KENCY CORNEJO

ART AND DECOLONIALITY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

VISUAL DISOBEDIENCE

VISUAL DISOBEDIENCE

BUY

DISSIDENT ACTS, edited by Macarena Gómez-Barris and Diana Taylor

VISUAL DISOBEDIENCE

Art and Decoloniality in Central America

KENCY CORNEJO

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2024

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Livia Tenzer
Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro and Raginy
by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Cornejo, Kency, author.
Title: Visual disobedience : art and decoloniality in Central America / Kency Cornejo.
Other titles: Dissident acts.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2024. | Series: Dissident acts |
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023040715 (print)
LCCN 2023040716 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478030546 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478026334 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478059608 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Art, Central American—Political aspects. | Art, Central
American—Social aspects. | Art and social action—Central America. |
Art and society—Central America. | Politics and culture—Central America. |
Postcolonialism and the arts—Central America. | Decolonization in art.
Classification: LCC N6560.2 .C67 2024 (print) | LCC N6560.2 (ebook) |
DDC 701/.03—dc23/eng/20240228
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023040715
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023040716

Cover art: Edgar Calel, *B'atz constelaciones de saberes*, 2015.
Diptych photograph, back view. © Edgar Calel. Courtesy of the artist.

Para mi padre, RENE B. CORNEJO,

y mi madre, BLANCA R. CORNEJO,

modelos de fuerza, amor, resistencia,
y los más importantes maestros de mi vida.

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ix
Acknowledgments xix

INTRODUCTION 1
Against Visual Coloniality

1. *SEMILLAS* 35
Art and Indigenous Defiance in Guatemala

2. A CREATIVE TURN TO THE BODY 78
Feminist Dissonance and Erotic Autonomy in Central American Art

3. SHIFTING THE BORDER 132
Central American Art against the War on Mobility

4. "LOS SIEMPRE SOSPECHOSOS DE TODO" 177
Art on Criminalization, Prisons, and Social Cleansing in Central America

CONCLUSION 231
Visual Disobedience and Art Histories Otherwise

Notes 239
Bibliography 257
Index 271

ILLUSTRATIONS

I.1 Regina José Galindo, *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* (artist with basin), 2003. 4

I.2 Regina José Galindo, *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?* (footprints), 2003. 6

I.3 Jorge de León, *El círculo: Festival octubre azul*, 2000. 7

I.4 Elyla (Fredman Barahona), *Ni azul blanco ni rojo negro*, 2019. 9

I.5 Marton Robinson, *La virtualidad del cuerpo: Aparecer y desaparecer en tiempos de guerra*, 2020. 11

I.6 Edgar Calel, Kit Kit series (mural), 2014. 18

I.7 Edgar Calel, Kit Kit series (window mural), 2017. 19

1.1 Benvenuto Chavajay, *El grito*, 2002. 37

1.2 Sandra Monterroso, *Rakoc Atin*, 2008. 41

1.3 Ángel Poyón, *Letanía*, 2008. 44

1.4 Benvenuto Chavajay, La suave chapina series, 2007–8. 46

1.5 Benvenuto Chavajay, *Untitled* (black *mazorca*), 2013. 49

1.6 Ángel Poyón, *Estudios del fracaso medidos en tiempo y espacio*, 2008. 51

1.7 Fernando Poyón, *Contra la pared*, 2005. 54

1.8 Antonio Pichillá, *Vida*, 2011. 57

1.9 Antonio Pichillá, *Lo oculto*, 2005. 58

1.10 Sandra Monterroso, *Lix cua rahro/ Tus tortillas mi amor*, 2002–4. 61

1.11 Marilyn Elany Boror Bor, Para no olvidar sus nombres series, 2012–13. 64

1.12 66
Marilyn Elany Boror Bor,
Kaqchikel-Slash-Kaxlan, 2014.

1.13 67
Marilyn Elany Boror Bor,
Kaqchikel-Slash-Kaxlan
(installation view), 2014.

1.14 68
Sandra Monterroso, *El matador*, 2011.

1.15 70
Edgar Calel, *B'atz constelaciones de saberes* (diptych, front view), 2015.

1.16 71
Edgar Calel, *B'atz constelaciones de saberes* (diptych, back view), 2015.

1.17 74
Edgar Calel, *At nu jukukempe*
(still) 2016.

1.18 75
Edgar Calel, *At nu jukukempe*
(still), 2016.

2.1 79
Regina José Galindo, *Perra*, 2005.

2.2 84
Isabel Ruiz, *Matemática sustractiva*, 2001.

2.3 85
Alexia Miranda, *No necesitamos más papel*, 2011.

2.4 86
Natalia Domínguez, *Atuendo*, 2010.

2.5 88
Jorge Oquelí, *Honduras*, 2010.

2.6 89
Priscilla Monge, *Pantalones para los días de regla*, 1996.

2.7 93
Priscilla Monge, *Lección no. 1: Lección de maquillaje*, 1998.

2.8 95
Regina José Galindo, *El dolor de un pañuelo*, 1999.

2.9 99
Colectivo Artería, *ZIP 504, un país cinco estrellas*, 2001–5.

2.10 101
Dalia Chévez, *Falso-Franca*, 2007.

2.11 102
Dalia Chévez, *Falso-Franca* (detail), 2007.

2.12 104
Regina José Galindo, *Mientras, ellos siguen libre*, 2007.

2.13 107
Lucy Argueta, *Merma*, 2012.

2.14 109
Sandra Monterroso, *El agua se volvió oro, el rio se volvió oro, el oro se volvió azul*, 2019.

2.15 111
Katie Numi Usher, *#GRUB*, 2017.

2.16 113
Katie Numi Usher, *Trabajas como negra para vivir como güera*, from Facing the Music series, 2008.

2.17 116
Maria Raquel Cochez, *Live Performance no. 3*, 2009.

2.18 117
Regina José Galindo, *Himenoplastia*, 2004.

2.19 120
Martin Wannam, *Hueco*, 2019.

2.20 124
Martin Wannam, *Daniela Pacheco, hospital general, 1 de noviembre del 2012, Guatemala*, from THEY series, 2018–19.

2.21 126
Elyla (Fredman Barahona), *Somos una patria*, 2014.

2.22 129
Elyla (Fredman Barahona), *Yo (no) tengo miedo de tanta realidad*, 2018–19.

3.1 133
Mauricio Esquivel, *Líneas de referencia*, 2009.

3.2 137
Carlos Cañas, *El Sumpul*, 1984.

3.3 139
Artist unknown, *Untitled* (Mesa Grande *arpillera*), ca. 1980s.

3.4 142
Guillermo "Habacuc" Vargas, *Exposition #1*, 2007.

3.5 144
Guillermo "Habacuc" Vargas, *Rostros vivos*, 2016.

3.6 145
Guillermo "Habacuc" Vargas, *Rostros vivos* (details), 2016.

3.7 150
Regina José Galindo, *Móvil*, 2010.

3.8 151
Regina José Galindo, *Survival Course for Men and Women Who Will Journey Illegally to the U.S.*, 2007.

3.9 154
Ronald Morán, *Breve cuestionamiento que traspasa el estado material*, 2009.

3.10 156
Ronald Morán, *Brevedad inmaterial*, 2009.

3.11 158
Guadalupe Maravilla, *Requiem for My Border Crossing*, 2018.

3.12 161
Walterio Iraheta, *Migrar es siempre cuestión de espacio*, 2007.

3.13 163
Catalina del Cid, *Electrodomésticos + Regalos = Amor*, 2012.

3.14 165
Myra Barraza, *Un saludo desde la hermana república de El Salvador*, 2006.

3.15 167
Walterio Iraheta, *Faraway Brother Style*, 2008–10.

3.16 169
Simón Vega, *Shanty Mall*, 2006.

3.17 171
Adán Vallecillo, *Remesa Republic*, 2007.

3.18 173
Mauricio Esquivel, Líneas de desplazamiento series (coins), 2009–14.

3.19 174
Mauricio Esquivel, Líneas de desplazamiento series (map), 2009–14.

4.1 180
Los Siempre Sospechosos de Todo, *Poleas*, 2017.

4.2 185
Danny Zavaleta, *Retrato hablado*, 2009.

4.3 189
Danny Zavaleta, *El tur*, 2006.

4.4 190
Simón Vega, *Ciudad encajada*, 2001.

4.5 193
Simón Vega, *Vigilantes invertidos*, 2001.

4.6 194
Jorge de León, *Cuadros de costumbres*, 2015.

4.7 195
Alma Leiva, Celda series, 2010.

4.8 198
Alicia Maria Siu, *Targets of Manifest Destiny*, 2010.

4.9 200
Marton Robinson, *Slot Machine*, 2020.

4.10 202
Danny Zavaleta, Se busca series (vendor of toys), 2006–7.

4.11 206
Jhafis Quintero, In Dubia Tempora series (catalog), 2004.

4.12 208
Jhafis Quintero, In Dubia Tempora series (intervened objects), 2004.

4.13 210
Jhafis Quintero, *Máximas de seguridad* (book), 2007.

4.14 211
Jhafis Quintero, *Máximas de seguridad* (performance), 2007.

4.15 213
Jhafis Quintero, *Hágalo usted mismo*, 2008.

4.16 215
Jorge Oquelí, *Exhumación (rito funerario)*, 2011.

4.17 218
Gabriel Galeano, *100% Catracho*, (bags), 2004.

4.18 219
Gabriel Galeano, *100% Catracho* (performance), 2004.

4.19 220
Regina José Galindo, *Las escucharon gritar y no abrieron las puertas*, 2017.

4.20 222
Regina José Galindo, *American Family Prison*, 2008.

4.21 225
Guadalupe Maravilla, *The OG of Undocumented Children*, 2018.

4.22 227
Ernesto Bautista, *Teatro de desencuentro*, 2021.

4.23 229
Salvador Meléndez, *Meira Alemán, mother of Daniel Alemán, with a Los Siempre Sospechosos de Todo flyer depicting him*, 2017.

C.1 232
Walterio Iraheta, *Súper niño en Atitlán*,
from Kriptonita series, 2007.

C.2 233
Walterio Iraheta, *Súper chica en Atitlán*,
from Kriptonita series, 2007.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was conceptualized, researched, written, and revised across the years, in multiple spaces, and with the support of many people. The list is too extensive to include in full but I extend my gratitude to everyone for every contribution.

First, this book would not be possible without all the artists and cultural workers in Central America who supported me and this project from its very inception and across ten years of research travel. They spent hours in dialogue with me; some traveled with me across lakes and mountains, some shared rare catalogs and resources, and some facilitated meetings and connections with other artists. Others reminded me to take a break and let the beauty of the lakes, oceans, volcanoes, food, music, and beautiful people of the region serve as inspiration. Some accompanied me to visit family members and others invited me into their own family homes. It is impossible to name everyone in this space, but special recognition goes to Ronald Morán, Adán Vallecillo, Benvenuto Chavajay, Sandra Monterroso, Antonio Mena, Edgar Calel, Fernando and Ángel Poyón, Regina Galindo, Danny Zavaleta, Yasser Musa, Joan Duran, Rosina Cazali, Anabella Acevedo, Bayardo Blandino, José Pablo Ramírez, Juanita Bermúdez, Muriel Hasbun, Jorge de León, Lucy Argueta, Fabricio Estrada, Ruben Silhy, Raúl Quintanilla, Patricia Belli, Ernesto Calvo, Gustavo Larach, Jhafis Quintero, Walterio Iraheta, Guadalupe Maravilla, Beatriz Cortez, Yasmin Hage, Cristina Cuadra, Natalia Domínguez, Ernesto Bautista, Ernesto Salmeron, Mauricio Kabistan, Victor "Crack" Rodriguez, and Miguel A. López.

