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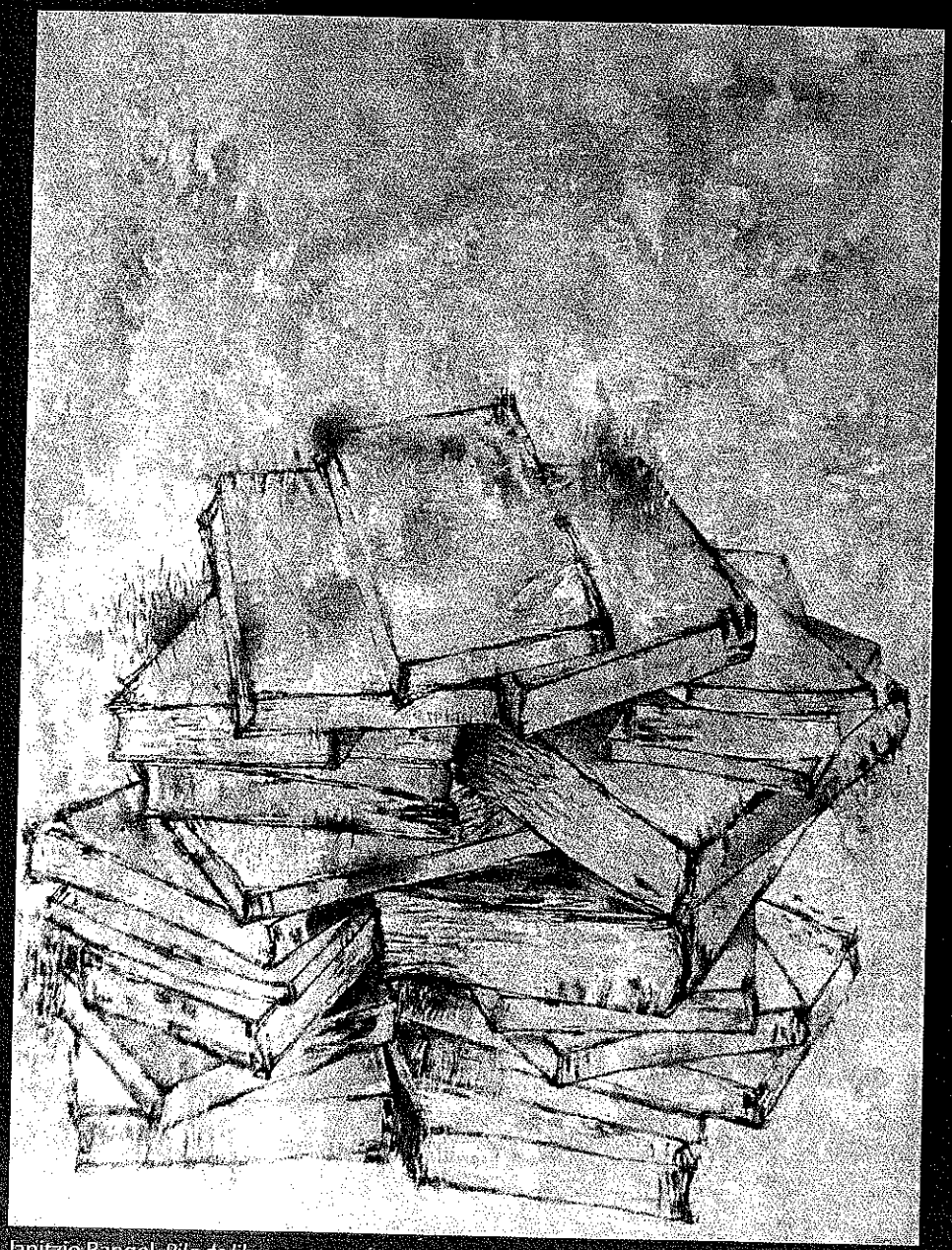

