Chicano Vibrations: Notions of Vital Materiality in Lucha Corpi’s Black Widow’s Wardrobe

AT FIRST GLANCE . . .

The cover of Lucha Corpi’s novel Black Widow’s Wardrobe (1999) features a woman’s illuminated torso (Fig. 1). Her face, from her mouth upward, is in shadows, as are her arms. Her hands emerge from the darkness and are represented in the act of pulling apart her robe to reveal her bare chest. There we see not her breasts but the outline of a house on fire, its flames reaching up to the woman’s collarbones. However, what at first looks like a house also looks like a spider, with the house’s central cupola standing in for the spider’s head and the far-reaching flames extended like spider legs. Then again, the incandescent image bears the same outline as La Iglesia de la Conchita, the sixteenth-century church in Coyoacán, a neighborhood in Mexico City, at which La Malinche, Hernán Cortés’s indigenous mistress, reportedly worshipped (Fig. 2).

Each of these images—house, church, spider—correlate with the novel’s plot, which features a protagonist, Licia Lecuona, also known as the Black Widow, who kills her husband. Licia believes herself to be the late twentieth-century reincarnation of La Malinche, and her final act in the novel is to set fire to her own house in Oakland, California. The enigmatic cover image, however, suggests philosophical themes beyond this plot. It recalls Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s assertions in Nature that the “nature in us must have some relation to the nature outside of us” (206). The cover image presents a figure both in and of its world—not
Fig. 1: Cover Image of Black Widow’s Wardrobe (1999). This cover photo is reprinted with permission from the publisher of “Black Widow’s Wardrobe” by Lucha Corpi ©1999 Arte Público Press—University of Houston).
a subject separated from its surroundings but a being materially imbri-
cated in her built environment, much like a spider who inhabits a struc-
ture crafted from her own bodily secretions. In the cover image, the
spider-house-church is superimposed on the woman’s torso, and yet it
glows as if from within. The cover image thus suggests that the nature outside the woman bears some relation to what is inside her, being one and the same.

Merleau-Ponty was moving toward articulating a deep physical connection between the human and nonhuman in the lectures collected in *Nature*, delivered near the end of his life. *Nature* has received considerable attention from scholars engaged in the turn toward a new materialism, scholars such as the political philosopher William Connolly, who uses the later Merleau-Ponty as a staging ground for what Connolly calls a “philosophy of immanence” or “becoming” (178).¹ For Connolly, Merleau-Ponty’s depiction of humans as not just connected to their physical environment but as forming integral parts of it grounds a specific idea of the universe as being sustained by “uncertain exchanges between stabilized formations and mobile forces”; that is, by the motion and interaction of matter, out of which new matter and new forces emerge (179). Connolly’s “immanent materialism” is foundational to his theory of progressive political change, and the catalytic interactions central to his and Merleau-Ponty’s work ripple throughout *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*.

The cover image offers an initial illustration of the connections the novel draws across time and space. I highlight and expand on those connections by using *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* as a case study for how new materialist philosophies can help articulate a new mode of *chicani*dad, one that accounts for questions of identity, political engagement, and cultural production. In the novel, connections are metaphysical, such as Lecuona’s belief that she is the reincarnation of La Malinche, but they are also empirical, as evidenced in the very concrete story of pre-Columbian artifacts that structures the novel. That story centers on Juan Gabriel Legorreta, an anthropology professor at UC Berkeley who heads a group of smugglers engaged in the illegal trade of primarily Aztec and Mayan relics. Other characters include Legorreta’s wife, Isabel, who is also Licia Lecuona’s sister-in-law, and Peter, Isabel’s brother and Licia’s alcoholic, abusive husband. Gloria Damasco, the Chicana detective who is the main protagonist of the story, is assigned to protect Licia after her release from prison and, in the course of investigating recent attempts on Licia’s life, discovers Legorreta’s smuggling operation. Things become even more complicated when Gloria comes to understand that the stillborn twins Licia delivered while in prison
were actually not stillborn but sold to the Legorretas, who could not have children of their own. While such a dramatic and emotional plot does not immediately suggest the philosophical concerns outlined above, and it is not entirely clear how those concerns are relevant to the study of migration, in what follows I aim to bring these three concepts—melodrama, philosophy, and migration—into productive conversation in a way that will underscore a new type of chicanidad.