This book first developed at Duke University, where I benefited from the support of many, including Kristine Stiles, Esther Gabara, Richard Powell, and Walter Mignolo. Their own intellectual interventions and critical thinking were foundational for the development of concepts and ideas in my work.

I am eternally grateful to my community of friends for their support during those years, especially Yuridia Ramirez, Alicia Barrientos, Fredo Rivera, Raúl Moarquech Ferrera-Balanquet, Fari Nzinga, Zach Blas, Jeannette Acevedo Rivera, the folk at El Kilombo Intergaláctico, and Jasmina Tumbas, who was my most trusted friend and political ally from day one. Financial support for initial research travel during those years was made possible with a Latin American and Caribbean Studies Research Grant, a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad (DDRA) Fellowship, and a Ford Foundation Dissertation Completion Fellowship.

This book was heavily revised while I was at the University of New Mexico. My colleagues Szu-Han Ho, Kirsten Pai Buick, Ray Hernandez-Duran, Ana Alonzo-Minutti, Marcella Ernest, Aaron Fry, and Myra Washington were a source of support and friendship. I am grateful to them. I also thank Mary Tzongas, Claudia X. Valdes, Bernadine Hernández, Francisco J. Galarte, Rebecca Schreiber, Amy L. Brandzel, and Elizabeth Quay Hutchison, who offered support in many ways. Much of the material in this book was shared with graduate students in my Central American art seminars at UNM. Their engagement was a constant reminder of the urgency of this work, and I'm especially grateful to the Central American students who reminded me this material was personal and political for them as well, including Martin Wannam, Hazel Batrezchavez, Jeannette Martinez, Joselin Castillo, Alexandra Rivas, Manuel Criollo, and Ezekiel Acosta. Additional travel to Central America was made possible with funding from the University of New Mexico, including the College of Fine Arts and the Feminist Research Institute. Image reproduction for this book was supported with a UNM Research Allocations Grant, a WeRi Investing in Faculty Success Program Grant, and a CFA Creative Research grant. In the greater Albuquerque community, I am most thankful to Victor Chacon, Beva Sanchez-Padilla, Gabrielle Marie Uballez, Sue Shuurman, and Farah Nousheen for their friendship and support and Samia Assed for her political solidarity, friendship, and radical inspiration.

The various invitations to present my work in progress at institutions afforded valuable feedback at different parts of the manuscript and at various stages of its development. Many thanks go to Tamara Toledo, Claire Bishop, Cristina Gonzalez, Kaitlin M. Murphy, Anita Huizar-Hernández, Ester E. Hernández, José David Saldívar, Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, Shannon Speed, Macarena Gómez-Barris, Claudia Sandoval, Luis Vargas Santiago, Jennifer Jolly, and Claudia Milian. Each preparation and conversation was a contribution to my thinking and the development of this book.

Writing is both a solitary and a collective endeavor and I'm indebted to many friends and colleagues whose company offered joy and encouragement during the writing of this book, especially when I returned home to Compton, California. My thanks to Maylei Blackwell, Claudia Sandoval, Sylvia Zamora, Ana Paulina Lee, Juan Herrera, Lauren Aguilar, and Milo Alvarez. I am also grateful to all who offered a change of scenery for my writing. I was blessed to be able to do some of the writing for this book from cafés in downtown Puebla, Mexico, thanks to Arquetopia: International Art Residency, or with a beautiful view of Lake Coatepeque in El Salvador thanks to Laberinto Projects. In Beirut, Lebanon, the conversations with Anjali Nath, Manu Vimalassery, Hatim El-Hibri, Anaheed Al-Hardan, Samhita Sunya, and Adam Waterman were invaluable. And in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, Simon Njami, Daniel W. Coburn, Daniella Géo, Bruno Vilela, Guilherme Cunha, and Brígida Campbell offered insights and discussion that were instrumental in earlier phases of my research. Simon Njami offered the best reminder—to always be me. All these encounters fueled both my spirt and my writing at various stages of this book.

I am also indebted to Leticia Alvarado, Laura Perez, Tatiana Reinoza, Robb Hernandez, Adela Licona, Ana Paulina Lee, Arely Zimmerman, Colleen Jankovic, and my sister Xiomara Cornejo, who all read different chapters of the manuscript. Thank you for your time, careful consideration, thoughtful feedback, and unwavering encouragement, especially Colleen Jankovic for reading the manuscript in its entirety. An interdisciplinary community of intellectuals, thinkers, doers, and activists provided a source of inspiration and accountability. I am grateful to Central American studies scholars and writers Claudia Milan, Arturo Arias, Arely Zimmerman, Maritza Cárdenas, Kirsten Silva Gruesz, Ana Particia Rodríguez, Cary Cordova, Leisy Abrego, Suyapa Portillo Villeda, Cecilia Menjívar, Karina Alma, and Roberto Lovato. I am inspired by scholars committed to decolonizing knowledge, the university, and the arts, and I am especially grateful for conversations with Nelson Maldonado Torres, Nitisha Dillon, Shellyne Rodriguez, Tatiana Flores, Saudi Garcia, MónicaRamón Rios, and members of the Curators and Educators for Decolonization group.

At Duke University Press, Ken Wissoker's guidance and kindness, especially amid the unpredictability of a pandemic and multiple family emergencies, has been encouraging and comforting beyond what I can express. I am grateful to the Duke team for answering my many questions and to the anonymous readers for their careful reading and feedback; thank you for making this book better. Any errors in the book are entirely my own. To Diana Taylor and Macarena Gómez-Barris, coeditors of the Dissident Acts series, thank you for believing

in this book. I am especially grateful to Macarena Gómez-Barris, who has been a constant source of encouragement, support, and friendship and a true example of what feminist decolonial solidarity can be.

Finally, I am everything I am because of my family. To my parents, Rene and Blanca Rosa Cornejo, thank you for inspiring the love in this book. To my sisters, Xiomara and Edlin Cornejo, and my brother, Rene Cornejo, thank you for your support and encouragement. And of course, to my furry family members, our dogs Xocomil, Boogie, Uma, Koko, and Lulu, your love and loyalty are unrivaled.

I'm also grateful to my family in El Salvador, especially my cousin Katherine Siliézar, who was a companion during many travels in El Salvador. My tías, Morena Cornejo and Deisy Palacios, may you rest in peace, thank you for reminding me how strong Salvadoran women have always been. Manuel Huerta, you have taught me more than you realize; thank you for being by my side during the final phases of this project. To everyone listed and not listed, I extend my gratitude for being part of this journey.

INTRODUCTION

Against Visual Coloniality

Artists, curators, and cultural workers all waited eagerly to view the anticipated exhibition *Ante América*. After inaugurating in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1991 and traveling to the United States in 1993, the exhibition arrived in San José, Costa Rica, where it was hosted by El Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo in 1994. It was one of several Latin American art exhibitions in the United States and Europe fueled by a growing interest in multiculturalism and an attempt to address the growing Latina/o populations, albeit doing so through the promotion of Latin American art.[1] *Ante América*, curated by Gerardo Mosquera, Rachel Weiss, and Carolina Ponce de León, was of particular interest for Central Americans because its curators presented it as one of the first Latin

American exhibitions curated from the "inside" and proposed an expanded geographical vision of Latin America by including artists from South America, the Caribbean, and of African descent together with Chicana/o and Native American artists. Yet, when *Ante América* arrived in Costa Rica, many in the region were surprised at the blatant omission of Central American artists from this hemispheric approach. During the exhibit's theoretical encounter, audience members questioned the curators on the Central American absence from their vision, to which the curators replied that they were simply unaware of any artistic activity taking place in Central America.[2]

The exclusion of seven countries (Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama) from *Ante América* revealed to attendees the nature of disappearance of an entire region from a hemispheric artistic framework, even when led by desires for diversity. Some understood that under the layer of innocent unfamiliarity lie assumptions shaped by colonial logics on *who* makes art and from what geopolitical locations, for as US curator Dan Cameron noted in a review of the show, the three areas overlooked in the exhibition all shared the most prominent Indigenous populations in Latin America.[3] Moreover, the curators' selection of the Central American country as a destination for the exhibition but not considering it as a site of artistic presence reiterated to others the perception of the region as a consumer rather than a creator. These realizations became the impetus for a series of regional dialogues, artistic initiatives, curatorial visions, art spaces, and a new cultural infrastructure led by Central Americans that propelled the artistic scene of postwar Central America for years to come, producing renowned artists now included in national and international exhibitions, collections, and biennials around the world.[4] And yet, such moments of disappearance for Central American art are still repeated in both research and curatorial projects that collectively form and uphold canons in Latin American art in which Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina are defined and amplified as Latin American art centers by the inferred voids around them.

The deeper implication of cultural erasure, however, is not limited to inclusion on gallery walls but ripples into sociopolitical spheres in which negation of a people's culture is historically tied to the negation of a people's history and humanity. For Central Americans, visibility and invisibility extend beyond aesthetics or exclusion from the canons of art and into the denial and erasure of our very existence. Deletion occurs through blatant exclusion of historical narratives, reduction into objects of gaze, disappearance into homogenized groups and geographies, or existence as targets of empire. Nation-states' investment in ideologies of mestizaje (an anti-Indigenous and anti-Black project) continue to perpetuate the myth of whiteness, relegating Indigenous peoples

to a romantic past and disallowing Blackness in the region.[5] These types of erasures are reinforced by an amalgamation of anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-LGBTQ sentiments in the United States that force migrants into obscurity.[6]

Border zones further amplify Central American imperceptibility. Maritza E. Cárdenas has theorized the nonrecognition of US Central Americans as the "Other Than Mexican" logic, or "OTM"—an acronym first used by US Border Patrol to taxonomize immigrants, and a logic that propels the "unintelligibility" of Central Americans beyond the border.[7] Central Americans' incomprehensibility, and by extension the unrecognizability of their creative productions, is only reversed when they are read/seen by institutions and political entities as subjects of suffering and destitute. Thus, Central America remains hypervisible in US imaginaries as a tropical site of misery and violence in need of intervention, while artistic and cultural production from the region remains little known, or unimaginable. This obscurity further parallels what Sarita Echavez See calls "imperial forgetting" in her own work on the Filipino American context as a process in which US empire forgets it is empire by categorically erasing those it subjugates and denying them the space and language needed for the exploration and articulation of their culture and history.[8]

Nonetheless, artists in Central America continue to defy a multiplicity of erasures, whether it be forceful disappearance, cultural elimination, historical deletion, or the normalization of institutional forgetting. In 2003, Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo created *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, one of the most iconic performances of Central American contemporary art in reaction to the repression of historical memory. The state had just approved General José Efraín Ríos Montt's candidacy to presidency despite his involvement in genocide during the country's civil war (1960–96). Throughout his 1981–82 tenure, Ríos Montt oversaw the rape, torture, displacement, infanticide, and murder of more than 1,771 Ixil Maya people in Guatemala. Outraged at the state's historical amnesia, Galindo, dressed in black, walked silently and barefoot from the Constitutional Court of Guatemala to the National Palace, two institutions and symbols of power (see figure I.1). She carried with her a basin of human blood, only pausing periodically to place her feet inside before leaving a trail of bloody footprints between the two locations. As she walked, Galindo passed before a line of policing figures, protectors of the nation-state, and after an hour ended the action with two feet pointing toward the National Palace—the last of the blood-spattered footsteps—where she left the basin of blood and walked away.

