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A Few Thoughts About Using Visual
Images in LatCrit

The visual image reproduced for the LatCrit VII poster comes directly out of critical theory, and probably even LatCrit. I call the image “Somewhat Suspended in a Doubly Decontextualized Space.” The image is part of a series of paintings about brownness, femaleness, and outsidership. I call the series

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“Latindia,” a term coined by Professor Berta Hernandez-Truyol, who used it in a very productive and yet difficult LatCrit session we had on the indigenous aspects of our Latina identities. Professor Hernandez’s points were that none of us are pure products, and indeed that the very notion of blood purity is the bedrock of any racist society. It seemed an important and obvious point, until we went around the room. I heard that some conferees did indeed regard themselves as pure products, others knew they were not pure products, but nevertheless referred to themselves that way in an effort to atone for a painful historic past, or to be relieved from having to reconcile a painful historic past with what seems an irreconcilable present. Others wanted to begin piecing the various strands of the past together, even if those strands didn’t respond to a linear narrative or otherwise make sense. But what stayed with me was the narrative vehemence that those who claim purity (whatever its manifestation) can assume in relation to those who can’t (or more accurately, won’t) claim such a heritage. To be pure in America, in a sense is part of being accepted. But pure what? None of us can say. I began to wonder just why it is that purity—ambiguous as the concept is—seems to loom so large in the American psyche.

The image reproduced here directly counters the idea of blood, or even cultural, purity. In my opinion, blood purity is a racist fiction, and cultural purity is a myth, especially in a world driven by media and computer technology. The woman in the image is brown, but she is not pure. She is female, but she is not a woman in the traditional sense because she is androgynously ambiguous, except when she is masked. If I had to sum it up (and that is exactly what the LatCrit editors are asking me to do), I’d say that the image is a postmodern portrait of a single person. Not a disturbed person, mind you, but a person who lives quite responsibly in a culture that raises aggressive linearity to the status of a stereotypical ideal. The dressed up figure hiding behind the leaf mask in the center of the canvas wears the mask so as to function in the world. This woman’s leaf is the same leaf the biblical characters Adam and Eve reached for in their shame. The naked figure is the person unmasked, pensive, concerned, split with indecision, in a word, human. The face at the far right is partial, distorted, uncertain, ambiguous, even twisted; not only is the viewer unable to define her, she herself rejects definition. She will not be placed in someone else’s category, even if that other



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“Somewhat Suspended in a Doubly Decontextualized Space”

person insists. Or maybe it is the opposite, maybe she is planted (limited) in societal boxes and categories. I can't say. But I know that she claims her status as an image of a person, even if

she doesn't look like what the viewer would expect the image of a person to be. The blue body that appears at first as negative space is ethereal, strong, decontextualized; this body, like all of the others, exceeds the frame of the painting, suggesting that there is more outside of what we know or expect, more than we are aware of, or otherwise allow.

In a way, the painting is about personal and professional indecision, unknowingness in the face of personal challenge. It is sad, to some degree, but also defiant. Frankly, not all the aspects of the woman in this painting are concerned with the currently approved labels for a body that is brown, female, and ambiguous, as she understands that the "approved" labels are often void of her imagic presence. Similarly, she is not at all concerned with notions of blood purity, or cultural purity, or family purity, or any of society's other hallowed myths. Indeed she is discarding the most stubborn cultural idea that a person is unchangeable, monolithic over time, and otherwise doomed to singularity. This woman, in her aspects, refuses stereotype. She—in all her parts—demands her own imagic presence. She rejects, possibly transcends, the familiar images of brown women we as viewers know. In not being what we usually see (and thus expect), she thus encourages the viewer to accept the particularity of *her* brownness, *her* femininity, *her* androgeneity, *her* kaleidoscopic "personality," in essence, *her* parts, *her* differences.

Art links powerfully with symbol, often challenging the standards, rules, rubrics, and braces that are so often mistaken as a natural, unchangeable part of life. Art can upset the vision of our privilege, or it can empower the vision of our powerlessness in the face of privilege. We are told this about famous artists' work so that now we too can see (understand) their genius. Van Gogh upset the vision of what at the time constituted the proper way to depict a landscape. Rothko challenged the idea that art needs a defined image in order to be about something. Warhol intentionally merged art, commodity, and cliché with his view that art, even high art, need not be unique in the traditional sense. It could be mass produced, like his Brillo boxes, or inexact and cheap, like his silkscreens, or repetitive, maybe even shallow, like the multiple Marilyns who at once look empty and deeply, painfully full in both color and black and white. Indeed Warhol was known for saying that his art had no hidden meaning, it was no more than paint on a canvas.

