

Preface

In my home in Oakland, California, you will find an appropriate metaphor for the inverted temporal order of this book: a small image of the Sankofa bird of Akan philosophy. Carved into a piece of wood, this feathered creature is suspended in motion, its billowing body moving forward while its head contorts, facing backward. In the present tense of its carving, the majestic Sankofa bird looks back toward history as it moves into the future, as if to say, “We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward, so we can understand how we came to be who we are today.”¹ The future is enabled through the recognition of the presence of the past.

This book is an exploration of the symbolic role of Mexicanas and Chicanas in culture. I begin at the end of a long journey through a century of representations of meXicanas (pronounced “me-chi-canas”) in various institutional, social, and cultural sites. Inverting the chronology of history and memory, *meXicana Encounters* looks at the vital role of culture in the formation of social identities on the borderlands. Looking back from the perspective of the present, I dramatize the significance of cultural practices and symbolic forms in shaping, representing, and defining social identities in our contemporary world. By emphasizing the role of social identities in nation-building narratives, I aim to offer an account for the apparent contradiction between the visibility of meXicanas in cultural representation and their invisibility in the history of the nation.

For me, this exploration has been transformative, and the ordering of the chapters reflects the evolution in my thinking about the cultural rep-

resentation of *meXicanas*. Oriented to the future while moving through the past, each chapter stages an encounter with the symbolic visibility of *meXicanas* from the perspective of the present, from a social location that is constantly being transformed and shaped by social interactions, events, narratives, and power relations in the life of, in Barbara Kingsolver's words, "Another America."

A comment on the term "*meXicana*": As the interface between *Mexicana* and *Chicana*, "*meXicana*" draws attention to the historical, material, and discursive effects of contact zones and exchanges among various communities on the Mexico-U.S. border, living in the shadows of more than 150 years of conflict, interactions, and tensions. "*meXicana*" references processes of transculturation, hybridity, and cultural exchanges — the social and economic interdependency and power relations structuring the lives of inhabitants on the borderlands.

Not recognizably *Chicana* or *Mexicana*, "yet geographically and historically localized" — echoing the lyrics of Chavela Vargas's song, "*Ni de aquí ni de allá*" (Neither from here nor from there) — *meXicana* is a metaphor for cultural and national mobility.² And even though the term is an amalgamation of "*Mexicana*" and "*Chicana*," it does not signal an erasure of difference, but rather calls attention to the intersections among the multiple narratives of race, gender, sexuality that inform nation building.

My concern with how the making of social identities is structured in dominance, within narratives of racism, sexism, and classism, guides the focus on practices of representation. In the first three chapters of the book I consider the role of violence in reproducing racial, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies, emphasizing the interconnections between experiential and symbolic forms of violence.

Current debates over nomenclature are based on legal distinctions between "*Mexicanas*" as immigrants to the United States and *Chicanas* as native. While such distinctions may serve policy interests or demographic aims, in the realm of cultural representation, the difference between "*Mexicana*" and "*Chicana*" is often obscured and erased. The term "*meXicana*" reflects the complicated imbrication of "*Chicanas*" and "*Mexicanas*" in the formation of subjects in the nation. My readings of mainstream cinema in the United States, especially in chapters three and seven, will take up this amalgamation of *Mexicana* and *Chicana* within cultural representation. My focus here is on the shared history of othering, on how dominant culture collapses differences and homogenizes *Mexicanas* and *Chicanas* into a single social category as "other." Chapters four, five, and six examine the politics of othering that excludes identities

of women from conceptions of the Chicano and Mexican nations. In this case, the term “meXicana” charts an encounter with a shared history of exclusion and subordination within the cultural and political practices of various patriarchal nationalisms, those emanating from the nation-state (the United States) as well as from nationalist, antiracist movements (the Chicano nation). In this manner, *meXicana Encounters* probes the role of Mexicanas and Chicanas as figures of otherness within cultural discourses of the nation.

Clearly, however, my story of the making of social identities on the borderlands is far from a one-way process of othering within culture. At each stage, *meXicana Encounters* recuperates the counternarratives emanating from and giving voice to new social collectivities. From the politics of grassroots activists in Ciudad Juárez (chapter one) to feminist subversions of gender arrangements (chapters two, four, and five) to a star persona’s disruption of gender roles (chapter six) to my grandmother’s countermemories of Tejano film culture (chapter eight), *meXicana Encounters* affirms the production of new cultural citizens on the borderlands.

Even so, the utopic borderless world many of us imagined seems increasingly distant these days. “Borderlessness” seems more like a dystopic nightmare, a design reserved for the new global empire of the United States as it reasserts its imperial role as state above all states and as beyond the rule of international law. In a climate of fervent nationalism, the banner of counterterrorism is currently the pretext for emergent forms of state terrorism against immigrants, the poor. The state is intensifying border militarization as it develops new forms of policing and surveillance of immigrants and dissidents—the excluded citizens of the nation.

The normalcy of state terrorism in our own historical moment makes the movement for global social justice more urgent than ever before. My writings join the common and overlapping struggles on behalf of social justice among many people throughout the world. Like others, I am driven by a sense of urgency, by the recognition that what is at stake today goes beyond the survival of ethnic, national, or racial groups; it involves the very survival of our planet.

If the growth of state terrorism and the nativist obsession with territorial borders are new political realities in the twenty-first century, so too are the new social forms of transnational migration and group membership. Mexicana and Mexicano immigrants no longer reside solely in the Southwest, but are living in every state of the United States, from large

metropolitan centers like New York City and Atlanta to the hinterlands of rural Pennsylvania and Kentucky. Nor are these immigrants and their native-born children bound territorially to a single nation-state.

New forms of cultural citizenship are in the making wherein Mexican communities forge binational and multistate networks and affiliations. Maintaining vital ties with their hometowns in Mexico, Mexicanas and Mexicanos contribute directly to the political and economic lives of their communities of origin but also culturally enrich and economically revitalize their resident communities. Today, you will find Mexican agricultural, poultry, and hotel and restaurant workers in states like Kansas and Rhode Island, and Mexican *tienditas* and *tortillerías* in Delaware and Georgia. These transnational immigrants represent the social and political crosscurrents, riding against the growing tide of state terror and racist nativism. They are the new cultural citizens claiming social space, rights, and recognition. These transnational immigrants are creating the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a new political consciousness, brewing in many of those hidden corridors throughout the new borderlands a consciousness that joins the ancient call for social justice everywhere.