As inferred by the performance's title, *¿Quien puede borrar las huellas?* (Who can erase the traces?), Galindo confronted the Constitutional Court

FIGURE I.1.
Regina José Galindo, *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, 2003, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

with its historical amnesia, rejected its narrative of peace and justice, and located nation-state institutions as accessories to crimes against humanity. Though pained and enraged, Galindo did not utter a word or a scream. Instead, with her own body, she materialized a trail of bloodstained footmarks that metaphorically made visible the people most erased by the nation-state; the red stains created a ghostly presence of the thousands of Maya Indigenous people murdered and disappeared under Ríos Montt (see figure I.2). Her corporal gesture evoked the ephemeral and the fragility of life and memory in Guatemala while she refused to let the state expunge its role in Indigenous extermination from the collective and historical memory. Beyond the forgetting of genocide, she condemned Guatemala's use of systematic erasure to facilitate reoccurrences of state-sanctioned oppression.

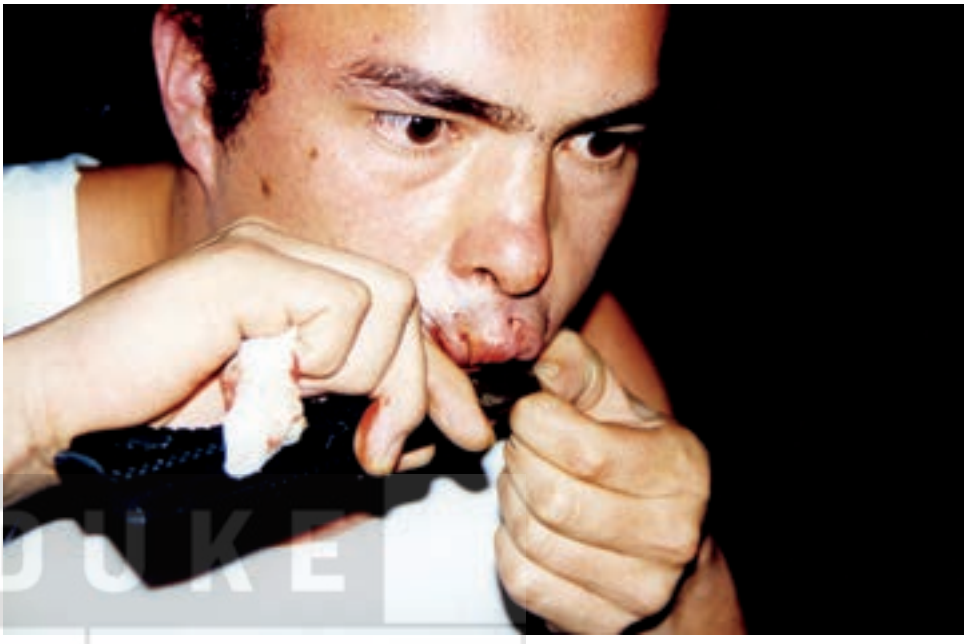
Visual Disobedience defies imperial forgetting and the erasure of our humanity by offering a panorama of art across three decades in Central America. The forty artists and over eighty artworks analyzed in this book attest to both the experimentation and the abundance of creativity and art making in the region, and to a critical understanding of how colonial legacies and US empire fuel the mass exodus of refugees and asylum seekers arriving at the US-Mexico border. I specifically focus my attention on a postwar context, beginning in the 1990s, when the region transitioned into a period of reconciliation following years of US intervention, revolution, and occupation. Yet, as I show, the afterlives of violence have produced new emergent manifestations with ongoing displacement, racial and gender violence, and criminalization and repression that cause the current exodus and dispossession of Central Americans.

Guatemalan artist Jorge de León gestured at this perpetuity of violence in another iconic performance of the region, *El círculo* (The circle)(2000). During his action, the artist inserted a needle and thread through his lips in a circular motion, sealing his lips shut as a testimony to the continuity and cyclical nature of violence in a so-called postwar region (see figure I.3). Metaphorically, he enacted the repeated sequence of silencing and violence that, despite the signing of peace accords in 1996 that ended a thirty-six-year-long war in Guatemala, remained a common form of repression through fear tactics and unresolved injustices. De León was not only physically drawing and visualizing with the needle and thread but also feeling this painful act. His performance conveyed the continuous muzzling of historical pain and scarring on the collective body in the rotation of state and imperial aggression that the artists in this book address.

The so-called postwar context further marks a transitional moment for the region and its creative expression, both politically and conceptually, which includes a new postwar understanding of historical violence beyond the Cold

FIGURE 1.2.
Regina José Galindo, *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas?*, 2003, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE I.3.
Jorge de León, *El círculo: Festival octubre azul*, 2000, performance. Photograph by Regina José Galindo. Courtesy of the artist.



War or left-/right-wing rhetoric of the decades prior, and an innovative critical visual language that includes performance, conceptual, installation, new media, and video art. This shift is evidenced in the works of activists and artists like Nicaraguan-born Elyla (Fredman Barahona), who turns to embodied performance to push against the left- and right-wing binaries that dominate Nicaraguan politics. In *Ni azul blanco ni rojo negro* (Neither blue white, or red black) (2019), the artist walked to the Nicaraguan Embassy from La Carpio, a poor neighborhood in San José, Costa Rica, where thousands of Nicaraguans settled during the conflict in the 1980s to 1990s and remain marginalized by the government (see figure I.4). During the procession, the artist carried a baby doll half-covered in red-black (a reference to the Sandinista Revolution of the 1970s) and the other half in blue-white (a reference to the now Sandinista political party led by Daniel Ortega), thus binding patriarchal revolution with contemporary neoliberal politics. Physically engulfed in a black dress, the artist mourned the failures of both groups in their attempts at liberation and the colonial legacies still entrenched in Nicaragua that sanctioned a shared exclusion of queer, nonbinary, and Afro-descendants from visions of the ideal nation-state. Instead, the artist pushed for anticolonial conversations that center queer, feminist, Afro, and Indigenous perspectives and autonomy.[9] These interconnected creative dialogues as briefly exemplified with Galindo's, de León's, and Elyla's actions offer a new imaginative use of the body and space for critical interventions into issues of racial, gendered, and colonial violence not previously addressed during years of conflict in the 1970s and 1980s.

While important scholarship has analyzed the social and political nuances that form the region's history and current political climate, to date no US academic book has offered a history of Central American art, analyzed the correlation between visuality and the legacies of colonialism as they manifest in the isthmus, or examined the resulting and ongoing decolonial practices in art.[10] However, with this book I seek not to insert Central American art into Western canons from which it has been excluded but rather to expose, disrupt, and dismantle the colonial logic behind systemic violence in the region by theorizing creative acts that counter the politics of seeing and invisibility that have been used against Central Americans across borders in multiple ways. The emergence of Central American art histories thus requires a decolonizing disruption of disciplinary confines and hegemonies in the art world and knowledge production, to dismantle boundaries located not only in geographical spaces and geopolitical borders that displace migrants but also in conceptual, intellectual, and philosophical venues from which Central Americans, and other marginalized groups, have long been negated and excluded—including the artistic realm.

FIGURE I.4.
Elyla (Fredman Barahona), *Ni azul blanco ni rojo negro*, 2019, performance. Courtesy of the artist.

Visual Disobedience thus offers a contemporary art history of postwar Central America through decolonial aesthetics, by which I mean an anticolonial reconfiguration of visuality, art, and its principles from the perspective of those whom colonial logics place outside the realm of Western art histories, theories, and practices. I propose "visual disobedience" as a tactic of resistance within decolonial aesthetics—it is a defiance of both state repression and visual coloniality; it is an act of praxis and protest against colonial logics and toward the decolonization of art and knowledge. Throughout the chapters of this book, I frame the practices of Central American artists as collectively forming a visual disobedience that attests to the most pressing issues for the region and its diaspora, from Indigenous genocide to femicide, anti-LGBTQ violence, mass migration, criminalization, and prison captivity. My analysis of visual disobedience in the context of these themes both introduces an array of established and emerging artists and offers a critical foundation for understanding the recent Central American exodus at the center of US anti-immigrant policies.

DECOLONIALITY AND DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS/AESTHESIS

In *La virtualidad del cuerpo: Aparecer y desaparecer en tiempos de guerra* (The virtuality of the body: Appearing and disappearing in time of war) (2020), a performance critiquing the erasure of Afro-diasporic artists from art spaces, Afro–Costa Rican artist Marton Robinson eliminated the white walls of the gallery altogether and centered the Caribbean jungle as a site of knowledge and creation (see figure I.5). In the video performance, the artist pours a white glue liquid over his head as a reference to the whitening agenda of nation-states in Central America, whose investments in ideologies of mestizaje continue to perpetuate the myth of whiteness.[11] As the glue covers the majority of his head and upper torso, the artist also evokes the white marble sculpture, its connotation of Western high art, of European ideals of beauty, and its placement in white Eurocentric art histories. Robinson, who at one point mimics the European classical white sculpture, begins to wipe the white liquid from his face and head, ultimately exposing a failed whitening process over the artist, and thus his corporal resistance to Black erasure in the art world and in the geopolitical spaces he navigates. The artist connects a racist logic of whitening of Central American peoples with whitening of art spaces and art systems and the masking, disappearance, and reappearance of the politicized Black body. Importantly, Robinson's critiques extend beyond Costa Rica, into a deeper relationship and history between aesthetics and colonialism that perpetuate assumptions already fused into the structures, definitions, and values of the art world.

FIGURE I.5.
Marton Robinson, *La virtualidad del cuerpo: Aparecer y desaparecer en tiempos de guerra*, 2020, video performance (stills). Courtesy of the artist.

Because the Western concept of "art" is entrenched in colonialism, which together with US empire is at the core of contemporary Central American struggles, this study engages the theorization of decolonial aesthetics by artists, cultural workers, and scholars from the Global South. The term *aesthetics* is a historically determined Western notion and invented formal category with which to theorize the senses of a human subject. It reflected a set of principles determined by European intellectual men that focused on specific human subjects whose senses and subjectivity they believed were the *only* ones that mattered—themselves. Taste was considered a matter of reflection on the senses that only the evolutionary superior species could engage. According to racist Darwinian ideas of the time, that meant Western upper-class men. Those unable to reflect on the senses, that is, non-Western people, the "underdeveloped" or "backward," could simply only be immersed in their senses.[12] Consequently, in early Western art, aesthetics became a body of knowledge that implicitly centered art and its sensorial reception, especially vision, as the domain of European men. All others (racialized and colonized peoples) were relegated to the subject matter depicted in art, but not the producers or receptors whose sensibilities, creativity, and subjectivity required intellectual consideration. As the philosophy of aesthetics was increasingly intertwined with class and race, aesthetics became a category of judgment and by extension of morality and humanity. That is, aesthetics not only upheld the idea of inferior and superior races but also perpetuated the idea that racial hierarchies determined appreciation for beauty and artistic abilities, thus undermining the creative expression of subjugated peoples as a way to reinforce hierarchies of human civilization.[13] Aesthetics became a colonizing philosophical category, as Robinson reminds us in his video performance.