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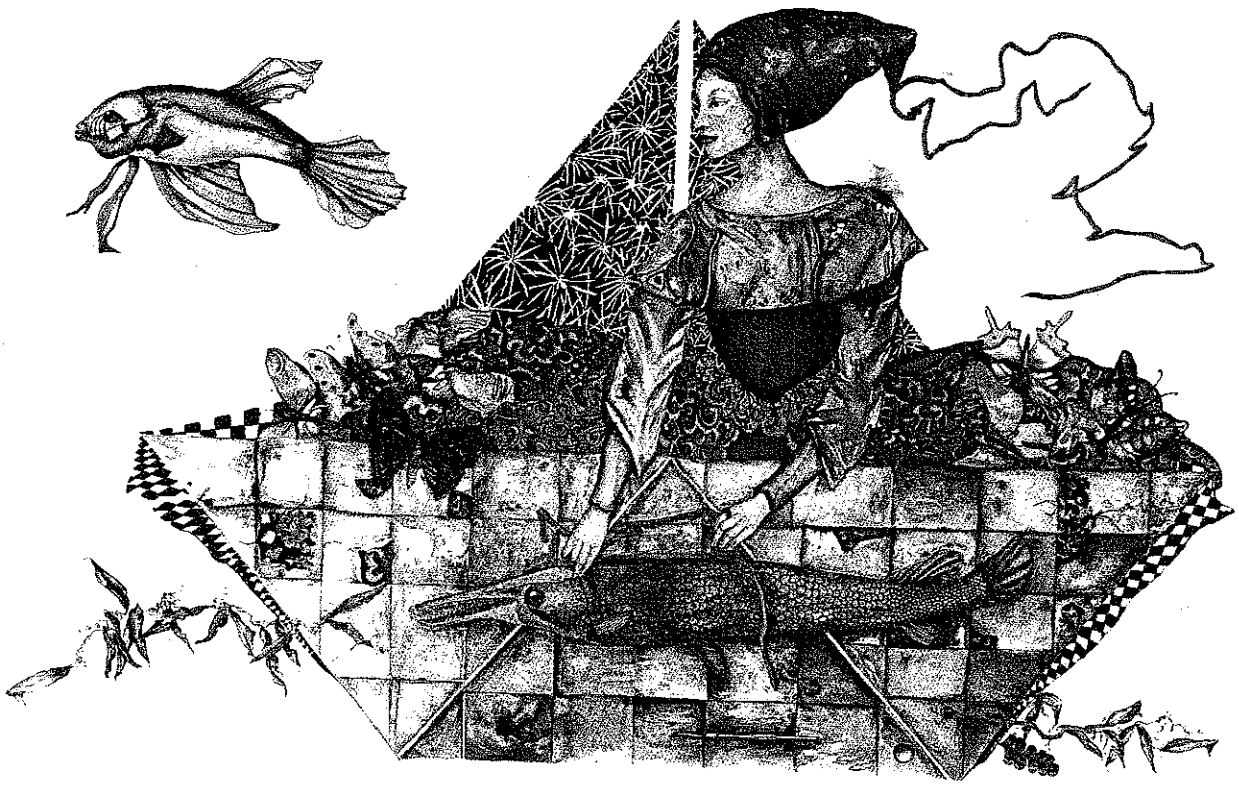

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THE UNIVERSITY
of NORTH CAROLINA
at CHAPEL HILL

Photography, Self-Knowledge, and Solidarity in Graciela Limón's *Erased Faces*[1]

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In her poem "La Malinche," Chicana poet and playwright Carmen Tafolla offers a re-reading of the historical figure that focuses not only on Malinche's personal choices and agency, but on her status as a seer and visionary. Speaking to Hernán Cortés, Malinche laughs derisively at the idea that she was a traitor or an unwitting participant in a larger drama she did not understand: "(Ha-Chingada! Screwed!)/[...] But Chingada I was not/ not tricked, not screwed, not traitor" (198). Tafolla's Malinche insists on the importance of her ability to envision a new kind of world, writing: "I saw our world/ And I saw yours/ And I saw/ another" (199). Emphasizing her ability to see and transform this vision into "another world", Malinche positions herself as a participant in the creation of the Chicana/o people. In the last lines of the poem, Malinche's voice trails off as she declares that she has "reached" her dream: "[...] la raza/ La raaaaaaa-zaaaa" (199). Tafolla's re-writing of Malinche is one of many Mexicana and Chicana feminist responses to historical accounts of Malinche that see her as a whore and traitor.[2] However, the poem's rendering of Malinche as a woman who successfully brings into existence "another world" through her visions and dreams, encourages a new understanding of Malinche's role in the Conquest and offers an entry into exploring questions of vision, agency, and witness in Chicana feminist literature.

