the riverbank of the Rio Grande shifted (2004: 46). After some controversy and a bi-national convention in 1963, the land was returned to Mexico in 1964 ([Friedman](#) 2015: n.p.). Alvarez Muñoz recounts that for some period of time before the land was returned, “‘What was Mexico’s became the United States’. That section, that strip, was developed. Families lived, schools were built – along that section. And then the dispute surfaced again during the Kennedy years and it was given back to Mexico. So all the families were displaced, moved throughout the city, and the evidence was visible in many, many instances” (2004: 46). Alvarez Muñoz started documenting some of the “hybrid” houses that emerged after the mostly Mexican-American families living in the Chamizal area were displaced and then moved into homes in white-identified neighborhoods in El Paso. She recalls how “sections of El Paso that were originally just white bec[a]me these mixed neighborhoods, or predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods” (2004: 46) and describes how certain houses acquired new facades, ornate fences, more yard art, or brightly painted exteriors (2004: 46). She collected

images of these homes, in El Paso and in other Texas cities (San Antonio, Fort Worth, etc.) and assembled them in an “accordion postcard book” (2004: 46) appropriately called *Postales*, which book became the starting point for the gallery-size installation.

The culminating installation consisted of a carefully wrought conglomeration of ambivalent linguistic, cultural, and visual “signs.” The hybrid aspects of the front porch tableaux and the actual signs and street names were reinscribed by dualistic visual objects throughout the gallery: large airbrushed images of the hybrid houses; 16 different scroll canvases that appeared to be pages from a “giant children’s storybook” (2004: 47) with illustrations of hybrid insects and flowers; and, on each storybook page, fragments of evocative and fanciful lines of text that mixed both English and Spanish and pulled from both Anglo and Hispanic mythologies. Tejada argues that, among other associations, “The text and images evoked childhood” and “the creative confusion of bilingual realism” (2009: 27). One such scroll depicted a seeming sunflower or marigold with lines that read, “Many times we played Florin Dishes Florin Dan or El Saponi. The former was London Bridge, the latter, Here Comes a Pony” (2009: 27). Alvarez Muñoz explains that the text reflects “more play about how we learned English [. . .] the way English sounded” (2004: 47). Thus, in *Postales*, Alvarez Muñoz returns to the linguistic surpluses born of language-learning and language-mixing and to the ways in which the play between signs and signifiers reiterates this linguistic and bicultural abundance.

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Alvarez Muñoz never left, that she recurs to the excesses of multilingualism as a primary aesthetic and stimulus. As she states in the exhibition catalog for a 1986 exhibit on “New Talent in Texas”:

My works are a narrative of visual and verbal expression. A love of story-telling, toys and books brought me to bookworks as an art form. Through them I reveal my bilingual and bicultural heritage; a schizoid type of existence from growing up in the border town of El Paso. I gently poke fun at myself and my culture. I call the works enlightenment stories, because they help me synthesize my own history. (cited in Pérez 2007: 207)

In the *Postales* installation, her Enlightenment series of photographs, her miniature art books and “bookworks,” and in the vast majority of the numerous projects that constitute her evolving corpus, Alvarez Muñoz evidences a committedly multi-modal approach to thinking about and foregrounding the work and the event of translation. She revels in moments of misreading or misrecognition and draws her viewers / readers into the act and aftermath of such translational encounters. As Noriega claims, in her work “[t]he misreadings become metaphors for the underlying social relations within a regional and national culture marked by diversity, but often imagined otherwise” (2009: xi). Alvarez Muñoz extends the semiotics of language to visual culture, particularly in relation to the rich interplay of signs that arise in the space of the US

borderlands, in the movement between Spanish and English, and in the liminal transference between image and text.