Attempts to decolonize aesthetics have led some anticolonial thinkers to the conclusion that no term attached to *aesthetics* (i.e., *political*, *radical*, or even *decolonial*) would stop it from being a colonizing category rooted in Western ontologies that reproduce colonial logics and narratives. The Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter proposed a differentiation between aesthetics and its colonial counterpart by referring to them as "Aesthetics 1" and "Aesthetics 2." The former (Aesthetics 1) relates to the perception of the world through the senses, and the latter (Aesthetics 2) is the colonization of the senses through the theorization of beauty and taste as defined by Eurocentric thought.[14] The discourse of Aesthetics 2, she claims, not only projects the class-specific taste of Europeans as the general and "universal" taste of the developed world but is also imbued with codes that coerce behavior from subjugated people that condition them to live in a colonial world.

Indigenous proposals to combat aesthetics as a colonizing system emerge across the hemisphere. To reclaim the senses and orality in Indigenous knowledge making, Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui proposes two epistemological and pedagogical methodologies of praxis. These approaches, which she calls "historia oral" (oral history) and "sociología de la imagen" (sociology of the image), prioritize Indigenous oral and visual forms to decenter the written word as the only valid means of instituting history.[15] Meanwhile, art historian Jolene Rickard, citizen of the Tuscarora Nation (Haudenosaunee), drawing from her own subjectivity and family history, rejects the Eurocentric notion of sovereignty. Instead, she theorizes a Haudenosaunee understanding of "visual sovereignty" as a dominant expression of Indigenous self-determination, renewal, and resistance and as a better method for reading the interrelated space of colonial gaze, deconstruction of colonized image and text, and Indigeneity in relation to the settler state.[16]

Along the lines of Wynter's arguments, members of the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality collective project conclude that aesthetics colonized *aesthesis*, a term that defines the perception of the world by the senses that they use as a replacement for Wynter's Aesthetics 1.[17] The group proposes a revival and recuperation of aesthesis (Aesthetics 1) as a way of sensing-knowing-doing in the world.[18] What differentiates their framing from a "postcolonial" art framework is the concept of "coloniality" and "decoloniality" as coined by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano. Coloniality describes a system of domination conceived through racial divisions, in which the European/Western colonization of political and economic spheres continues to be intricately linked to the colonization of knowledge systems at the world scale.[19] While colonialism refers to the historical moment of colonization, coloniality refers to its continuity into the present as an ideological and epistemic tool of domination. Interventions by feminist theorists and philosophers further expand coloniality to include overlooked gendered-raced-sexualities, exposing gender, gendered logics, and the category of "woman" to be additional colonial concepts.[20]

The ongoing occupation of land through settler colonialism and the coloniality of knowledge through institutions continue to inform policies and state laws affecting racialized peoples in Central America, whether to justify the forced sterilization of women in Guatemala; the theft of sacred lands under government control in Honduras; the erasure of Indigenous histories and languages in El Salvador; the oppression of Afro-descendants in the region, especially in Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Panama; the abduction and imprisonment of migrant children at the border; or the rationalization of genocide. As I elaborate in the next section, visuality is also entrenched in

coloniality. Because we are conditioned to subscribe to Western hegemonies through the coloniality of knowledge, Walter Mignolo proposed a rejection, or "delinking," of coloniality and theorized "epistemic disobedience" as an act of insubordination against the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge.[21] For me, the term was an invitation to question the role of art and visuality within coloniality—as these are also embedded in colonial projects and upheld through its institutions, such as archives, museums, and universities. How can we locate, historicize, and theorize the defiance of creatives most affected and erased by Western modernity, racial capitalism, and the colonial matrix of power?

While building on these conversations of decolonial aesthetics/aesthesis, my interest in *Visual Disobedience* is less in contesting a philosophical category and more in exposing how coloniality and decoloniality function in Central America through the sensing-knowing-doing of creatives. I do so by centering anticolonial acts of resistance. Placing these creative acts within a decolonial aesthetics framework allows me to move beyond institutional critique of art, and beyond coloniality as subject matter in art (i.e., depictions of colonial suffering), toward honoring the praxis of Central American art and creativity historically denied to us. Thus, the subtle acts, delicate movements, and brief moments of being through which subjugated peoples reassert their existence are as key in my framing of decolonial aesthetics as are the long-term battles and historical engagements with decolonization that receive recognition. Every moment, every gesture, is already a defiance that calls for the death of coloniality when one's own existence is an act of insubordination, as it is often in Central America for poor, racialized, and gendered people, and as Galindo, de León, Elyla, and Robinson show in their actions.

We can view these artists' brief moments of creative embodied resistance as what Macarena Gómez-Barris calls "decolonial gestures," which she defines as the "smaller spaces and moments of decolonization, in relation to racial and settler colonial projects."[22] The term is useful for me in identifying and centering embodied acts of creativity in service of decolonization rather than focusing on the commodified product that is often valued in Western art. Brevity or subtleness should not be mistaken as futile, for decolonial gestures are assertions of existence and a defiance of erasure that moreover decenter colonial structures and frameworks of knowledge, history, and memory. Therefore, valuing both the archive and the repertoire, as theorized by Diana Taylor, for this book I'm less interested in creative things as fetishized relics and more interested in creative decolonial *acts* and *who* enacts them, with all the history and resistance behind them.[23]

An attention to multiple geographies of reason is crucial to a decolonial aesthetics in Central America since the region shares a history with other geopolitical spaces of creative erasure brought on by colonialism. For instance, Nelson Maldonado-Torres notes the unique position of the Caribbean in the creation of its own decolonial aesthetics.[24] Topologically, the Caribbean is an archipelago that under multiple colonial empires also gave way to multiple decolonialities. Maldonado-Torres reminds us that the Caribbean, as the first site of colonial encounter between the Old World and the New World, was ground zero for brutal practices of colonization and dehumanization in the making of the modern/colonial world. Thus, a consortium of pioneering decolonial thinkers who emerged from the Caribbean (i.e., Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Sylvia Wynter, Édouard Glissant, and Maldonado-Torres himself, among others) pointed to the decolonized body and the decolonized senses as necessary for decolonization. As Maldonado-Torres explains, "Aisthesis is a key zone of struggle as it defines how subjects relate to their own bodies and encounter everything in their temporal spatial horizon."[25]

The topology of Central America, like that of the Caribbean, has also shaped its political history and, as I show in this book, the relation to its spatial and temporal environment. Communities along the Atlantic Coast of Central America, like the Garinagu and other Afro-descendant populations, identify with Black Caribbean culture due to their history as descendants of Afro-Caribbean people and their proximity to the islands. Others perceive the seven Central American countries as islands due to the tropical nature and the isolation perpetuated by decades of war. However, in their exhibition on Caribbean art, scholars and curators Tatiana Flores and Michelle Ann Stephens refute archaic frameworks of fragmentation, instead asserting a continuity of connections among the Caribbean islands, which one could also extend to Central America.[26] Yet, topologically, Central America is an isthmus—a strip of land, a narrow passage, flanked by the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans on either side. It is a bridge that connects North America with South America, that is neither North nor South, nor the Caribbean, yet is at the center of it all. It is the center of the Americas. Poet Pablo Neruda once called it "the waist of America" in reference to corporate colonization: "The United Fruit Company / reserved for itself the juiciest / the central seaboard of my land, / America's sweet waist," which it baptized "Banana Republics."[27] That geographic location made the region a target of US imperialism and the geopolitical embodiment from which its artists sensed the world.

But what comes of such a struggle, in which a body *senses* and thus *makes sense* of its own spatial and temporal context, a context shaped by coloniality?

In her study on South American Indigenous and Afro–Latin American communities, whose territories have been made into "extractive zones," Macarena Gómez-Barris reveals what she describes as "submerged perspectives"—those ways of perceiving otherwise that offer possibilities of decolonization unintelligible to capitalist and colonial powers.[28] Though focusing on sites targeted by extractive capitalism in Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Colombia, and Bolivia, Gómez-Barris offers a framework with which to consider ways of seeing from other zones ravaged by racial capitalism and extractivism, such as Central America. From corporate colonization by the United Fruit Company to land occupation and violence with the Panama Canal, the region faces ongoing and extractive colonial projects such as land theft, privatization of water, and the building of hydroelectric dams that disproportionately affect Indigenous and Afro–Central American communities and make them chiefly vulnerable to governmental repression. Yet from underneath that heavy cloak of such extractive violence, their creative acts both reveal alternative perspectives and expose the incomplete project of modernity.

Naming, loving, and writing from those turbulent spaces that produce submerged perspectives is another form of delinking from the Eurocentrism of the discipline of art and art history and another component of decolonial aesthetics. For me, as a US Central American art historian, daughter of Salvadoran immigrants, it is necessary to dispel what Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez describes as hubris *of the zero point*.[29] The zero point refers to that geopolitical grounding from which one thinks and produces knowledge but which in European modernity and imperialism is imagined as an *invisible* location. That invisible location, which in fact truly centers a European positionality as a point of observation, has been passed off as a "universal point of view" and is still enforced in Eurocentric fields as *objectivity*. In contrast, decolonial aesthetics is rooted in seeing, feeling, thinking, and creating from the embodiments of those who are erased, subjugated, colonized, or previously colonized, and acknowledges creations from those specific geopolitical groundings as valid ways of knowing and being in the world.

What these decolonial thinkers point us to in the many possibilities of decolonial aesthetics is that the sensing-knowing body and the geopolitical space from which it senses and enunciates produce alternative ways of seeing that are incomprehensible to colonialism and empire—ways of seeing that defy the heavy cloak of colonization by piercing through it with insubordinate existence and love for oneself and one's communities. It is that love that Maya Kaqchikel artist Edgar Calel summons in his series Kit Kit (2014) (see figure I.6). When Calel learned of his grandmother's passing in 2014, he was consumed with lov-

ing memories of her chanting "kit, kit, kit, kit" when she called birds to feed them corn seeds. From his grief and coming to terms with an utterance he would no longer witness, Calel used clay earth, the very substance she had now become, to depict a repetition of the monosyllable "kit" in different scales, positions, and directions all across the walls of his grandmother's humble house in Comalapa, Guatemala. What appeared as an abstract visual distortion is in fact an acoustic intervention with a range of volume mimicked by the different scales of the word and not only honors the memory of his grandmother but transforms the space into an archive and repertoire of her song since passersby who read the words perform her melody. Calel further re-creates Kit Kit in public and in artist spaces during his travels, thus carrying with him the onomatopoeic sound that evokes his grandmother in all dimensions of space and time and that has become a sort of artist signature that further fuses them in life and creation (see figure I.7). Calel's variations of Kit Kit extend beyond the visual and embody a Maya sensing-knowing way of love, memory, and ancestral honoring.

When we understand how the violence of settler colonialism and coloniality repress ways of seeing/sensing/knowing/being in site-specific locations—whether in Palestine, Turtle Island, the Caribbean, the Philippines, the Amazon, or, as I show in this book, Central America—and when we think and write from those spaces, the practice of re-existence becomes all the more radical, and the possibilities of decolonial aesthetics innumerable. Artists are central to this process because decoloniality is lived and embodied and theorized by the people on the ground who are directly affected by multiple systems of oppression. *Visual Disobedience* begins in the recognition that decoloniality does not reside in the academy. Therefore, it centers artists as creative makers, thinkers, and theorists. It is a book from a Central American diasporic perspective in dialogue with artists on the ground who are collaborators and friends, who dismantle Western concepts of aesthetics and their colonial products through a disobedience that is visual, embodied, and activated in real space and time, and multisensorial all at once—a resistance rooted in the very human faculties a *colonizing* aesthetics philosophically denies them.