Following Tafolla's emphasis on Malinche as visionary, the following essay explores the relationship between visuality and visual representations (specifically, photography), dreams, Chicana identity, and revolutionary solidarity in Graciela Limón's *Erased Faces* (2001). The novel's protagonist, Adriana Mora, travels to Chiapas in the early 1990s where she finds herself asked to document and disseminate pictures of the Zapatista rebellion. Like Tafolla's Malinche, Adriana transforms from a witness to genocide to an active participant in the revolution. And like the Malinche of the poem quoted above, Adriana's active stance is facilitated through her dreams and visions, in addition to what she captures on film.

[1] Thanks to Alicia Muñoz for her keen eye and helpful critique.

[2] A historical figure known alternatively as Malinalli, Malintzin, Malinche, or Doña Marina, Malinche was the Aztec (Nahuatl-speaking woman) who became Cortés's translator during the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. Her role as translator and mother to a child by Cortés contributed to a historical perspective that viewed her as the repudiated mother of Mexican history and identity, a view that lives on in the epithet "¡hijo de la chingada!". Mexican writers from Octavio Paz to Carlos Fuentes to Laura Esquivel have written and re-written Malinche's story in fiction and non-fiction. In relation to her place in Mexican literature, Oswaldo Estrada reminds us that "lo cierto es que la caracterización de las mujeres en la literatura mexicana guarda en sus entretelas la influencia de la Malinche como figura arquetípica y pieza fundamental de la historica mexicana" (622-23). In light of her influence on cultural production, both Mexican and Chicana feminists have produced a large body of work devoted to exploring and re-presenting the historical figure. For an exemplary historical perspective from a Chicana feminist see Adelaida del Castillo's "Malintzin Tenepal: A Preliminary Look into a New Perspective", and for a small selection of fictional works see *Infinite Divisions*.

Tim Libretti's psychoanalytic reading of the novel suggests that Adriana's psychic links to these historical indigenous women illustrates the text's argument that just as Adriana must delve into her unconscious to undertake psychic healing and connect herself to the indigenous movement, so too must the Chicano Movement delve into a "Zapatista unconscious" to discover its connection to "the resurgent Latin American indigenous movement", a process that can "fruitfully nourish a Chicano Movement that has forgotten its own indigenous identity and history" (100). Libretti's reading offers valid explanations for the role that Adriana's dreams play in her self-discovery and *concientización*; the young woman's connections to indigenous women living during the Conquest spurs a confrontation with her own traumatic past that culminates in her understanding and acknowledgement of her personal and political connections to the Zapatista rebellion. However, dreams are not the only mechanism used by Adriana to access her political and psychic unconscious. Her photography also plays a key role in prompting her explorations. My argument here is twofold: first, Adriana's photography, along with her dreams, allows her to access her past and past lives, explorations that lead her to understand her relationship to the Zapatista rebellion. Second, photography allows Adriana to embody her role as both a witness and participant in the revolution. Thus, photography functions as both a means to access and to represent "truth". In the narrative, Adriana searches for "truth" in her photography and finds it only after she has confronted her own past and experienced life among the Zapatistas. Consequently, the novel positions photography as means through which to explore both self and other, argues for the productive compatibility of Western and non Western epistemologies, and suggests the political importance of visual representations.

Erased Faces was published seven years after the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, a movement with which the novel is centrally concerned. The January 1st rebellion was the culmination of over ten years of clandestine organizing by indigenous inhabitants of Mexico's southeastern most state. The timing of the uprising, the day that NAFTA went into effect, marked the Zapatistas' keen understanding of the relationships between neoliberal economic policies and the social and political realities for Mexico's indigenous communities. Shortly after taking control of several towns in Chiapas, the Zapatistas retreated and have at several points in the last two decades attempted to negotiate with the Mexican government. Limón's novel interweaves some of this history, although the work concentrates on the organizing efforts of several fictional characters prior to the 1994 uprising. Each of the principal characters comes to the rebellion from different circumstances, highlighting the heterogeneous identities and political viewpoints that characterize the Zapatistas and suggesting that "social movements are made up of individuals with diverse motivations" (López-Calvo 70). Their personal circumstances not-withstanding, Limón's novel scripts the Zapatista movement as a place where characters come to understand and act upon their personal and political subordination while unequivocally pointing to the role of colonialism in the establishment and perpetuation of oppressive systems.