My point is that images and symbols can be powerful ways of challenging deeply held beliefs that others take as given. But images are also used unconsciously, inherited from our American past and employed to teach the very ideas that divide us. The symbol of blood purity, even though muted, is still a powerful one. It is the basis of historic wrongs, as well as of current wrongs, in the sense that it purports to establish a clear line where in biology, or feeling, or any other human aspect there is no such division. Similarly the idea of gender purity gives us the traditional (ideal) man or woman, bodies bent into stereotypes in order to live out society's approved gender roles. So too with the modern portrait, with its emphasis on the singular aspect of the individual, and particularly of what the individual looks like. Looks, of course, at once being the defining force in a life and the least relevant to our sense of what is ultimately important. Think of augmented breasts, for example. Why are they so popular when we all know (or at least are told) that the size of breasts is irrelevant to one's worthiness to be loved?

I wish I could take full credit for somewhat suspending myself in a doubly decontextualized space, but the truth is that the title of this work of art was given to me by a peer reviewer who was reading an essay I'd written on the Native American as a symbol in property law.¹ The peer review process involved two peer reviewers, one from law and one from an unknown (to me) discipline, as the reviews were anonymous. The law reviewer's comments were helpful and aggressively linear. The other reviewer's comments were equally helpful. However, the comments signaled to me that he or she grasped what I was communicating about the use of symbols in law. The reviewer noted that certain passages in the essay, because they were invoking multiple levels of interpretive ambiguity, were intentionally decontextualized from historical or social frames. In addition, the reviewer responded to my idea about how symbols are powerful precisely because they are decontextualizable, if not decontextualized. Symbols are a timeless language. Hence "somewhat suspended in a doubly decontextualized space." The comments puzzled me at first, but they sounded poetic to my ear, and so I pondered them. Many in our profession would deride this language as jargon, but when I thought about the phrase, as

¹ Jo Carillo, *Getting to Survivance: An Essay about the Role of Mythologies in Law*, 25 POL. & LEGAL ANTHROPOLOGY REV. (POLAR) 1 (2002).

one would ponder a work of art, I realized these words were an academic gem—a seemingly unintelligible sentence making quite a bit of sense about life in the postmodern era.

We may not all live in the postmodern era. It's possible the privileged among us still live securely entrenched in a modernist ethic. Their world works. Their lives and economic cushions are secure. But the woman in my image, does not live in a modern world. She lives in a postmodern one. She has deconstructed, in a sense, the idea of the—or a—singular personality, as a woman of color who teaches in an American law school has to do on a daily basis. She has recognized her inner Tibet and her inner America, as the Dali Lama encourages us to do. She is aware of her soft spots and her hard edges, her masked performances and her relapses into a healing quiet. She knows when she is rejected (or accepted), and why. This woman is a biological mixture, a social mixture, a gender mixture—a being of incredible mixture, and she knows it, she wants it, and she lives it despite the personal and social cost to her.

Sometimes when I am asked what my work means, I cannot say. This is particularly true for visual images, and (alas) sometimes for written work. But in my sensibility, the art I've lived with—or been able to live with—doesn't shout. It speaks in whispers. I notice—it allows me to notice—changes here, colors there. It allows me to observe it and draw my own conclusions over time. It serves as a canvas for my own psyche to project upon as a way of continuing and deepening the relationship I have with myself. In that way, I believe, the images one surrounds oneself with, precisely because they do sink deep, play a part in forming the person. This includes art images, but it also includes media images, and more relevant to this discussion, the legal images we surround ourselves with. Images, I believe, are important to the study of law as a culture.

Art—visual art—presents symbols for our “reading.” We “read” a painting the same way we “read” books or poems. If this is so—and it certainly is for me—then my painting illustrates Native American Studies Professor Gerald Vizenor's idea of *survivance*. Survivance is different than mere survival. Survivance is something more than mere survival. With survivance, we—like the woman in the painting—imagine ourselves for our own purposes, even if others don't understand. Survival, on the other hand, means we live on, breathing, eating, going forward in life,

letting others imagine us for their purposes and within the confines of their limited knowledge about what it is that makes us “different” or “similar.” Survivance is an artist’s idea.

Vizenor says that survivance refers to our ability to imagine ourselves. It takes strength, after all. Do we, can we, imagine ourselves? Or must we live by others’ imaginings? Individually, culturally, collectively? How indeed do we imagine ourselves into the present, into the culture, into law, into justice, into our bodies, our souls, our sexualities, or even into our God(s)? As we are law professors when we gather together for LatCrit, where in the law is our survivance? How are we (and our students) denied entrance into the imagic presence that law represents in this country? When and why are we allowed in? Are we imagined flatly? Wrongly? Are we at once projected and simultaneously cut out, like the “Indians” in the old John Wayne movies? Are we distorted into stereotypes created for us, or worse, assumed by us? Imagining ourselves richly is one of LatCrit’s projects. The project is about making it possible for all of us to gather, to talk, to engage in the process of imaging ourselves and our work fully, creatively and powerfully as Latina and Latino scholars.