VISUAL COLONIALITY

When we fail to locate a direct correlation between a colonized aesthetics and visuality to land dispossession, forced poverty, war and genocide, and other realities of subjugated peoples, a decolonial aesthetics becomes a mere slogan in a long list of empty signifiers.[30] In proposing a decolonization of art, or a decolonial aesthetics, it is necessary to also establish how colonized aesthetics have

FIGURE 1.6.
Edgar Calel, Kit Kit series, 2014, mural. © Edgar Calel. Courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE I.7.
Edgar Calel, Kit Kit series, 2017, window mural. © Edgar Calel. Courtesy of the artist.

come to violate humanity in tangible ways. To do so, I ask, where do we locate it in actual space and time beyond abstract concepts? This inquiry into specificities of colonial violence leads to a more explicit question regarding this book: in the praxis of what I call visual disobedience, what exactly is being disobeyed? To build on the vocabulary needed to name sites of colonial violence, I propose that there are concrete ways colonization has appropriated visuality into a colonizing tool beyond the philosophical category of aesthetics, what I call *visual coloniality*. With this phrase I build on Quijano's concept to specifically address the colonization of creativity, images, and artistic production of those who've been made into subject matter (the topic of an artwork, the thing seen in an artwork) that is then transformed into a *tool* of domination in the service of colonization. I'll elaborate on just three mechanisms of visual coloniality: visual erasure, visual thingification, and visual extractivism, three different but entangled forms of colonial violence affecting us across space and time.

VISUAL ERASURE

The power of our creative history, and the threat it poses to empire, is often underestimated, in part because we have been fed colonial lies that as a violent region on the peripheries of modernity we have no art, that it only existed once long ago and is now extinct, that we are now incapable of artistic sophistication, or that it can only be "gifted" to us in solidarity by others. Yet I want to remind us that the creative force of the native inhabitants of the region was so powerful that it posed a threat to European domination at the time of conquest. Thus, to visually and epistemically remove that threat, visual erasure was an initial and deliberate project of colonialism that continues into contemporary time. As Ariella Aïsha Azoulay reminds us in the context of art and its constitutive imperialism, colonial plunder is not a concluded event but an ongoing process.[31]

In Mesoamerica—what is now Central America—architecture, murals, calendars, and codices that are often preserved today as popular tourist sites or in museums and collections held an epistemic value for Maya people before conquest. They convey a sophisticated visual and spatial system designed for astronomical calculation, recordkeeping, and the preservation and transmission of histories and cosmologies. Like the performances, ceremonies, and ritual acts that took place at these sites, this material culture consisted of an ocular, corporal, and spatial system of knowing essential to the order of Indigenous ways of being and seeing. Significantly, historical and visual production was a highly valued and respected responsibility assigned to a select few. For instance, the

ancient Maya highly regarded scribes for their ability to produce written texts and illustrations, making writing, painting, and sculpting one and the same, highlighting the equal relation between knowledge, power, and visuality.[32] However, through violence, looting, and destruction, European colonizers repudiated Indigenous visuality and knowledge. Such rejection was not merely collateral damage of colonization or a sweeping dismissal but rather consisted of strategic tactics. They ostracized the visual aesthetics of Mesoamerican representation, the proportions of anatomy of the Indigenous bodies depicted, the portrayals of space and the location of objects within that space, and the visual rendering of gods and deities. They rejected this system of representation because the visual language derived from Maya anatomy, space, and perspective located the Indigenous body—not the colonizer's—as a frame of sight.

As Mignolo has written, Spanish dismissal and rejection of Indigenous systems of knowledge was rooted in the Renaissance belief that the Western book was the only repository and disseminator of knowledge and that alphabetical writing indicated civilization and intelligence.[33] Yet, as art historians know, Western scholars locate the origin of history and theory of art as a discipline within the Renaissance, which also coincided with the colonization of the Americas. In *The Lives of Artists* (1550), considered the first written history of Western art, Giorgio Vasari shows that artistic skill during the Renaissance was judged by the mathematical and geometrical accuracy with which artists could "capture" and depict space, perspective, nature, and anatomy. The desire to study and imitate nature attributed godlike status to those who were skillful enough to accomplish such a task: the *artist*.[34]

Renaissance representation simultaneously located the viewer at the center of this system. The notion of "perspective" revolves around the observer who occupies the one and only central position from which space and all its contents are mapped and located. This same notion influenced the measure of proportion, which was located in the human anatomy as the center of the universe, as illustrated in Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvius Man*. A mathematical depiction of nature and space allowed the viewer not only to witness a godlike creation, the representation of nature, but to dictate nature and locate him at its center. In sum, at the time of Spanish Conquest, "mastery" of perspective reinforced the status of artist-as-intellectual and the production and recognition of visual art as intellectual work.[35] Thus, in the fifteenth century, the visual conveyed power in political and religious spaces not only by being the standard tool for measuring the world but also by making a claim to the world from the European perspective, effectively situating European man and his ideals of beauty at the center of the universe.

This *mutual* understanding of the power of art and visuality made Mesoamerican visuality a threat to European colonizers for it decentered the European body, perspective, and ways of seeing as universal. European negation and destruction of Mesoamerican systems of visuality was not due to inferiority or nonexistence as we are led to believe by dominant history. On the contrary, *recognition* of the sophisticated visual system of knowledge was effectively an acknowledgment of it as a danger to the colonial project. It was therefore virulently attacked—a violence that has persisted and developed through visual coloniality. Targeting and destroying Indigenous visuality is thus not just an incursion on material objects, sites, styles, or artifacts. It is also a systematic assault on Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and beings, initiated at the moment of conquest in the service of colonization. It makes the way for the imposition of European visuality as the ultimate visual system to aspire to, and then all other attempts dismissed as "derivative." As I discuss in chapter 1, on Mayan art and defiance in Guatemala, this makes the safekeeping, preservation, and new emergence of Indigenous creativity and knowledge a major defiance to visual coloniality. It also encourages us to ask: might the epistemic and ontological power of Indigenous visuality still pose a threat to colonial order? A threat to the US empire?

VISUAL THINGIFICATION

Aimé Césaire equated colonization with "thingification," meaning that colonization requires the commodification and objectification of the colonized into things, or nonhuman objects.[36] This process is one in which the colonizer defines himself (as human) in opposition to the colonized (as nonhuman) to justify his dominance over the latter. To do this, the colonizer must ease his consciousness by *seeing* the colonized as animal in order to then habitually treat the colonized as such. In turn, as Césaire notes, the colonizer "transforms *himself* into an animal," for the only true body that loses its humanity is the one that violently beats, enslaves, dispossesses, exploits, and kills another human.[37] By this logic, the colonizer becomes the true savage of this fabricated and still powerful dichotomy. His idea of humanity is therefore, by default, one of inhumanity. However, to convince himself and the world otherwise, the colonizer remolds the colonized into an image that benefits his economic needs through a series of negations. For example, the colonized are not civilized, moral, good, intelligent, beautiful, or human.[38] It is this multifaceted fictional image, and the real consequences beyond the colonial gaze, that, inspired by Césaire, I call "visual thingification": the colonialist practice of fabricating visual evidence for

the dehumanization of the colonized through a series of negations for the purpose of justifying elimination.

The visual thingification of Indigenous and enslaved African peoples was accelerated with the invention of photography in the nineteenth century and projects that aimed to prove racial inferiority through the visual. Its technological nature was put forth as objective and scientific, and, combined with Darwinian evolutionary theories and phrenology studies, contended that racial inferiority could be identified merely by looking at physical traits and skull shape. Soon, photography became a dangerous tool with which to categorize, label, and criminalize colonized peoples and to establish a nonhumanity that aided colonial projects. With the rise of mechanical reproduction, photographic images were disseminated globally. As European travel increased, fueled by a desire to experience and possess the exotic colonial lands, photographic images of untamed landscapes, zoology, botany, and even Indigenous and colonized peoples fulfilled European fantasies of discovery and conquest.[39] Images were displayed, consumed, studied, and examined not only to establish the inferiority of the colonized subject but also to establish the superiority and humanity of the colonizing society.

The visual thingification of Indigenous and enslaved peoples extended from the two-dimensionality of the photograph to the corporeal by way of human zoos, which consisted of the violent coercion and kidnapping of peoples who were held captive and displayed around the world as freaks and animals—a practice that only ended in the 1930s.[40] Human zoos are rooted in a series of displays informed by the nonscientific to racist theories of biological evolution. These range from pre-Enlightenment cabinets of curiosity, a tradition of collecting rare objects, to a fascination with cadavers, anatomy lessons, and public executions in the displays of mortality, to the exhibition of "nations," "mankind," and ethnographic subjects fueling inventions of exoticism and savagery.[41] The conquest of the Americas further fueled a fascination with "missing links," the Darwinian idea of a linear evolution structured like a chain, where one subject displayed the transition to modern human—an idea used as proof of evolutionary hierarchies.[42]

The best-known case in Central America is the kidnapping and exhibition of brother and sister Maximo and Bartola, who were first exhibited in the United States in the 1850s as "The Last Aztec Children." Born in a small village in San Miguel, El Salvador, the children suffered from microcephaly, the neurological condition that causes reduced brain and head size, and dwarfism. Their physical appearance and size were exploited to prove that they were the remaining two "missing links" of a nearly extinct race, and they were exhibited

to American and European audiences and offered to scientific communities as objects of study and testing. For four decades, Maximo and Bartola were held captive, obligated to perform as freaks, and were ultimately forced to marry each other to garner further publicity.[43]

The visual thingification of Maximo and Bartola occurred through the fabrication of photographs, promotional material circulated about them, and a forced display of their bodies, which were dressed with supposed Aztec garments. Additionally, a fictitious illustrated narrative published as a pamphlet told the story of their "discovery." The pamphlet visually connected Maximo and Bartola with the ancient Indigenous culture to establish them as the declining and soon extinct race and, by extension, whites as the superior evolved race destined to replace the colonized.[44] As Robert D. Aguirre points out, the children were often depicted in profile: a visual strategy to accentuate anatomical and alleged racial differences that by the 1850s served as "a cue to look for a deviant subject—racial, criminal, or both—within the visual frame."[45] The constant profile-view depiction, along with their juxtaposition with images of archaeological Mayan sculptures and stelae, further associated the children with "a stony, lifeless past while dissociating them from the technological modernity of the viewer."[46] As "stony" and "lifeless," Maximo and Bartola were made into artifacts to convey that they belonged on the lower spectrum of civilization—as animals, monsters, or *things* detached from humanity. The long history of collecting, storing, and exhibiting Indigenous peoples' artifacts, ritual objects, and physical remains continues today in museums, which are often sites for visual thingification.