Much of the novel is devoted to Adriana's explorations of her past trauma as a way to understand herself and her role in the Zapatista community. An Afro-Latina orphaned at a young age, Adriana is the victim of vicious racial slurs as well as an insufficient U.S. foster system. Her Mayan lover, Juana, suffers from abuse at the hands of a patriarchal community that sells women for the price of a donkey and fails to recognize marital rape. In the vocabulary of the novel, Juana and Adriana are connected via their experiences of suffering. When Juana asks Adriana to join the movement, Adriana protests: "I am not one of your people", but Juana assures her "soon you will be" and then adds "besides, you, too, have suffered, haven't you?" (38). Adriana's time with the Zapatistas, coupled with her dreams and role as a photographer, prove integral to her understanding of her own suffering and integration into Juana's life and the Zapatista movement.

Adriana originally travels to Chiapas as a photographer but quickly finds that her photography spurs investigations into her own past. One day, she finds herself fixated on a young mother nursing a baby. She is particularly struck by the woman's age –"*Chispas*! The girl can't be more than thirteen!" (30). After taking a few shots of the young mother and child, Adriana sits down and begins "jotting down her impressions [...] including not only the details of her subjects, but her own feelings as well" (31). Taking pictures of and thinking about the mother and child pushes Adriana into a complex set of emotions about her own childhood, including

"envy because she was not the child sheltered in those arms, sadness at having been robbed of love, [and] fierce desire to discover the reason for her mother having murdered her father" (30). Suddenly, Adriana is mentally transported to her childhood in Los Angeles and readers are taken with her as the narrative fills in the story of Adriana's adolescence. While Adriana's stance as a photographer at first positions her as distant from her subject –her surprise at the young age of the mother highlights her outsider status– her meditations on her subjects facilitate her own exploration into her past.

In her stance as a photographer, Adriana subverts the male gaze and disrupts the binary of male/active, female/passive. Moreover, the narrative actively breaks the reader's identification with the spectator by quickly making Adriana not simply a lens through which to view the indigenous women, but a character to be scrutinized as well. That Adriana's photography is integral in this shift reflects the narrative's interruption of the relationship between gender and visual technology in which woman functions only as the object of the spectator/male gaze (Mulvey 11). Adriana does not simply become the object of her own gaze; turning her lens inward, as it were, produces not a static image but reveals a psychic terrain to be explored. As Libretti explains, Adriana's psychic healing is necessary for her to be able to connect to the indigenous movement (100). However, her psychic healing is *also* necessary for her to mature as a photographer. Here photography becomes both an instigator of, and a beneficiary of, Adriana's self-exploration. Adriana's use of visual technology and the ways in which both she and her photography transform throughout the narrative deconstruct the male gaze while nonetheless gesturing to the political and psychic possibilities inherent in the camera's lens.

Adriana's photography continues to prompt her psychic explorations. Later in the narrative, when she has joined the Zapatistas and is documenting their organizing efforts, she is again thrown into a memory of her past. This time, Adriana has a vivid dream in which she is photographing the drafting of a declaration. Suddenly government forces attack the camp and Adriana finds herself taking pictures of a battle until she herself is struck by a bullet. As she loses consciousness, she meets her mother and is able to ask her why she [the mother] murdered her father and killed herself (197). Adriana expresses her sense of abandonment; just before she wakes from her dream, she asks her mother "What about me?" (197). Like the previous instance in which Adriana's pictures prompt her to remember her childhood, this instance affirms the relationship between Adriana's photography and an active engagement with her childhood.

