An Analysis of Hybridity in 
*Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol* 
Ruth Meredith 

Note: This is an excerpt from a longer paper about postmodern art

Examining a collaborative artist book, *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol* illuminates the importance of the distinction between the post-modern use of multicultural images and materials and the practice of hybridity capable of challenging and subverting the essentialist\(^1\) assumptions made by imperialist attitudes in Western culture. The politically subversive subject of this artist book arises from a critical recreation of the history of the conquest of the Americas seen from the point of view of the resulting culture. “In tales that unfold in poetic *Spanglish* and an elaborate pictography, the artists reveal history as anything but a coherent, linear narrative that leads step by step to the inevitable present. Instead, they offer an unfinished, catalectic text in which history must be read forward and backward, in fragments and in recurring episodes in the changes in language that allow systems of power to remain unchanged—in short, as history itself tends to unfold”

\(^1\) Essentialism is a form of determinism because it assumes that what matters to identity is predetermined by such factors as sex or skin color rather than the result of choices. As a result it serves to justify the status quo because the oppressed were born to be oppressed and therefore it is a ‘natural’ state.
The work also reflects the practice of hybridity because it is a collaboration between book artist Felicia Rice, poet and performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena and painter and printmaker Enrique Chagoya. As a result, it also represents a dialogue between male and female, nationalities—both Chagoya and Gomez-Pena were born in Mexico but now live and work in the United States, and different creative media from both literary and visual arts—Gomez-Pena is a writer while Chagoya and Rice are visual artists.

The complex construction of the book itself embodies the equally complex realities of the new mixed culture that was created as the result of the interaction between the pre-conquest culture of Mexico and the Spanish Conquistadores. For example, the book is bound using an accordion fold inspired by the pre-conquest Aztec codices. Over 21 feet in length, it can be stretched out to be viewed as a single unit like an architectural frieze or read page by page like a book. The book opens and is read from right to left which is the opposite of the European convention—itself a challenge to those conventions that is experienced by the reader directly. In contrast, the pages are read from left to right, a sequence which follows western conventions. As a result, the reader is constantly switching between cultural patterns creating a kind of hybrid experience of reading and drawing attention to the use of the conventions themselves.

The relationship between the binding and the pages also draws attention to the book as both text and object—a hybrid property of all books that contemporary book artists exploit. The Codex Esangliensis exists in three different versions that correspond to various forms of commodity value related to rarity: a hand-painted addition of 5, a limited hand printed edition of 500 and the potentially unlimited production run of the mass market edition. The fine art edition was letterpress printed in black and red on the bark paper used before the Spanish introduced
European paper. The combination of traditional materials and format with western visual art technologies like the printing press provides yet another layer to the hybrid character of the work. Five copies were hand painted. The mass market edition uses paper and printing techniques suitable for mechanical production and mass distribution. In each version, the format and message remain the same however, and I would argue that the increased availability of the work to anyone who can afford $23 to buy a copy more than makes up for the loss of some aesthetic resonance.

The text is written in a mixture of literary forms from poetry to prose to advertising slogans and two languages—Spanish and English. Approximately 3/4 of the text is in English suggesting that its target is the presence of the dominant culture in the Americas, the United States. Within U.S. society, the Latino population probably forms the primary source of experience—and perhaps audience—because both pure Spanish and a linguistic mixture, Spanglish, is used throughout the text.

This reading is supported by the imagery combining references to traditional Spanish and Aztec images with pop culture images from both the US—Wonder Woman, Superman and Mickey Mouse—and Latin America—Che and Our Lady of Guadalupe. Many of the images themselves are hybrids, for example, the Santo Nino de Atocha with the head of an Aztec Deity (the body of the deity is shown on the previous page wearing the Santo Nino’s head) or the skull wearing a Mickey Mouse ear hat. These multicultural hybrids are a signature aesthetic strategy for Enrique Chagoya, one of the collaborators in the book. Appropriation is a favorite strategy of post modern artists but very often artists in the West have borrowed from the rest of the world
“Chagoya inverts this practice in a process he calls ‘reverse anthropology,’ placing icons from the dominant American culture within Indigenous or colonial settings, so that Superman faces off with an Aztec god, or cannibals run amok in Monet’s gardens at Giverny. Chagoya has described this world of intermingled influences as a place where ‘all cultures meet and mix in the richest ways, creating the most fertile ground for the arts ever imagined.’ All these layers of hybridity allow the object to mediate between the two cultures by mapping and therefore which more accurately reflects the experience of living in a multicultural society.

This work demonstrates how hybridity can operate as a dialogical process but only if it is grounded in dynamics of the cultures from which it draws its substance. “Caught between two worlds, between familiar and unfamiliar modes, the viewer begins to experience the dissonance of bi-cultural literacy as a concrete, material practice of reading in two paradigms” This critical distinction between post-modern hybridity that simply re-inscribes the image and hybrid works capable of mediating the differences between cultures explains why the postmodern approach to hybridity so often fails to do more than just reproduce the underlying assumptions of the dominant system.

In order for hybridity to function as more than empty reference—an ‘in joke’, it must be able to bridge the boundaries that separate the cultural realities that are its source. So understanding how hybridity mediates the experiences of multicultural society becomes important. This raises questions about the relationship between the aesthetic dimensions of the work and its context, particularly those associated with national or ethnic identity and sociopolitics. Dialogical hybridity becomes a revolutionary strategy capable of serving as the means for constructing new identities in a multicultural world and, like syncretism to which it is related, its role can be understood as a way to negotiate the ever shifting reality of a multicultural society.
Syncretism provides a model for understand the process of constructing reality in the face of multiple possibilities. As a process, syncretism has the advantage of not implying fixed elements but association of disparate terms capable of altering meaning depending on circumstances. Syncretic works possess permeable boundaries suggesting not an absolute difference between self and other, representation and what is represented. The resulting work/image/text emphasizes how each is defined by its relationship to the opposing term and this shift of focus from distinction to relationship blurs the separation between the pairs of related terms. Exploitation of this tension between relationship and difference becomes a primary strategy of postmodern discourse. I would argue that this idea of partial co-existence provides an important way to understand dialogical hybridity’s mediating function as the key condition for negotiating the multitude of differences that we, as citizens of the developing global society, encounter on a daily basis while syncretism provides another way to understand the implications of the hybrid form of this work.

So the dialogical practice of hybridity becomes a form of resistance to the dominant culture and so, I would argue, provides a powerful strategy in the process of constructing an identity that can serve to revolutionize the relationship between individual and society. Such practice does not reduce the work to an aesthetic sign thereby producing a loss of cultural meaning but instead functions as an elaboration of meaning in which the contaminating presence of hybrid elements destabilizes established meanings and so creates the possibility of new ones.

1 Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Enrique Chagoya San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2000 intro p. 1

2 http://www.oakland.com/enrique-chagoya-borderlandia-e193341 5/31/2010

3 Codex Espangliensis intro p. 2