Characteristics projected onto colonized peoples in the process of visual thingification suggest they are (1) criminal, (2) anachronistic, and (3) monstrous. But these do not remain mere ideas or images; rather, visual thingification materializes the series of negations used to turn humans into things by eliciting very real reactions. Philosopher George Yancy elucidates the nature of this process as a series of mythos, codification, ritual, ontologization, constructivity, stereotyping, and overdetermination.[47] As he describes, the white colonial gaze freezes the colonized body through mythopoetic constructions, projecting onto the colonized body its own fears. Though these are projected fantasies of otherness, the white gaze considers them factual by erasing its role in creating such fantasies. The white imaginary then codifies the colonized body with attributes (evil, dirty, etc., values opposite to those attributed to whiteness: good, pure, etc.). These attributes suggest not only a void of values in the colonized but that the colonized body is an enemy of values, and thus of whiteness.[48] Myths and codes then lead to rituals, through which bodies undergo transformation; that is, the white body physically reacts to seeing the

colonized body. Yancy cites the classic trope: white woman sees Black body and clutches purse. Thus, an asymmetrical constructed relation forms between colonizer and colonized, followed by a process of stereotypification where colonizer and colonized become solid types to the colonizer. These types are consumed by colonizers unchangeably and unquestionably through overdetermination, which fixes the colonized body, as Yancy states it, as "something *it is* rather than as something that is *done* to it."[49]

Visual thingification is a violence *done* to Central American people through the fabrication of images and visuality. It is designed to render Central Americans nonhuman, criminal, and monstrous, not only in the imaginary realm but in the physical world. While this may no longer take place through human zoos, as was the case of Maximo and Bartola, visual thingification persists for Central Americans today with the visual fabrication of the *marero* (gang member) and, by extension, of the migrant and refugee. This visual thingification stems from multiple centers of power, including the US and Central American governments. The visual disobedience Central American artists enact to protest migration, criminalization, and captivity, as I discuss in chapters 3 and 4, defy the centuries of fictitious visual narratives fabricated and adopted by governments to *thingify* Central Americans, which cause very real corporal violence against us.

VISUAL EXTRACTIVISM

Extractivism in Latin America, or what is also called neo-extractivism or extractive imperialism, is not only a current problem of late capitalism; rather, it has been a continuous, albeit changing force in the Americas since the sixteenth century, when the search for silver and gold mines motivated European expansion into the Caribbean, Central America, and South America.[50] The resources targeted are usually found in zones inhabited by Indigenous peoples whose relations to the land are disregarded and ignored. Their communities face looting of resources, pollution of water and land, privatization and food scarcity, diseases, and decreased life expectancy.[51] Gómez-Barris theorizes these areas as "extractive zones" and as areas produced by the "extractive view." The "extractive view" is the colonial way of seeing that treats land and resources as attainable commodities, "while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity."[52] She thus points us to the broader phenomenological aspects of extractivism and connects colonial seeing to the facilitation of land and resource theft. As complementary to Gómez-Barris's "extractive view," I here extend my concern with extractivism to the

direct theft of Indigenous visual design as yet another resource targeted by extractivism and turned into commodity for profit.

With the phrase *visual extractivism*, I refer to another mechanism of visual coloniality to name the direct robbery of Indigenous visuality, both materially and epistemically. The material type of looting is evidenced by European explorers who stole and looted ritual objects and artistic creations ranging from ceremonial objects, textiles and weavings, jewelry, masks, clothing items or headdresses, tools and weapons, and quotidian objects. With these items, they built private collections and exhibitions and sold rare and valuable objects in markets.[53] This visual extractivism created the foundation for today's richest museum collections and continues to fuel a market economy in the art and museum world. Additionally, an epistemic type of looting under visual extractivism is seen in Western art history. Consider the most famous and admired artists of Western art history, such as Pablo Picasso or Paul Gauguin, who took styles, designs, and objects from Indigenous communities, whose own art was ignored, devalued, or mislabeled as primitive and naive. Yet, when taken by the West, the very same Indigenous visuality was framed as "inspiration" for new artistic movements and styles that were then credited to Western artists who profited with financial and cultural capital. This type of visual extractivism has justified the valorization of Western artworks for massive amounts of money, while imbuing them with historical presence and authority. Entire movements such as "cubism" or "abstraction" are credited to European artists.

Visual extractivism is practiced even by Latin American governments, whose lands are extracted by foreign companies and who find themselves increasingly dependent on foreign investment for the purpose of their tourist economies. In Guatemala, where an (under)estimated six million people are Indigenous (Maya, Garifuna, Xinca, and Afro-descendants), the government fosters its economy by promoting tourism to sacred temples and sites, while closing these spaces that are important for ceremony to Indigenous peoples today. Likewise, it exploits Mayan textiles and weavings as visual bait for foreign travelers, with no permission from, or profits returned to, Maya communities. Weavings and textiles are worth more than money. Their unique designs visually document history, identify specific tribes and identities, encompass preconquest traditions passed on for centuries, and enforce ancestral spiritual connections. As sacred garments, certain Mayan weavings can only be used by elders or spiritual leaders and/or during ceremonies. Maya women have compared the significance of their *trajes* to that of their own child, as it accompanies them everywhere, even in burial after death.[54] Their significance maintains continuity for a Maya diaspora in the United States, as scholar Floridalma Boj Lopez has argued.[55]

When these ancestral visual elements are not exploited for tourist consumption, they are used to target Indigenous peoples and coerce assimilation.[56] In Guatemala, textiles and weavings are a source of discrimination against Maya people, who are ridiculed, humiliated, and verbally abused for preserving ancestral garments and clothing. Ladinos are known to use words like *embueltas* (wrapped-up women) as derogatory terms for Maya women that reduce them to objects. In her reference to the racialization of clothing, Egla Martínez Salazar explains: "This denotes the clothes Maya women wear are not real clothing but pieces of worthless fabric" and belittled as "*unprocessed* fabrics."[57] That the item is considered crude and unrefined, and thus worthless, until it is "processed" and commodified by a Western entity reinforces the perception of Indigenous aesthetics as natural resources that are wasted unless they are extracted and processed by more "civilized" people. Both national and international designers continuously steal Mayan embroideries and patterns to make clothing and accessories (shoes, handbags, belts, and other clothing garments) that sell for hundreds of dollars throughout the United States and Europe. The items are sold as exotic fashionable trends that simultaneously function as souvenirs, mementos, and keepsakes. In the colonial mindset, only then do sacred weavings and patterns yield profit and value in a tourist economy and market.

Just as Indigenous communities are resisting and defending their lands, water, and resources against extractivist corporations all over the Americas, Indigenous communities are also increasingly defending their creative, visual, and aesthetic resources because of their value and significance to life and being. In 2011, Guatemala designer Giovanni Guzmán used sacred K'iche' Maya designs reserved for spiritual male elders for Miss Guatemala in the Miss Universe Beauty Pageant, sparking indignation from the Maya community. That same year, the Navajo Nation sued clothing company Urban Outfitters, which had launched an entire clothing line with the tribe's name, but lost the case in court because they could not prove that the tribe had sufficient prominence. In 2015, two French designers, Antik Batik and Isabel Marant, stole *huipil* designs from the Mixe community, an Indigenous people who reside in Santa Maria Tlahuitoltepec, in the southwestern state of Oaxaca, retailed the garments at $365, and attempted to copyright the design as their own. Currently, Maya women in Guatemala, led by the Asociación Femenina para el Desarrollo de Sacatepéquez (AFEDES; Women's Association for the Development of Sacatepéquez), are fighting national and transnational companies to protect the collective intellectual property of Indigenous peoples and demanding a halt to the theft of their sacred weavings and designs by the Guatemalan government as well as by international fashion designers and sellers in companies and online websites like Etsy.[58]

Naming visual extractivism as yet another mechanism of visual coloniality allows me to more accurately address a type of colonial thieving that has long been obscured under art historical terminology. While the words *appropriation* or *influence* are popular terms in art to address artists' use of other cultures' preexisting objects and images as their own, visual extractivism acknowledges the power abuse and violent repression that comes with visual theft through colonization. Terms like *appropriation* and *influence* may allude to a cultural exchange, but visual extractivism emphasizes the explicit thievery of art and visual systems from Indigenous peoples as yet another resource that, once commoditized, is exploited to yield monetary profits for private entities, megacorporations, and the Western art world. By exposing its colonialist logic and function and explicit thievery, visual extractivism can no longer persist under the innocuous excuse of cultural exchange or artistic influence, which perpetuate uneven power relations, loss, and violence, under the cloak of artistic normalcy.[59]

Visual erasure, visual thingification, and visual extractivism are just a few of the many mechanisms of visual coloniality as it manifests in Central America. Visual erasure names the colonial deletion of Indigenous artistic history and significance to impose colonial standards as superior and unreachable. It is the rewriting of visual history in the service of empire. Visual thingification names the dehumanization and criminalization of people through visual fabrications as a way to justify both violence done to them and their disposability. And visual extractivism names the thievery, that of Indigenous designs and visuality/knowledge in Western art histories, by nation-states, and by non-Indigenous designers. Naming these mechanisms of visual coloniality, which function differently but are entangled within the colonial project, allows me to identify real and tangible consequences beyond abstract theories and thus to contextualize the role of art and decoloniality in this book as more than an attempt at inclusion in art historical canons, and rather as a deliberate stand against visual coloniality as a system of oppression. Acknowledging how visual coloniality works, hides, and affects us, one can begin to make sense of how making art amid colonial violence and negations of our humanity *is* a radical act of defiance.

VISUAL DISOBEDIENCE

In historizing creative actions, gestures, and interventions, such as the ones briefly mentioned thus far and the more than eighty to come in the following chapters, I offer this book as a story of survival and creation in the face of erasure, invisibility, and dehumanization brought on by both colonial violence and colonial ways of seeing. I therefore theorize the artists, actions, and creations in

this book within a framework of "visual disobedience" to directly address a liberation movement in which Central Americans use art to expose ongoing colonialism, defy visual coloniality, and reveal the radicalness of our art and visions as we combat death with creation. Three premises of visual disobedience are key.

First, visual disobedience is an act of informed intervention: it is art as praxis. Centuries of colonial legacies and decades of US military intervention and anti-immigrant policies have led to the current sociopolitical context for the artists addressed in this book. It is from their geo and body politics that artists are using every tool at their disposal to take back public spaces, challenge state aggression, expose racist and colonial logics, and condemn ongoing and unresolved injustices. It is especially relevant when we consider that, despite civil wars and counterinsurgency violence in the 1970s through the 1990s, the region now has greater levels of violence than before. This means that there is no postwar Central America just as there is no postcolonial Central America. Artists engaging in visual disobedience do not represent suffering and oppression—they interrupt, expose, condemn, and provide counternarratives and other ways of seeing. Thus, their disobedience is an intervention into reality. While violence as a theme remains constant, it is not as an exoticized subject but rather as testimony to existence and resistance. Visual disobedience thus understands the artists as knowing and capable humans active in liberation efforts.

Second, visual disobedience comprises an all-sensing and questioning existence where the tactile, auditory, and visual coexist. The experimental art practices addressed here in performance, conceptual, installation, and video art comprise a combination of corporal uses of the body, manipulations of objects, physical gestures in space, and a tactile and auditory cognizance that creates and evokes memory through an honoring of the senses. Through the remaining visual images of such acts of visual disobedience, as seen throughout this book, we can now revisit these historical moments that can be repeated but never duplicated. These images here archive visual counternarratives to the hegemonic ones created about Central Americans and thus are in confrontation with visual coloniality. Visual disobedience centers a sensorial existence in its many facets, from the tangible and corporal to the remaining visual images in its aftermath—a fusion of archive and repertoire.

