

Mapping East Los Angeles: Aesthetics and Cultural Politics in an Other LA

JOSE GAMEZ

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Introduction

During the 1980s and early 1990s, scholars in both Europe and Latin America began to look to the Chicano experience in the United States as a means of understanding global processes of differentiation and ethnic identification.¹ This interest in Chicano identity is due, in part, to its position within processes of cultural production; cultural practices tied to the politics of Chicano identity have made visible conditions of internal colonization and of postcolonial resistance through a variety of media including art, literature, and urbanism.

As the largest Mexican-American city in the US, Los Angeles—particularly East Los Angeles—has become an integral part of the social identity of many Chicanos and Latinos. Here, place and identity intersect creating both a real and an imagined geography that has served as the place of and inspiration for a range of critical practices. These conscious and creative explorations have contributed to the production of distinctly Chicano and Latino cultural landscapes. In this sense, the politics of Chicano identity have helped to translate, re-inscribe, and reclaim the (post)colonial center—the modern metropolis.²

This paper explores three areas of Chicano cultural production rooted in East Los Angeles in order to illustrate their importance to understandings of contemporary Latino LA: street muralism, the spatial narratives of Asco and Frank Romero, and the architectural investigations of James Rojas and the team of Margaret Crawford and ADOBE LA. By revisiting these past manifestations of an *other* Los Angeles, this paper will illustrate how the politics of identity can inform the contemporary city.

Chicano Socio-spatial Identity

Writer and poet Rubén Martínez has described his life in Los Angeles as a “blend of cultures, languages, and ideologies (Anglo/Latino, Spanish/English, individualist/collectivist)”—as a life located in both the North and South and neither simultaneously.³ For Martínez, LA is shaped by social and spatial divisions that are rooted in global political geographies and realized in local cultural landscapes. Los Angeles, and the American Southwest, have been understood as Atzlan, the Chicano cultural homeland; Los Angeles was once a Mexican territory and became an American city via military occupation and cultural domination. The same is true of much of what is now considered the southwestern region of the US. As an occupied territory and, later, as an annexed state, California became a colonized space—a space overtaken by American westward expan-

sion. The local Mexican populations therefore became internally colonized peoples.⁴ In this sense, Los Angeles became and continues to be a cultural and physical borderland in the sense described by Martínez.

In many ways, this need to negotiate cultural worlds provides a tie to the Chicano Movement in both art and politics. As an outgrowth of the 1960s era of social struggles, the Chicano movement, or *El Movimiento*, was ideologically aligned with the civil rights movements in the US as well as international student and Third World liberation movements.⁵ Although it shared common goals with a wide range of struggles, the Chicano movement aimed to address the marginalized condition of Mexican-American groups in the United States.

While few printed documents spell out a specific Chicano art manifesto, the outlines of an aesthetic can be found in a variety of sources including artist’s statements, oral histories, and the influential publication, “*El plan espiritual de Atzlan*” (The Spiritual Plan of Atzlan), that emerged from the Chicano Youth Conference held in Denver in 1969.⁶ In these documents, one finds a political vision clearly tied to grass-roots artistic production; artists were called upon to help disseminate information and to help define the cultural identity of the Chicano communities. This link between cultural identity and manifestations of that culture in material form provides a key to understanding Chicano socio-spatial practices as they apply to architecture and the city. Chicano art provides evidence of clearly motivated cultural practices: Chicano art, by definition, seeks to bring to light colonial legacies and forces of marginalization by drawing upon and re-defining the cultural landscape of the city. In this sense, Chicano art actively embraces the politics of identity in order to engage a wide range of urban audiences.