The patently bilingual praxis of Alvarez Muñoz suggests that there is more work to be done in examining the kinds of translation strategies multilingual visual artists have utilized as a means of signification and a creative point of departure. While Alvarez Muñoz's collective works differ from each other and from those of her Chicana/o contemporaries, they are clearly in dialogue with the politics of "el movimiento" and with the bold and recombinative stance of "rasquachismo" employed by many Chicana/o visual and performing artists and, especially, with the aesthetic variant of "Chicana rasquache" or "domesticana" formulated by fellow artist and theorist Mesa-Bains (1999: 161). In his landmark essay for the influential CARA exhibition catalog, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto approaches "rasquachismo" as an elusive "attitude," "sensibility," or "irrepressible spirit" (1991: 156) that involves the purposeful reuse or recycling of materials and a penchant for the "elaborate" and "flamboyant" (157). He describes how "[t]he rasquache inclination piles pattern on pattern, filling all available space with bold display. Ornamentation and elaboration prevail, joined to a delight for texture and sensuous surface" (157). His notion of rasquachismo borrows from Susan Sontag's notion of "camp," but he reads rasquachismo as a hybrid "insider" code specific to the Chicano community (156) and cites examples as varied as the *No Movies* by Asco (stills or posters advertising non-existent movies) (155), velvet paintings (155), the pícaro character of "Don Chipote" in Daniel Venegas's early Chicano novel (157–158), low-rider cars (160), the sculptures of Ruben Trejo (161) and the performance art of Guillermo Gómez-Peña (161). More than Mesa-Bains, Ybarra-Frausto situates rasquache in a variety of artistic forms and mediums. In reference to her own work and to the projects of Chicana artists Patricia Rodriguez and Patssi Valdez, Mesa-Bains describes a similarly oppositional and abundant aesthetic centered on domestic spaces such as the home altar, kitchen, and the front yard and in female-centered occupations such as healing and handicraft or *artesanias* (1999: 160–161). She explains how, like rasquachismo, the hybrid "Chicana rasquache" or "domesticana" aesthetic defies "an imposed Anglo-American cultural identity," and she adds that it goes a step further by defying "restrictive gender identity within Chicano culture" (161) and deploying "[s]pacial ambiguities and metaphors [. . .] to shake the foundational patriarchy in art" (162–163). While several of Alvarez Muñoz's projects are more minimalist or visually spare than the typically ornate projects of Mesa-Bains, Rodriguez, Valdez, and other Chicana/o contemporaries, she reinscribes the visual gestures of "domesticana" through her elaborate wordplay, her efforts to foreground the fertile ambiguities between English and Spanish, and her recurrent consideration of gender issues in Chicano culture. She adopts a "domesticana" practice or posture of translation that is also "[c]haracterized by accumulation, display, and abundance" (Mesa-Bains 1999: 160) and privileges "a flux state from within Chicano [. . .] culture" (163). The linguistic aspects of her works elucidate and provide a

corollary to the predominantly visual strategies of cultural translation undertaken by contemporaries like Mesa-Bains, Rodriguez, and Valdez.

For instance, in *El Limite*, an installation completed for the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego in 1991, Alvarez Muñoz layers distinct perspectives and voices, “piles” English and Spanish on top of each other, and presents an intimate and familial take on the complicated space of the US-Mexico border.¹¹ As Tejada describes, the original installation included wall drawings that reprise iconic photographs of the Mexican Revolution by Agustín Casasola (84), visual references to typography, “Aztec-inspired art deco borders” (86), and two large photographic compositions by the artist, in which she depicts a toy train made out of sardine tins and a can of evaporated milk that was recreated by her elderly Mexican-American father (87). Though this list makes the installation seem fairly cluttered, the assorted visuals were cleanly set against a solid, bright-yellow backdrop. As Asta Kuusinen argues about the large photographic panels in the installation,

Sparingly composed, the photo-mural does not show a single human figure, yet it does, indeed, involve a large number of embodied and gendered subjects through the artist’s authorial voice and the strong physical presence of her father, the anti-hero, who not only recreated his childhood toy but also, in its image, resurrected the whole community of working-class Mexicans in El Paso. (2006: 131)

As in her other projects, Alvarez Muñoz frames her images with evocative and whimsical excerpts of text in English and Spanish. The text below the image of the toy train in the first photographic panel reads:

Stories by Dad came from two sources; invented
and real life adventures. At times hard to separate or distinguish.
En las arenas, near the railroad tracks, they played with toys made out of
things that don’t belong together. Like combinations we were warned against.
Nunca, never, eat watermelon during a certain time of the month.
Nunca, tome leche cuando coma pescado.
Nunca, tome un helado cuando ajitado. (Tejada 2009: 88)