Third, visual disobedience is a mutiny motivated by love for those Frantz Fanon called "the damnés"—the condemned. It is not merely a disorder by colonial subjects for the sake of appropriating the spaces and resources from which it has been excluded—whether the state or the mainstream art world—for that is not an attempt to undo visual coloniality but instead an appropriation in

order to benefit from it. Rather, I locate visual disobedience as part of a long revolt against a historical repression that impedes peace, justice, and a dignified way of being. It is a fight against visual thingification, and all the ways in which Central Americans have been placed in a zone of nonhuman. In fact, the vast majority of the creative work and actions analyzed in this book emerged in moments of urgency, shock, and pain upon experiencing or witnessing attacks on Central America's most vulnerable, as was the case for Galindo's *¿Quien puede borrar las huellas?*, and it is precisely that love that allowed rage to manifest; it is love—so integral to a decolonial attitude, as Maldonado-Torres noted—that has pushed the artists here to a visual disobedience.[60]

While the word *disobedience* evokes anger and rage that irrationally leads to insolence, I remind us that in actuality love precedes rage. Love for the *damnés* inspires disobedience of colonial-based structures as a necessary step toward self-love—not a love required from the state but a love required from within and for each other; the very human ability that coloniality attacks. Thus, I locate love at the core of visual disobedience, as Frantz Fanon did on his theorizations on violence, as Chela Sandoval did in her methodology of the oppressed, and as Che Guevara did in his revolutionary motivations.[61] Visual disobedience is motivated by decolonial love.

BOOK STRUCTURE

The chapters in the book center on how Central American artists have been engaging in visual disobedience for three decades against the most pressing manifestations of violence and the attack on the region in a so-called postwar context. While injustice and movements of resistance are many in Central America, I focus on Indigenous genocide, gender-based and anti-LGBTQ violence, displacement and migration, and systematic criminalization and imprisonment. These issues constitute the historical violence of a so-called postwar Central America and best explain the current phenomenon of women and child migrants and their criminalization on a transnational scale.

Chapter 1, "*Semillas*: Art and Indigenous Defiance in Guatemala," asks: What happens when "bad seeds" defy the demands of coloniality and violence enacted on them, and survive and grow? And what happens when they do indeed retaliate through visual disobedience? Guatemala's 1954 coup, backed by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), set the stage for the thirty-six-year-long civil war (1960 to 1996) that resulted in the deaths of more than 200,000 Guatemalans and the disappearance of 40,000 others. Eighty percent of all deaths were of Maya Indigenous peoples. Recent investigations and trials have

shown that the military, led by former Guatemalan dictator José Efraín Ríos Montt, directly executed the genocide of Maya people and their children, whom he labeled "bad seeds" to prevent their future retaliation.

This first chapter analyzes the artistic work of Maya Tz'utujil, Maya Kachikel, and Maya Q'eqchi' artists who belong to the generation of Maya children targeted by the military government. Their presence today alone is an act of defiance. Through their performance art, video art, installations, and object-based works, these artists depart from Indigenous episteme to bring notions of spirituality, gender, and earth relations to the forefront of decolonial visual thinking, while connecting the current repression against Maya peoples in the region to the continuity of repression brought on by the Spanish conquest. Therefore, this chapter addresses visual disobedience of Maya artists against the state and against the coloniality of seeing in visual research of Indigenous peoples' culture.

Chapter 2, "A Creative Turn to the Body: Feminist Dissonance and Erotic Autonomy in Central American Art," centers on a postwar historical shift in feminism and feminist art history of Central America. Following the peace accords and efforts for reconciliation in the 1990s, violence against women in the region has been greater than it was during armed conflicts, while countries like Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are among the most dangerous for nonheteronormative and gender nonconforming peoples. At the same time, performance art became a preferred medium in the region, revealing a departure from decades earlier, when the representation of women as revolutionaries and liberators proliferated in the public art aimed for the masses. This chapter asks: How does a creative turn to the body in a postwar context redefine feminism and erotic autonomy in the region? What is revealed when artists bypass the right-/left-wing rhetoric of decades prior and expose the various mechanisms of what Latin American, Indigenous, and women-of-color feminists have shown to be an entanglement between gender and coloniality?

Through a feminist decolonial reading of selected artworks, I show how artists visually and physically theorize, expose, and condemn a systemic gendered violence beyond the physical injury of women, instead exposing the current gendered violence as a historical tool of patriarchy and nation-state that also functions in the service of coloniality. This chapter shows how through visual disobedience, especially in performance art, artists expose and condemn public attacks on women and gender nonconforming people that have functioned to perpetuate fearful submission. This includes rape and forced reproductive control, domestic violence and psychological control in private spaces, government impunity, Eurocentric notions of beauty and sexuality and anti-Blackness,

neoliberal workspaces like *maquiladoras* (sweatshops), and the increasing attacks on land and environmental activists. This chapter also addresses artists that defy, and undo, the nation-state through their own embodied erotic autonomy, while denouncing the nation's role in homophobia and transphobia.

The third chapter, "Shifting the Border: Central American Art against the War on Mobility," analyzes artworks that respond to the waves of Central American migration as a result of civil wars, new manifestations of violence, and neoliberal policies. I decenter the traditional focus on the US-Mexico border as a site of migration discourse and show how the conceptual shift of the border now extends down to Mexico-Guatemala, El Salvador–Honduras, Nicaragua–Costa Rica, and even along the "vertical border" that is Mexico. Shifting the border expands an analysis of border art beyond the US-Mexico dichotomy and allows for consideration of the invisibilized migratory passage for Central Americans through the region and Mexico. This journey is often marked by anti-Indigenous and anti-Black tensions, abduction, rape, forced sexual slavery, and the killing and disappearance of Central American migrants, revealing that the migratory dangers begin long before reaching the US-Mexico border.

While criminal violence is understood to be the main cause for mass migration today, in this chapter I analyze artworks that show how these manifestations of criminal violence are directly related to the decades of US intervention and US anti-immigrant policies of the decades prior. The artists I analyze expose the complexities dismissed in the media and lost in numbers and statistics. They center on the physical journeys and landscape of migration, anti-immigrant sentiment within the region, the consequence of migration on families, the architecture of remittances and changes to urban space, memory and map making in migration, unaccompanied child migrants, and other intricacies of Central American migration. Shifting the border takes us back to a site of multiple border cultures and to the visual politics of unequal capitalist exchange of what activist, writer, and educator Harsha Walia calls border imperialism.[62] I show that artists in Central America shift the border in an act of visual disobedience to create countercartographies of migration and recenter our right to freedom of mobility.

In the fourth and final chapter, "'Los Siempre Sospechosos de Todo': Art on Criminalization, Prisons, and Social Cleansing in Central America," I address one of the gravest consequences following US intervention in Central America: the systematic criminalization of Central Americans and their subsequent captivity and annihilation through the idea of the *marero* and the "*illegal* migrant." The criminality of migrants in the United States has been critically

addressed by scholars who reveal how prescribed illegality of migrants enforces labor exploitation, global capitalism, and the impediment of solidarity and coalition building by positioning oppressed groups against each other in the fight for who deserves value. These analyses are useful in considering racialized groups in the United States, to which we can include Central American migrants. This becomes evident when Central Americans' worthiness of citizenship protection and human rights is dependent on their not being mistaken for gang members or terrorists, the presumed "real" criminals. This chapter asks: How do artists in the region, through their visual disobedience, expand and challenge the debates around criminality, worth, and citizenship both in the region and in the United States? Specifically, how do artists expose the multiple origins of such criminalization to reveal it as a violence that both precedes and follows migrants reaching the US-Mexico border?

The art in this final chapter reveals that criminality is not ascribed to migrants only upon reaching the US-Mexico border. As I show, from the making of transnational gangs in the United States, to the increase of mass incarceration in the region, a wave of mysterious prison fires that are burning inmates alive, and the construction of mega-prisons, Central American artists theorize illegality and delinquency within a broader colonial agenda of dehumanization. Beyond a critique of anti-immigrant sentiment, artists reveal and expose a carceral logic rooted in coloniality that ties a perpetual criminalization of Central Americans across borders and that is inseparable from the colonial agenda of social cleansing of poor, racialized, and marginalized Central Americans. Thus, I show how collectively their visual disobedience against policing, criminalization, and imprisonment of Central Americans—both within the region and across borders—pushes not for immigration reform, not for selective citizenship, but for an abolition of the carceral logic, the carceral state, and the carceral state's mechanisms of violence.

This book does not pretend to offer a comprehensive art history of Central America. Instead, I proceed from the assertion that when a people are forced into silence, a scream is an act of defiance; when a people are reduced to an image of suffering and victimhood, creating images of oneself is an act of rebellion; and when a people are made invisible through historical erasure, telling one's stories is an act of insurgence. I show how Central American artists have engaged in visual disobedience as an epistemic and ontological practice of defying coloniality and visual coloniality through corporal interventions, manipulations of space and sound, and the subsequent images through which these practices live on in our historical imaginaries. This book conveys the radical and

resilient nature of Central American artistic creation as acts of defiance and as essential in our decolonization. While the dominant idea of us revolves around US-centric images of suffering or less-than-human status, this book aims to show how Central Americans see our history, our present, our future, and ourselves. It is written with Central Americans in mind and all whose creative culture, knowledge, and ways of seeing and being are continuously erased through colonization and empire.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION. AGAINST VISUAL COLONIALITY

1. For discussions on the tensions and conflation between Latin American and Latinx art and artists amid the emergence of multiculturalism or demands for difference in the artworld, see Dávila, *Latinx Art*, and Ramírez, "Brokering Identities."

2. Pérez-Ratton, *Un lugar inacabado*, 101.

3. In his review, Cameron stated: "Having offered such a promising curatorial thesis, it is disappointing that Mosquera, Ponce de León, and Weiss were not able to extend their research into any one of America's three most predominantly indigenous regions: the Andes (Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador), Central America (primarily El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua), and northern Canada (mainly Quebec, Saskatchewan and Northwest Territories) . . ." See Cameron, "Ante América," 96.

4. Some were in collaboration with curator Gerardo Mosquera, who since *Ante América* became a strong and constant supporter of art in the region. For documentation on these initiatives, see Pérez-Ratton and Castellano, *Mesótica II*; Mosquera and Samos, *Ciudad Múltiple City*; Olmo and Pérez-Ratton, *Todo incluído*; and Duran, *LANDINGS Ten (the Black Box)*. During his tenure as director of TEOR/éTica, Miguel López initiated a significant editorial series that recounts many of these events. Books in the series, Escrituras locales: Posiciones críticas desde América Central, el Caribe y sus diásporas, compile multiple essays by a single author into a standalone volume. They include Cazali, *Certezas vulnerables*; Díaz Bringas, *Crítica próxima*; Pérez-Ratton, *Un lugar inacabado*; Quintanilla, *Zona de turbulencia*; and Samos, *Divorcio a la panameña*.

5. In her seminal article, Juliet Hooker further points to the denial of culture in the erasure of Afro–Central Americans. Though both experience oppression, nation-states still attribute tradition, ancestral culture, and languages to Indigenous peoples, while Afro–Central Americans are seen as devoid of culture. The supposed lacking of culture, and of cultural identity, is one of several factors listed by Hooker that explains why Indigenous communities have been more successful at attaining collective rights over Afro–Central Americans. See Hooker, "Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion." Regarding the US-based Garifuna, Paul Joseph López Oro has argued against US racial categories that continue to

view Blackness, Indigeneity, and Latinidad as mutually exclusive. See López Oro, "Garifunizando Ambas Américas."