To be clear, it is not the production of the urban *barrio per se* that this paper takes as its focus; rather, it is the conscious expression of Chicano identity as a representational practice that lies at the center of this investigation. However, Chicano art often draws its strength from everyday *barrio* life in which “art objects are embedded in a network of cultural sites...that express the community’s sense of itself, the aesthetic display projecting a sort of visual biculturalism.”⁷ This bicultural expressiveness illustrates the cultural hybridity necessary to navigate the contemporary postcolonial metropolis. The location of Chicano culture within a borderland between the social worlds of the US and Mexico is its greatest asset—one that has drawn the attention of scholars and cultural theorists worldwide. In the



Fig. 1. Willie Herrón's *The Cracked Wall* (photo by José Gámez).

words of Guillermo Gomez-Peña, an internationally respected artist and cultural critic, the “strength and originality of Chicano-Latino contemporary art in the US lies partially in the fact that it is often bicultural, bilingual, and/or biconceptual.”⁸ This type of cultural flexibility allows Chicano and Latino artists operate within what both Gomez-Peña and cultural theorist Homi Bhabha have described as a *third-space* of cultural expression that confronts the postcolonial present.⁹ The border, in this sense, becomes a site for intervening into the present that “demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not a part of the continuum of the past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation.”¹⁰

Muralism and the (in)Visible City

The urban mural is one example of such insurgent cultural translation. While not solely tied to the Chicano movement, the urban mural developed as a medium of expression that helped to reclaiming the public realm of the city and contributed to a larger struggle to overcome racism and poverty. Urban murals, as components of political visual voice, became one of the most enduring modes of insurgent cultural translation available not only to Chicano communities in Los Angeles but also to marginalized communities in general.¹¹ Influenced by the Mexican muralists of the 1930s, the Chicano movement called for a monumental public art easily accessed in everyday life. This was often translated into the appropriation of available surfaces for the dissemination information and images. By mixing long-standing symbolic iconography rooted in cultural tradition with images tied to local settings, murals provided cultural commentaries tied to contemporary struggles. As Coco Fusco, an artist and cultural theorist, has pointed out,

“Symbolic action expressed via artistic creation...has become the primary arena for innovative self-definition among politically disenfranchised peoples. This syncretic fusing of different forms of belief and practice has enabled disempowered groups to maintain their traditions while endorsing various cultural recycling methods that infuse old icons with new meanings.”¹²

Murals, as representations of political identity, have also helped to shape debates within the Chicano community. In the work of artists such as Judith Baca, urban murals serve as symbolic reminders to greater Los Angeles of an Other LA often subsumed under a mythologized Spanish heritage.¹³ Her work has attempted to create a unified identity that confronts dominant cultural (mis)representations and re-inscribes an often overlooked Mexican past into the contemporary urban realm. But for others, attempts to define unified notions of identity are themselves limiting. Willie Herrón's mural, *The Cracked Wall*, illustrates that the Chicano community is not easily defined (see Figure 1). Herrón's mural, located in a back alley rather than along a public avenue, was intended not as a gesture towards the city at large but rather as a commentary internal to the Chicano community and as a reminder of local problems such as gang activity, drug abuse, and provincialism. In this sense, Herrón did not seek a homogeneous unity, rather, he sought to draw the community together around a set of issues critical to the development of Latino Los Angeles. In so doing, muralists like Baca and Herrón initiated a dialog that has contributed to both the physical the social shape of East LA.

Walking in LA: Asco and the Politics of Place

The internal critique begun by Herrón in *The Cracked Wall* carried over into his work in the collaborative art group Asco during the early 1970s.¹⁴ Active from 1971 to 1985, Asco was the first and most influential Chicano conceptual/performance art group to come out of East Los Angeles. Utilizing improvisation, performance, and guerrilla theater, Asco transformed the city into their canvas; through a series of performances beginning with *Stations of the Cross* on December 24, 1971, Asco began their cultural assault on institutions shaping the barrio. Staged unannounced along a one-mile stretch of Whittier Boulevard in East LA, *Stations of the Cross* appropriated and re-deployed Catholic iconography in order to challenge local institutional power structures while simultaneously locating the politics of identity within the space of the city. The choice of

Whittier Boulevard itself is was not haphazardly made; Whittier connects the east-side to downtown Los Angeles and has often been called the symbolic of the heart of East LA. Additionally, Whittier was the site of the Chicano Moratorium—a Vietnam protest rally that ended in police violence and the death of Rubén Salazar, an active Chicano journalist with the *Los Angeles Times*.