Black Widow’s Wardrobe is part of Corpi’s Gloria Damasco series, which includes three other novels: Crimson Moon (2004), Eulogy for a Brown Angel (1992), and Cactus Blood (1995). Corpi is also a poet and an author of children’s books, but of all her work the Damasco series has garnered the most critical attention. For example, in his foundational study of Chicana/o detective fiction, Ralph Rodriguez understands the Damasco series as an effort “to better understand how history and memory shape identity and to gauge their corresponding impact on political movements” (55). Other scholars have followed similar lines of inquiry. Svetlana Tyutina, for example, reads Black Widow’s Wardrobe as part of the larger Chicana feminist project of recuperating a feminist La Malinche from the denigrations of patriarchal historiography. Carol Pearson similarly reads the entire series as a recuperative project, situating the Damasco novels in what Pearson identifies as a Chicano oral tradition invested in preserving communal memory, and seeing Damasco herself as exemplary of the Chicana feminist struggle (38).

While Rodriguez addresses such feminist themes, he is more interested in Corpi’s interventions in the hardboiled genre. In her study of the Damasco series, Judy Maloof likewise argues that queer private eyes and detectives of color are changing the genre, and that Corpi and writers like her “challenge assumptions about race, gender, criminal activity, and culture represented in the hard-boiled tradition of authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler” (n. pag.). Similarly, Sara Rosell reads Latina detective fiction, including Corpi’s, through a postcolonial lens, seeing value in its articulation of a marginalized point of view.

Whereas Rodriguez, Maloof, Pearson, Tyutina, and Rosell foreground minority subjects and subjectivity, I approach Corpi from a slightly different perspective. Taking my initial inspiration from Connolly and Merleau-Ponty, I am not interested in Damasco and her adventures as reflections of Chicano/a struggle. Certainly those things matter, but they matter as instances of matter. In other words, I want to use Black Widow’s
Wardrobe as an occasion for thinking about how identity matters in ways that differ from the expectations of Chicano/a studies.

Migration, the guiding principle behind new materialist ideas, provides a way of understanding these matters of mattering. Migration involves a host of extenuating political circumstances, but it is at its core about movement. The characters in Black Widow's Wardrobe move; that is, they travel, as do the relics that Gloria helps return to Mexico. It is important to study this parallel migration of people and objects, not in order to make an argument about migrant political subjects but, in fact, to do the opposite. Following Jane Bennett’s lead in Vibrant Matter, I want to posit migration as an instance of the larger field of matter and motion out of which chicanidad emerges. A migrant, in this context, can be a pre-Columbian artifact, a detective traveling to Mexico, or a battered wife imagining herself oscillating between sixteenth-century Mexico City and twentieth-century San Francisco. Movement is the common thread that draws these experiences and agents together.

Black Widow's Wardrobe imagines the relationship between people and objects somewhat differently. For example, when Dora, Gloria’s partner, tells Mario, their liaison in Tepoztlán, “We Chicanos are like the abandoned children of divorced cultures” (148), she establishes a metaphorical relationship between Chicanos and the pre-Columbian treasures Mexico neglects. I read those treasures, not as symbols of chicanidad, but as part of the very same vital materiality, to borrow Bennett’s term, that constitutes Chicanos. In looking at them in this way, I am engaging in a kind of surface reading similar to that advocated by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus. Best and Marcus argue for attending to “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible” and for looking at rather than through the surface of a text (9). They are “dubious that literature or its criticism can explain our oppression or provide the keys to our liberation,” and so, for them, the stakes in surface reading lie in figuring out “why literary criticism matters if it is not political activism by another name” (2). Sharing their motivation and skepticism, I turn to objects and migration in Black Widow’s Wardrobe as a radically different model for thinking about Chicano things.

Black Widow’s Wardrobe imagines things much like Bill Brown does in his book A Sense of Things (2003), a germinal text in the field of “thing studies.” Brown explains “how things become recognizable, representable, and exchangeable” (4). He examines American literature
from the turn of the last century that explores “how and why we use objects to make meaning, to make or remake ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies” (4). Brown’s “sense of things” refers to a “sensation of thingness” as well as “an existing set of relations” between subjects and objects (17). This relationship between subjects and objects is precisely what I am not interested in here, however.

By way of explaining what I mean by “Chicano things,” I turn to Jane Bennett who, echoing Brown, notes that things “can be fascinating to people and can thus seem to come alive.” Deviating from Brown, however, Bennett goes on to ask if “this evanescence [is] a property of the stuff or of people” (10). For Brown, things are opaque and are interesting because of the ways in which people relate to them. Bennett, on the other hand, takes things on their own terms as part of a larger project of decentering human subjects in the political field. Bennett is interested less in how people relate to things and more invested in showing how humans are really just a confederation of smaller things. Humans and things, subjects and objects, are not entirely distinct for Bennett, who argues that such an understanding can “reshape the self and its interests,” thus grounding a more ethical politics (122).