These two scenes portray photography as a kind of reflective mirror; Adriana looks into a camera lens only to find herself looking into her own psyche. An indigenous friend informs Adriana that dreams are like mirrors.[3] In a conversation with the elderly Chan K'in, Adriana is told, "a dream, though imperfect, is a mirror in which we see our own past lives" (14). When Adriana's photography prompts her vision into her past, the narrative suggests that photography functions similarly to dreams –as an imperfect mirror into a character's past. In this equation, the novel scripts a positive, productive relationship between indigenous and Western epistemologies. Adriana's photography does not function as a means to objectify the indigenous people but rather as a way for her to explore her own experiences, and thus connection to the Zapatistas.

In detailing how Adriana's photography prompts not objectification of the Other but self-exploration, *Erased Faces* inverts the relationship between Western photographer and indigenous subject in a particularly Zapatista way. In her 2005 article on anthropology and visual technologies, Deborah Poole revisits the history of anthropological photography to argue that while early anthropological photos sought to fix "the native subject as a particular racial type", they also illustrated the "instability of the photograph as ethnological evidence" (165). Poole encourages us to consider how perspectives on photography that see it only "as a technology that is productive of racial ideas and orders [...] [come] at the expense of silencing the capacity of both ethnography and photography to unsettle our accounts of the world" (160). When Adriana's photography of the young mother and child causes her to revisit her past, the novel presents photography as part of a dynamic process that leads to more complex understandings of self

[3] While outside the scope of this short article, Limón's construction of the photograph as imperfect mirror begs for a Lacanian reading of Adriana's photography and specifically one that investigates the narcissistic aspects of scopophilia (Mulvey 8).

and other. Rather than fix her subjects in an ahistorical moment, Adriana's pictures force her to explore her own psychic, racial, and economic position in relationship to the current rebellion. Furthermore, in having Adriana return to her life in Los Angeles in order to participate productively in the revolution, the narrative illustrates how the Zapatistas "solicit information from the First World for the benefit of the Third" (Olguín 163). Rather than exploit the Zapatista people through her photographs for her own gain, Adriana is forced to mine the depths of her own psyche in order to contribute to the movement. Although Adriana is quickly accepted into the Zapatista community, she must learn how to create pictures that accurately reflect the situation, a learning that comes about through direct experience. In their first encounter, Juana challenges Adriana's assumption that she is able to capture "truth" in her pictures. Just after Adriana takes the picture of the young mother and child mentioned above, Juana approaches her: "Why do you take pictures of our women, what is it that you are looking for?" (37). Juana's words claim collective possession of the women in the community and signal Adriana's outsider status. Adriana replies, naively, that what she hopes to find is "the truth". Juana calls Adriana's pictures "empty" and explains: "When you take the face of a woman with your camera, and her expression reflects misery, it is not enough to have that image on paper only. You must also capture her spirit, and the reasons for its anguish" (37).

Rather than feeling chastised, Adriana feels that Juana understands perfectly what she wants but cannot at that moment accomplish with her photography. Juana then offers Adriana the chance to join the Zapatistas as a photographer. Seeming to reverse her earlier articulation of Adriana's distance from the community, she insists that the people have already accepted Adriana and that the Zapatistas' actions need to be chronicled in writing and pictures "for all the world to see" (39). Seeking to understand more fully the people she has been filming, Adriana agrees.

When Adriana speaks to Chan K'in about joining the Zapatistas, he supports her choice and more over tells her that she will be able to tell the world the "truth". Chan K'in specifically refers to the importance of visions and representation: "We used to be like stones, like plants along the road. We had no word, no face, no name, no tomorrow. We did not exist. But now we have vision [...] we invite you to come and seek, to find yourself, and to find us [...] through you the world will come to know the truth" (41). In his allusion to the "erased faces" of Chiapas's indigenous people, Chan K'in references both the title of the book and one of its most important themes. At the same time, he suggests that while the people have now reclaimed their identity (face), they need a person such as Adriana to disseminate their movement to the world. Significantly, part of the recuperation of their identity is their development of a vision. In addition, Chan K'in confirms that Adriana's photography plays an important role in her self-knowing by telling her that she will find herself *before* she finds them. Thus, though the road to the truth lies through knowing ("finding") the Zapatistas, first Adriana must "find [herself]".