Asco returned to Whittier Boulevard several times over the following years and each new performance continued to explore the connections between the politics of identity, space, and place (see Figure 2). Additionally, each new performance introduced investigations into various media—film, muralism, and photography, thereby providing numerous opportunities to appropriate and re-articulate the image of the city. Through the use of site specific performances, film, and guerrilla tactics, Asco put the



Fig. 2: Asco performing *First Supper (After a Major Riot)* in 1974 (image copyright held by Harry Gamboa and reprinted courtesy of the artist).

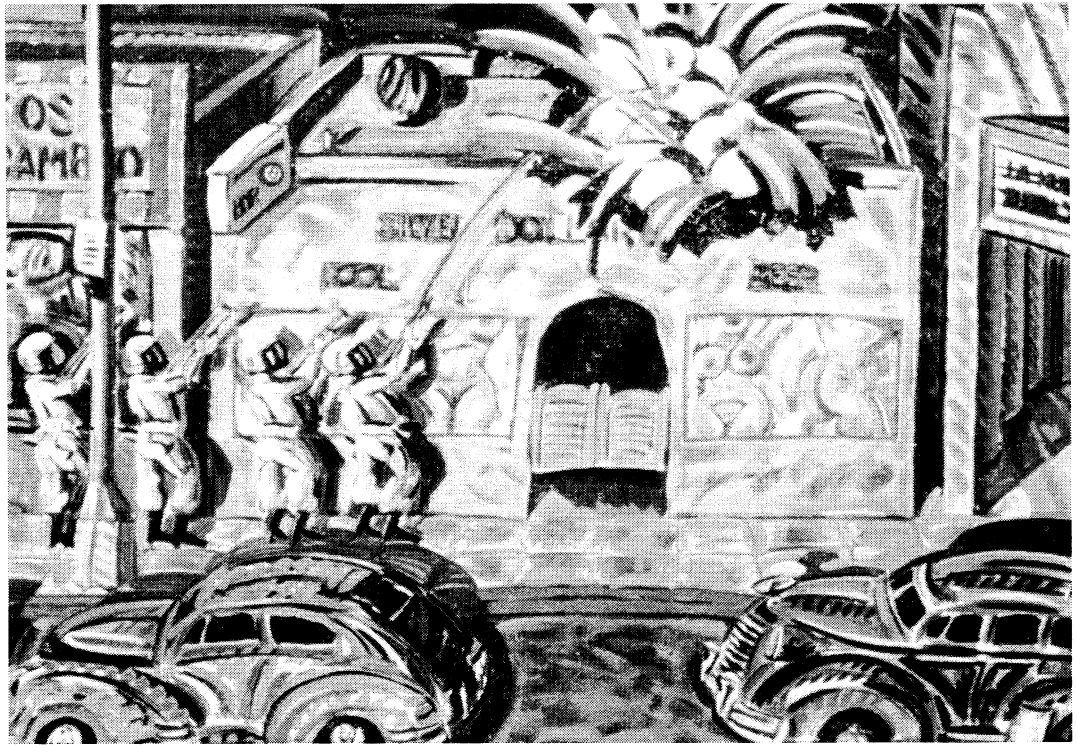


Fig. 3. Frank Romero's *The Death of Rubén Salazar* (image copyright held by Frank Romero and reprinted courtesy of the artist).

politics of identity of East Los Angeles in general, and Whittier Boulevard specifically, into play within a broad discursive landscape. While created prior to the present state of media technologies, Asco's place-based interventions are early examples of what cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai has labeled the ideoscapes of contemporary cultural flows—the “concatenations of images...and counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it.”¹⁵ Chicano urban art, in this sense, served to mobilize landscapes of images that challenged notions of a unified Chicano identity, of established artistic practices, and mainstream perceptions of the East Los Angeles. In doing so, East LA became a symbolic and physical center in the production of Chicano identity and served as evidence that public space is tied to socio-spatial action.