6. Scholars wrestle with how these multiple deletions complicate the making of US Central Americans into ethnoracial subjects within the United States. Arturo Arias writes about "Central American-Americans" as an intentional reiteration of excess that points to how Central Americans are paradoxically positioned outside both Latino and Latin American signifiers. For Claudia Milian, Central Americans "disorient" US Latinidades, which are further problematized by the "Blackness" and "Dark-Brownness" of Central Americans (i.e., Garifuna and Maya migrants in the United States). As Milian explains, "Central Americans are introduced and kept at a safe distance so as not to disorient a U.S. Latino and Latina brownness" (*Latining America*, 128). See also Arias, "Central American–Americans"; and Maya Chinchilla's poem from which Arias develops the term: Chinchilla, "Central American–American," in *The Cha Cha Files*, 21–22.

7. Cárdenas, *Constituting Central American–Americans*.

8. Echavez See, *The Decolonized Eye*.

9. Early art historical analysis of revolutionary Nicaragua can be found in Kunzle, *The Murals of Revolutionary Nicaragua, 1979–1992*; and Craven, "The Nicaraguan Revolution (1979–1990)." The revolutionary group turned political party has since undergone drastic changes. Throughout the writing of this book, for instance, the former revolutionary leader of the Sandinistas, and since longtime president, Daniel Ortega, is protested by Nicaraguan citizens for human rights violations, and hundreds have been imprisoned or died in the span of a year at the hands of police repression, prompting artists, like Elyla and others, to respond and some to flee into exile.

10. This book draws from two bodies of work on Central American art from decades prior and the emerging discourse on US Central Americans. The first emerges from US scholars who traveled to El Salvador and Nicaragua in the 1980s and 1990s as part of the Central American solidarity movement. Notable are publications by curator Marilyn Zeitlin and art historians David Craven and David Kunzle, whose research highlighted war violence, testimony, and the revolutionary ideals of a liberated society, mostly in El Salvador and Nicaragua. The second body of literature comes from Central American curators, writers, and cultural workers who in the 1990s began to question the region's invisibility in the international art world and thus the need to produce critical reflection from the isthmus. From their dialogues and events, they produced a new body of literature from Central America led by curators and writers like Juanita Bermúdez, Rosina Cazali, Pablo Hernández-Hernández, Monica Kupfer, Rodolfo Molina, Virginia Pérez-Ratton, Raúl Quintanilla, Pablo José Ramirez, Adrienne Samos, and Sergio Villena, among others. The third comes from the Central American diaspora, from which I write this book. As either immigrants or the children of Central American immigrants, they began to analyze the sociopolitical conditions that made them a diasporic community and the challenges they endured as migrants, refugees, and Central Americans within a broader US Latinx population and beyond. Their intellectual work set the foundation for Central American studies, carving interventions into Latinx, Latin American, Indigenous, and African Diaspora studies. This includes work by Leisy Ábrego, Arturo Arias, Giovanni Batz, Floridalma Boj Lopez, Maritza Cárdenas, Gloria Chacon, Jorge E. Cuéllar, Juliet Hooker, Paul Joseph López Oro, Cecilia Menjívar, Claudia Milian, Yajaira M. Padilla, Andoni Castillo Perez,

Suyapa G. Portillo Villeda, Ana Patricia Rodriguez, and Arely Zimmerman, among others. Though strong in sociological, historical, political, and literary analyses, the role of art and visuality within the history of Central America and its diaspora, however, is only recently materializing, as in the work of Mauricio Ramirez, Tatiana Reinoza, Carlos A. Rivas, and Melanie White, and in the curatorial work of Armando Perla and Alma Ruiz.

11. Afro-descendants in Central America trace their history to both the forceful abduction and trafficking of enslaved Africans to the isthmus and labor migration from the Caribbean islands and the United States. The various peoples that make up the Afro–Central American population, such as the Garinagu, Miskito, Bay Island Creole, and West Indian migrants, have unique histories, challenges, and forms of resistance. In addition to the previously mentioned, see Cosgrove, et al., *Surviving the Americas*; Cunin and Hoffman, *Blackness and Mestizaje in Mexico and Central America*; Corinealdi, *Panama in Black* ; England, *Afro Central Americans in New York City*; Gómez Menjívar, *Black in Print*; Harpelle, *The West Indians of Costa Rica*.

12. Sylvia Wynter draws on Pierre Bourdieu to discuss these as "taste of reflection" (pure taste) versus "taste of the senses" (impure taste). See Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics.'"

13. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, a canonical figure in Western aesthetics, created an "Other" based on their assumed abilities to perceive aesthetics, which he claimed was determined by their racial category. Kant posited that these are aesthetic categories that serve as guides of conduct and are linked to moral experience, implying that art is not just a way of *seeing* things but a way of *being*. See Kant, *Observation on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*.

14. Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics,'" 259.

15. Cusicanqui, "Experiencias de montaje creativo"; Cusicanqui*, Sociología de la imagen*.

16. Rickard, "Diversifying Sovereignty and the Reception of Indigenous Art."

17. Among members of the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality collective are Dalila Maria Benfield, Arturo Escobar, Raul Moarquech Ferrera-Balanquet, Pedro Pablo Gómez, Ramón Grosfoguel, Maria Lugones, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Walter Mignolo, Miguel Rojas-Sotelo, Rolando Vazquez, and Catherine Walsh.

18. They attempt to expose how aesthetics is embedded within the colonial matrix of power, intervening in creative practices such as biennials and curatorial projects to decolonize the senses. See Barriendos, "La colonialidad del ver"; Maldonado-Torres, "On Metaphysical Catastrophe, Post-continental Thought, and the Decolonial Turn"; and Mignolo and Vázquez, "Decolonial AestheSis."Additionally, see Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*.

19. Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality."

20. They include M. Jacqui Alexander, Aura Cumes, Maria Lugones, Xhercis Méndez, Mágara Millán Moncayo, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Hortense J. Spillers, and Gladys Tzul Tzul, among others. The hemispheric emerging proposals for decolonizing feminism are thus led by Indigenous, Afro-descendant, poor, nonheteronormative, and gender nonconforming feminists. They include communal perspectives, Indigenous cosmovisions, relations to land and nature, diasporic histories, legacies of ancestral resistance, and other modes of knowing rooted in the embodied experience of those marked by the coloniality of gender, which is typically excluded from institutional feminism. See Alexander and Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*; Cumes, "La 'India' como 'sirvienta,'"; Cusicanqui, "The Notion of 'Rights' and the Paradoxes of

Post-colonial Modernity"; Lugones, "Coloniality of Gender"; Mendez, "Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminist Methodology"; Moncayo, "Feminismos, Postcolonialidad, Descolonización"; and Spillers "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

21. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought, and Decolonial Freedom."

22. Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone, 13*. See also Gómez-Barris, Lane, and Godoy-Anativia, "Decolonial Gesture."

23. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor identifies a parallel existence between two systems of historical memory and knowledge: the *archive*, the material and archival memory that is resistant to change (as in text, maps, and documents); and the *repertoire*, an ephemeral embodied practice that transmits memory and knowledge (as in dance, song, and gesture). Though they coexist, the repertoire, important to Indigenous epistemes, is often dismissed as outside the domain of legitimate Western knowledge. Meanwhile, the archive, valued for its permanance, is often preferred and preserved to serve the interest of the state and its colonial projects. These distinctions are fluid, as Amelia Jones has shown in her interrogation of the dichotomous relationship between archive and repertoire. Yet they are significant in decentering the Western privilege over the visual and material, and for reasserting the importance of the embodied, ephemeral, and performative, and thereby recentering the body and decolonizing the senses and knowledge. Such distinctions allow me to situate Mayan performances, beyond the Western definition of performance art that emerges from the United States and Europe, as rooted in a much longer history of Indigenous systems of sensing-knowing that predate art historical categories. See Jones, "Archive, Repertoire, and Embodied Histories," and Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

24. Maldonado-Torres, "On Metaphysical Catastrophe, Post-continental Thought, and the Decolonial Turn."

25. Maldonado-Torres, "On Metaphysical Catastrophe, Post-continental Thought, and the Decolonial Turn," 256.

26. See Flores and Stephens, *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, exhibited at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) in Long Beach, California, as part of the Getty Foundation–sponsored Pacific Standard LA/LA series.

27. Neruda, "The United Fruit Company," in *Canto general*, 179.

28. Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone, 11–12*.

29. Castro-Gómez, *La hybris del punto cero*.

30. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor."

31. Azoulay, *Potential History*, 63.

32. Scholars note that Maya scribes, known as *ah k'u huns*, meaning "he of the writing," were recruited and trained in special academies in calligraphy and the visual, and were depicted in unique dress in a myriad of reliefs, murals, and cultural objects. Their visual production included individual signatures and names, thus indicating a prestige and importance attributed to them by the Mayan court. Along with warriors, high-ranking scribes were even common targets for enemies seeking captives during combat. For an in-depth art historical account and analysis of the ancient Maya scribe, see Coe and Kerr, *The Art of the Maya Scribe*.

33. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*.

34. For a discussion on the long effects of Vasari's writing in establishing a heteropatriarchal and exclusionary art canon, see Salomon, "The Art Historical Canon."

35. See Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*; Edgerton, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective*; and Elkins and Williams, *Renaissance Theory*.

36. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*.

37. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 41.

38. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 83.

39. For further studies on the intersections of visual culture, landscape, travel, and tourism in relation to the colonial gaze, see Fusco and Wallis, *Only Skin Deep*; Mitchell, *Landscape and Power* ; Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*; and Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*.

40. For a history of human zoos, see Blanchard, *Human Zoos*; Cariou, "The Exhibited Body"; Corbey, "Ethnographic Showcases, 1870–1930"; and Egan, "Exhibiting Indigenous Peoples."

41. For more on display practices, see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*.

42. Boëtsch, "From the Cabinets of Curiosity to the Passion for the Savage."

43. Aguirre, "Exhibiting Degeneracy."

44. Velasquez, Stephens, and Barnum's American Museum, *Illustrated Memoir of an Eventful Expedition into Central America*.

45. Aguirre, "Exhibiting Degeneracy," 50.

46. Aguirre, "Exhibiting Degeneracy," 49.

47. Yancy, "Colonial Gazing."

48. Yancy, "Colonial Gazing," 8.

49. Yancy, "Colonial Gazing," 8.

50. Veltmeyer and Petras, *The New Extractivism*.

51. Veltmeyer and Petras, *The New Extractivism*, 1.

52. Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, 5.

53. For more on the colonial history of museums and exhibitions of Indigenous culture, see Azoulay, *Potential History* , and Sleeper-Smith, *Contesting Knowledge*.

54. From an interview included in Martínez Salazar, *Global Coloniality of Power in Guatemala*.

55. Boj Lopez, "Weavings That Rupture."

56. For instance, in El Salvador following the 1932 military-ordered execution of thirty thousand Indigenous men and boys, now known as La Matanza, terrorized Indigenous Salvadorans concealed their native clothing and ceased speaking native languages, resulting in a largely assimilated country today. See Tilley, *Seeing Indians*.

57. Martínez Salazar, *Global Coloniality of Power in Guatemala*, 67 (my emphasis).

58. For more on Indigenous textiles, intellectual property law, and the Indigenous challenge to Western concepts of authorship, see Chacón, "Material Culture, Indigeneity, and Temporality."

59. For further reading on the intersection of art, visual politics, and extractive policies and climate change, see Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*.

60. Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality."

61. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*; Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*; Guevara, "Socialism and Man in Cuba."

62. Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*.