In this mix of family history, multilingual poetry, and apparent folklore, Alvarez Muñoz approximates the resourceful, throw-back aesthetic described by both Ybarra-Frausto and Mesa-Bains. The playful layers of text surround the recreated object with fanciful ambiguity and reinscribe the combinative but visually spare gestures elsewhere in the installation. Moreover, in her drawing that cites Casasola’s photograph of a “soldadera” or female revolutionary soldier (84) and in her narratorial figurations of herself as “daughter,” she inserts subtle tensions of gender into the larger project. The text accompanying the second photographic panel takes the form of smoke wafting from the image of the toy train:

Some stories stemmed from trips to the Golden State on trains, he jumped on in El Paso,
 during the depression years. My favorite stories dealt with The War when he
 was moved across the world and throughout Europe, again,
 mostly by train. Little do we know that colic
 couplings may well become the main
 ingredients required
 to survive. (89)

Though this excerpt is ostensibly less bilingual than the lines of text in the first panel, it presents the train as a literal and figurative vehicle that connects Alvarez Muñoz's bicultural heritage and the interdependent histories of the US and Mexico in the early twentieth century. Tejada seizes on her neologism of "colic couplings" as a collocation that "propels information into fantasy: a transposition of ordinary discourse into the uncanny language of wonder" (91). By pairing the evocative "colic" with "couplings," corporeal and material linking mechanisms, Alvarez Muñoz reiterates on the level of form and content the "make-do" impulses of *rasquache*, what Ybarra-Frausto describes as the "[r]esilience and resourcefulness" that "spring from making do with what is at hand (*hacer rendir las cosas*)" (156).

Alvarez Muñoz draws upon similar strategies of cultural and linguistic translation in her installation *Abriendo Tierra/ Breaking Ground* for the Dallas Museum of Art in 1991, in which she melds Native American and Mexican American cultural references; in the *Fibra y Furia* installation for the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco about the sexualization of young women by the fashion industry and the horrific femicides in Juárez (Tejada 2009: 67); and in *Enlightenment #9: La Yodo*, a curious art box or photo essay completed for a 1989–90 exhibit at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, in which Alvarez Muñoz pairs seven photos of a doll named "Honey" with the retrospective observations and childhood memories of a bilingual narrator. Again, in all of these projects, her approach to translation is multi-faceted and entails elaborate linguistic negotiations as well as design, photography, autobiography, historiography, and poetry. The task of translating involves recycling, creative reassembly, and the careful restaging of multiple perspectives. She pairs images and texts to re-signify material objects and foreground the ambiguities between English and Spanish, Anglo and Mexican cultures, and past and present. As Ybarra-Frausto argues about *rasquachismo*, the creative deployment "of available resources engenders hybridization, juxtaposition, and integration" (1991: 156). Alvarez Muñoz connects her assorted projects and the aesthetic and socio-political aspects of her works with her distinctive brand or posture of multilingualism. I maintain that further examinations of her works and the literary and translational ramifications of "Chicana *rasquache*" or "domesticana" can create new conversations in Translation Studies and unearth fertile connections between multilingualism and visual art.

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Notes

¹ Moreover, countless Chicana/o and Latina/o writers and artists, including Roberto Fernández, Ana Castillo, Luis Valdez, Ana Menéndez, Cherríe Moraga, Rolando Hinojosa, Gloria Anzaldúa, Margarita Cota-Cárdenas, Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz, and many others, incorporate Spanish, English, and Spanish-and-English into their narrations. In their language choices, they engage the political tensions surrounding English and Spanish in the US and bring readers into the extra-national dimensions of their works. For discussions of the kinds of language choices employed by these writers, see, for starters, Doris Sommer's *Bilingual Games*, Martha Cutter's *Lost and Found in Translation*, Steven Kellman's *The Translingual Imagination*, Alfred Arteaga's *Chicano Poetics*, Debra Castillo's *Redreaming America*, and Brian Lennon's *In Babel's Shadow*.

² Other well-known examples include artists such as Shakira, Enrique Iglesias, Los Tigres del Norte, and Cypress Hill. Like the aforementioned Latina/o writers and performers, these singers display varying degrees of heterolingualism, and some borrow only sparingly from English or Spanish. As Daniel Belgrad argues about the insider wordplay manifested in songs by Kid Frost, these kinds of moves are less coded than they pretend to be and are, more often than not, "revealed to be an assertion of difference rather than a move towards hybridity" (2004: 262). Still, I argue that by making their publics pass through their various acts of translation, each of these artists and performers clears space for poetic strategies that are less accommodating of monolingual publics.