Post-ASCO Tactics: Collective Urbanism

The influence of Asco's urban theater spread as other groups, among them Los Four, took the politics of identity in Los Angeles.¹⁶ Grupos, or collaborative artistic groups, are in many ways a legacy of the Chicano movement that persists to this day; grupos were often formed around local arts centers and aimed to promote grassroots artistic practices including social and spatial action. Los Four grew out of this tradition by incorporating street imagery into their work, particularly graffiti, as a means of bringing the politics of everyday life into the realm of artistic production.

After the group's demise in 1983, Los Four co-founder Frank

Romero continued to paint scenes of East Los Angeles in order to bring the message of Chicano struggle to outside audiences. This agenda remained a central part of Romero's work and provided a lens onto the politics of identity in Los Angeles for both Chicano and mainstream art audiences. For Romero, Whittier became a paradigmatic site of cultural resistance; two of his paintings, “The Closing of Whittier Boulevard” and “The Death of Rubén Salazar,” represent clashes between the dominant society of Los Angeles and the Chicano community in East LA (see Figure 3). As with the previous efforts of Los Four, Romero intended to further the agenda of the Chicano movement by introducing the politics of identity into established artistic circles. However, the importance of place remained; by addressing site-specific events, Romero maintained a dialog with East LA, contributed to the on-going development of Chicano identity, and connected the space of the gallery to the streets of the barrio. In doing so, the often de-politicized context of artistic display was disrupted through the introduction of the politics of identity.

Interestingly, Romero did not participate in either of the events he depicted in “The Death of Rubén Salazar” or in “The Closing of Whittier Boulevard;” each event occurred in the early years of the Chicano movement while Romero's paintings were executed some fifteen years later.¹⁷ Here, Romero drew upon the collective memory of East Los Angeles for his inspiration. In this sense, the works of Asco, Los Four, and Romero are not only related but are, in many ways, successive projects within a particular *family of resemblance*—entities within an on-going set of cultural negotiations.¹⁸

Everyday Practices and the Object of Study

By delving into social and political issues, Chicano artists began the process of re-writing the history of Los Angeles in order to include pieces of a story previously left out. This was not simply a process of historical revision; this was a spatialized project that took the urban realm as a part of its tactical base. The city became the site, subject, and text for critical intervention. In this sense, the city is not a rigid plan; rather, it is a set of collective inheritances to be continually re-articulated.

In this light, the socio-spatial “praxis” and “material force” of Chicano and Latino communities illustrate processes of urban transformation and provide ways to re-think contemporary urbanism.¹⁹ For urban planner James T. Rojas, East Los Angeles is an *enacted landscape* where the “identity of place...is created through the culturally related behavior patterns of the residents.”²⁰ Through his work as a graduate student in the Department of Architecture at MIT, Rojas illustrated the means by which the city is tailored to meet the cultural preferences of Mexican and Mexican American communities in East Los Angeles. This process of place-making through enactment involves various forms of architectural and urban props—murals, fences, vendor carts—that are incorporated into the existing urban fabric and help to create distinctive cultural landscapes. Although unpublished, Rojas’ master’s thesis has been widely influential within architectural, urban design, and urban planning circles (particularly in academia) where both faculty and students have drawn upon his work as the basis for further research. Rojas provided not only a reading of a Chicano cultural landscape but also a new academic terrain largely overlooked by schools of architecture and urbanism.