Once Adriana joins the Zapatista rebellion and explores her own past and the current realities of the indigenous struggles, her photography does indeed begin to reflect truth. After the 1994 uprising, Adriana stays in Chiapas and continues to organize with Juana. Again reflecting what Olguín terms the use of "first world" technologies and labors in the service of the "third world", the two women are able to live off the sales of Adriana's work:

> [Adriana] knew that with her photography she had a special way to be part of the struggle. Hers was a unique way of alerting the world to the anguish that was tormenting Chiapas. She had no doubt that the portraits she brought forth were a graphic and undeniable testimony of truth [...] she wired and mailed her work form San Cristobal de las Casas to publishers in New York, Houston, Chicago and Los Angeles [...] all of which resulted in stipends on which she and Juana were able to live (239).

After living within the Zapatista communities and taking part in the struggles of the people, Adriana is able to capture "truth". While Adriana's reliance on the descriptor "truth" bears scrutiny, I see passages such as the one above as an argument for the ability of photography to engage in testimony and specifically to reflect trauma. Noting the ways in which postcolonial studies and contemporary trauma have coalesced in contemporary criticism, Katherine Baxter explains how the representation of

trauma in literature has been unable to move beyond "event-based" models to account for ongoing trauma such as living under apartheid or prolonged experiences of domestic violence or poverty (20). She writes: "Psychoanalysis and European trauma literature have prescribed acceptable modes of presenting trauma within literary and therapeutic frameworks [that] potentially [close] off other modes of presenting trauma" (19). Considering the representation of trauma in media journalism, on the other hand, may offer "other modes". Baxter suggests that photographic representations of trauma may create in viewers what Dominic LaCapra terms "empathetic unsettlement"–a condition in which the subject's very realization of her own alienation from the traumatic event mimics the traumatized, alienated subject in the photograph (25). Similarly, Adriana's early photographs of the young mother highlight her distance from her subjects. However, the dreams and memories she is forced to explore as a result of these encounters allow her to move past empathetic unsettlement to empathy, understanding, and the creation of "true" photographs. In claiming her photographs as "truth," Adriana affirms the ability for photographs produced in tandem with psychic and political exploration to represent trauma such as war in productive ways.

Adriana's photography, rather than creating still images through which she presents static, exotic pictures of "others", spurs her into exploring her own past. The novel presents photography as both the means to and the product of self-exploration. Photography prompts Adriana's return to and reckoning with her past, a step necessary to her creation of accurate representations of the people whose struggle she is documenting. In a decidedly anti-imperialist move, the novel suggests that knowledge of the other starts with knowledge of the self. At the same time, the novel's insistence that Adriana has achieved the representation of "truth", while theoretically problematic, is politically ambitious.

The novel also offers new ways of understanding Mexican history and the relationship be-tween Western and non-Western epistemologies. Adriana's stance as a photographer and witness to the Zapatista rebellion genders and racializes the photographer's gaze as well as the act of witnessing. By arguing for the importance of the incorporation of Adriana's particular identity as a queer, Afro-Chicana into her work, the novel counters West-ern notions of objectivity or detached observation. Furthermore, Adriana transforms the role of the witness from a passive observer to an active creator; like the Malinche of the poem mentioned earlier in the article, she literally creates something new. While Tafolla's Malinche relied on dreams and visions to create *la raza,* Adriana relies on her photography. Via what I term her photography of witness, the novel affirms the human rights imperative in visual images as both means to capture and create. Visions, the novel argues, are not just static portrayals of a particular thing, but ways of envisioning and creating.

As the narrative draws to a close, the novel cements Adriana's role as a witness-in-solidarity, rather than an appropriator of others' experiences and identities, by having her return to the United States to continue her work. After Juana's death at Acteal, Adriana places a photograph of the two of them on her lover's dead body and then makes her way back to the United States. When she goes through customs, she declares to the agent "I'm a photographer" (257). Remaining a photographer in the United States, Adriana illustrates her commitment to contributing to a global struggle from her particular position and assures readers of the ability of her work and experience in Chiapas to transform both herself and the United States.

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