³ In response to the homogenization of works by historical and contemporary Chicano artists as “only political or protest art” (2010: 4), art historian George Vargas posits, “Today’s Chicano art is multipurpose and multifaceted, social and psychological, American in character and universal in spirit. It has flourished beyond the boundaries of political commentary and can be appreciated by broader audiences” (2010: 7).

⁴ As Laura Pérez explains concerning her discussion of Chicana artists, “Chicana” is “a term [that] artists identified with the ongoing, albeit shifting, shape of civil rights struggles have applied to themselves and their work, as artists decisively shaped in the United States, resistant to the racism against their Mexican and Native American cultures and the discriminations against a still largely pauperized, economically exploited, and culturally stereotyped and marginalized body of citizens” (2007: 12).

⁵ A corrective endeavor since 2007, the “A Ver” series also includes books on Chicana/o and Latina/o artists such as Gronk, Yolanda M, López, María Brito, Carmen Lomas Garza, Malaquias Montoya, Ricardo Valverde, Pepón Osorio, Luis Cruz Azaceta, and Judith Baca. Forthcoming titles include monographs on María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Raphael Montañez Ortiz, José Montoya, Freddy Rodriguez, Juan Sanchez, and Patssi Valdez.

⁶ Notable Chicano murals include Leo Tanguma’s *The Rebirth of Our Nationality* in Houston, Texas; Willie Herrón III’s *The Wall That Cracked Open* in LA; *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* by Judy Baca and the artists associated with SPARC (the Social and Public Art Resource Center); Barbara Carrasco’s controversial *The History of Los Angeles* mural; and works by Las Mujeres Muralistas and the “Los Four” collective. As Vargas describes, “Chicano murals exploded like piñatas in urban centers throughout the United States during the late 1960s and well into the 1970s” (2010: 25).

⁷ Tejada notes her connections to artists such as Alice Aycock, Sol LeWitte, Jackie Winsor, Ed Ruscha, Yoko Ono, and Barbara Kruger, and, especially in her later works, to the works of Chicana/o contemporaries, including Rupert García, Delilah Montoya, and Amalia Mesa-Bains (2009: 4) and to Cuban American artist Félix González-Torres (2009: 60). Alvarez Muñoz indicates her ties to several other artists, including her teachers / artists Vernon Fisher, Ashley Walker, Al Souza, (2004: 23); Chicana/o contemporaries Santa Barraza, Judy Baca, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña (2004: 42–43); multi-media and installation artists Laurie Andersen and Judy Pfaff (2004: 43); and architects Louis Kahn and Frank Lloyd Wright (2004: 48). She also recounts the “upside down” effect of pop artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol and the impact of artists such as Jasper Johns and Marcel Duchamp (2004: 25).

⁸ Of course, as theorist Jacques Derrida argues, “1. *We only ever speak one language—or rather one idiom only.* 2. *We never speak only one language—or rather there is no pure idiom*” (1998: 8). The languages of multilingual Chicana/o and Latina/o subjects are not clearly separate so much as they are part of a singular, expansive voice or “idiom.” The works of artists like Alvarez Muñoz expose the tenuous nature of conceptualizations of a “pure” and impermeable national languages.

⁹ Laura Pérez explains that, “From 1981 through 1985, Muñoz created ten books as a part of this series. Two in the form of ‘match-books’ (*Chispas Quemén, #1* and *Double Bubble & WWII, #2*). The fourth through ninth books consisted of loose-leaf pages in boxes” (2007: 206–207). “*Enlightenment 4*” is the most well-known piece of this series.

¹⁰ Alvarez Muñoz had her then school-aged son copy the specified lines of text into a cursive script (Tejada 2009: 46–47).

¹¹ Asta Kuusinen explains that the solo installation *El Límite* was commissioned by the museum as part of a larger exhibition entitled *La Frontera / The Border: Art about the Mexico / United States Border Experience*. She describes that, “in 1991, the installation / solo show *El Límite* opened in the museum and kicked off the larger exhibition, which then toured in Mexico and around the United States in 1993 and 1994” and “[d]ifferent versions of the *El Límite* installation have been on display in various venues” (2006: 127). My analysis centers on stills from the first exhibition in Tejada’s book.