The importance of Rojas’ work can be gauged by more recent research into Chicano Los Angeles; by 1994, this line of work had entered the mainstream of artistic, architectural, and academic practices. Rodolfo F. Acuña, a Chicano Studies Scholar whose work has chronicled the history of East Los Angeles, included a section on Chicano urbanism in his recent book, *Anything But Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles*, that is based largely upon the work of Rojas.²¹ Similarly, the collaborative art and architecture group, ADOBE LA (Architects and Designers Opening the Border Edge of Los Angeles), has also taken the cultural landscapes of LA’s Latino neighborhoods as the objects of both academic and professional pursuits.²² Through continued investigations into the cultural transformation of urban spaces and through design practices that actively engage Chicano and Latino communities in Los Angeles, ADOBE LA has both continued the line of inquiry begun by Rojas as well as the tradition of the *grupo*—a central component of the Chicano art movement.

Further illustrating the growing influences of non-traditional architectural investigations within mainstream circles was the inclusion of ADOBE LA’s work in two major architectural and urban design exhibitions: *Urban Revisions: Current Projects for the Public Realm*, held at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles and *House Rules*, which was held at

the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, and later published in the architectural journal *Assemblage*.²³ *Urban Revisions* intended to focus attention on a number of selected urban design and planning projects from around the country addressing a range of social, cultural, economic, ecological, and political concerns. In response to MOCA’s call, ADOBE LA submitted a proposal that highlighted an absence from the exhibition—“vernacular design on behalf of cultural survival.”²⁴

Conceding the oversight, MOCA invited ADOBE LA to intervene in the main exhibit. In response, ADOBE LA created pieces that worked themselves into the gaps of the larger exhibit in order to metaphorically illustrate the appropriation of urban landscapes common in many Latino communities in Los Angeles: gallery spaces were tagged with cultural markers, East LA’s ubiquitous vender carts were parked between project displays, and an urban map detailing the overlaps of toxic waste sites, sites of under-employment, and Latino neighborhoods served to remind MOCA’s visitors of an other urban reality.

House Rules grappled with the problem of re-thinking the American ideal of the single-family detached home through design interventions and theoretical speculation. Here, ADOBE LA was paired with urban theorist Margaret Crawford further illustrating the infiltration of the Chicano politics into the mainstream. Using a hyper-realistic architectural model depicting a typical Californian suburban bungalow transformed to meet the cultural needs of Mexican Americans in East LA, the project by ADOBE LA and Crawford illustrated cultural practices of appropriation while challenging accepted architectural representational standards. Additionally, the Crawford/ADOBE LA project added critical theoretical depth to the work Rojas by illustrating how the “heroic bricolage” described in the work of Michel de Certeau can be found in East LA.²⁵

Critical Practice and Space

Both the MOCA and Wexner Center exhibits indicate the extent to which the margins have entered into the center of theoretical debates. Largely overlooked in both theory and design, the politics of identity have made in-roads primarily via cultural critique. The power of making visible the previously invisible exposes not only formerly silenced voices but also the mechanisms by which silence is maintained. However, as with any marginalized position working from within the center itself, the project of speaking the unspoken is simply not enough. The charge must be one of “developing a vigilance for systematic appropriations of the unacknowledged social production of a differential” within the practices of the center.²⁶ This calls for a continual re-reading of past cultural productions in an on-going effort to keep culture in motion—to free cultural productions from reification.²⁷

As a practice, the revisiting of past works such as those of Asco, Romero, Rojas, and Crawford/ADOBE LA serves to maintain in motion an understanding of the politics of identity that both seeks to reclaim histories while preserving the power

that critique holds. Therefore, practice of re-visiting past forms of cultural production remains a necessary project given that the ability to consume and maintain space as transparent and/or ordered, is tied to operations of power. As Dolores Hayden has stated, “[o]ne of the consistent ways to limit the economic and political rights of groups has been to constrain social reproduction by limiting access to space.”²⁹ In this sense, the re-enactment of place through both symbolic and physical means is a vital part of the continued struggle towards visibility and to stave off cultural disappearance. In this on-going battle, creative and imaginative practices are now important aspects of cultural expression. As Arjun Appadurai states, the “image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms which direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *the imagination as a social practice*.”²⁸ This is not to say that the works described above present *true* images of urban life; rather, they provided momentary glimpses of an-other reality. In this sense, the works of Chicano artists such as Asco, Los Four, and Romero as well as more recent works by Rojas, ADOBE LA, and Crawford provide ways to examine the public realm that avoid reductions to zero-degree cultural categories implicit in many contemporary urban and architectural practices. These views frame the city as something more than the site of nostalgia or cultural consumption. Here, the city provides an important zone of interaction—a space of cultural hybridity within which to explore the politics of identity. By looking to various forms of cultural production, both formal and informal, one finds that murals, architectural props, spatial practices, and artistic representations emerge as important tools in the development of an aesthetic and an ability to exhibit culture from within a marginalized community.

NOTES:

- ¹ See: Hector Calderón and José David Saldívar, eds., *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* (Durham: Duke UP, 1994) 1.
- ² See: Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- ³ Rubén Martínez, *The Other Side: Notes from the New L.A., Mexico City, and Beyond* (New York: Vintage Departures,

- ¹⁶ Los Four were contemporaries of Asco and the group was active group from 1973 to 1983. The members of Los Four were: Carlos Almaraz, Roberto de la Rocha, Gilbert “Magu” Luján, and Frank Romero.
- ¹⁷ The Closing of Whittier Boulevard was painted in 1984 and The Death of Rubén Salazar was painted between 1985 and 1986.
- ¹⁸ See: George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990).
- ¹⁹ Mike Davis, “Chinatown Revisited? *Sex, Death, and God in LA* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1994) 35.
- ²⁰ James T. Rojas, “The Enacted Environment: The Creation of ‘Place’ by Mexicans and Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles,” Master’s Thesis, Department of Architecture, MIT, 1991, 14.
- ²¹ See: Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Anything But Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1996) 11-12.
- ²² ADOBE LA was established in 1992 as a collaborative and activist group of architects, artists, and designers in Los Angeles whose members have included Ulises Diaz, Ignacio Fernandez, Gustavo Leclerc, Alessandra Montezuma, Elipio Rocha, Leda Ramos, and Rosa Velasco.
- ²³ See: *Assemblage 24* (1994); see also: Elizabeth Smith, ed., *Urban Revisions: Current Projects for the Public Realm*, exhibition catalog (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994); Richard M. Carp, ed., *Saber es poder/Interventions* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 1994).
- ²⁴ Carp n. pag.
- ²⁵ Margaret Crawford and ADOBE LA, “Mi casa es su casa,” *Assemblage 24* (1994): 12.
- ²⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 63.
- ²⁷ See: Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).
- ²⁸ Appadurai 326.
- ²⁹ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as*

1993) 3-4.

- ⁴ See: Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term Post-colonialism," *SocialText* (1992): 1-15; see also: Edward Murguía, *Assimilation, Colonialism, and the Mexican American People* (Austin: U of Texas, 1975).
- ⁵ See: Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "The Chicano Movement: The Movement of Chicano Art," *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds., Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1991) 128-129.
- ⁶ See: Shifra M. Goldman and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "The Political and Social Contexts of Chicano Art," *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*, exhibition catalog, eds., Richard Griswold del Castillo, Teresa McKenna and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery/U of California, 1991) 83-95.
- ⁷ Ybarra-Frausto 130-131.
- ⁸ Guillermo Gomez-Peña, "A New Artistic Continent," *High Performance* 9.3 (1986): 27.
- ⁹ See: Gomez-Peña, "A New Artistic Continent;" see also: Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- ¹⁰ Bhabha 7.
- ¹¹ See: Alan W. Barnett, *Community Murals: The People's Art* (London: Associated UP/Cornwall, 1984).
- ¹² Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: New Press, 1995) 33-36.
- ¹³ A similar project to memorialize African American, Asian American and Latino urban histories in Los Angeles has been Dolores Hayden's Power of Place Project. See: Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).
- ¹⁴ Asco consisted of Harry Gamboa, JR., Gluglio "Gronk" Nicandro, Willie Herrón, and Patisse Valdez.
- ¹⁵ See: Arjun Appaduri, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds., Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 328-329.