Another distinction between the two thinkers is Bennett’s desire to move away from a view of things as fixed entities toward a vision of matter as energy and force (20). Bennett’s emphasis on motion, which she also terms variously as vibrancy or vitality, makes her especially useful for my analysis of migrating subjects and objects in Black Widow’s Wardrobe. I situate my reading of the novel at the critical crossroads where Bennett’s work intersects with Connolly’s and that of Diana Coole. That intersection represents one very thin slice of a vast and rich theoretical terrain populated with thinkers associated to differing degrees with object-oriented ontology, a branch of speculative realist philosophy that resists the privileging of human subjects over nonhuman objects. While such an approach makes possible a nonmetaphorical reading of Black Widow’s Wardrobe’s smuggled artifacts, Bennett, Connolly, and Coole all insist on the application of those ideas of interconnectivity to human political and social life.

Their insistence makes possible my own insistence on the significance of specifically Chicano things, which ultimately relies on an understanding of the Chicano body as situated both materially and his-
torically. Diana Coole supplements Bennett’s ethics of humans as confederations of vital things with an attention to subjectivity and the physical human body. Like Bennett, Coole imagines matter as “lively materiality that is self-transformative” (“Inertia of Matter” 92). From this notion she presents a vision of the body as “a field rather than a machine, its behavior being produced from a system of emergent motor powers” (“Inertia of Matter” 103). Coole imagines the body as a “future-oriented but open organization” whose form is not fixed but immanent, always constituting and reconstituting itself. Central to Coole’s thinking is Merleau-Ponty’s idea of matter as a system of folds and whirls emerging in space and time, as opposed to Cartesian ideas of matter, which are based in Euclidean geometry and rely upon the separation of mind and matter.

Subjectivity, in this context, takes shape as a set of “contingent capacities for reflexivity, creative disclosure, and transformation that emerge hazardously within the folds and reversals of material/meaningful flesh” (Coole, “Inertia of Matter” 113). To think of chicanidad in this way—as an embodied relationship to the world, at once a confluence of particulars while also part of a universal swirl of stuff—is to decenter the self. Thinking of ourselves as instances of vital, shifting, moving matter dramatically alters conversations we might have about ethnic identity and minority subjects. To begin with “an embodied humanity enveloped in nature, rather than as external to [the] inert stuff it dominates” brings us not to a political arena of rights and laws but to “a field of competing forces, strategies, reversals, and subterfuges that have incessantly to be finessed, interpreted, and negotiated from within” (113). From the perspective of Bennett and Coole, a notion of the Chicano body becomes useful not as a metaphor of the subjected self but instead for what it pulls together and catalyzes, for what it aggregates, for what it moves.

Bennett’s notion of congregational and distributive agency clarifies my use of moving objects and subjects as models of chicanidad, as her pressing question—“How would an understanding of agency as a confederation of human and nonhuman elements alter established notions of moral responsibility and political accountability?” (21)—is, more or less, the same question I pose to Black Widow’s Wardrobe: what kind of argument is this novel making about Chicano/a identity and politics if we read chicanidad as a confederation of things? Bennett is careful to
argue that privileging congregational or distributive over atomistic or individual agency does not vitiate ethics or social justice. Connolly, a political scientist known for his theories of pluralism and democracy, puts the imperative to social justice more precisely: “The idea seems to be, again, to consolidate attachment to this world as we ourselves interpret it to be and to overcome the tendency to resent the veritable minoritization of the world that is taking place at a faster pace today” (196). A progressive politics requires, in other words, that we understand our own deep attachment to the world, to understand that other constituencies have different conceptions of the world, but that we are all still a part of the same world, the same swirl of matter. We all, that is, have stakes in each other’s stakes (196).

Connolly is invested in seeking out ways and means by which political subjects can be made aware of these stakes and connections; he locates such incipient awareness in moments of rupture and dissonance that make our connections visible, if only for a moment. Black Widow’s Wardrobe begins to articulate this kind of progressive interconnectivity through the relationships the novel traces between objects, relics, and people, and how they travel. It is their motion, their migration, that puts the plot in play and occasions the kinds of instantaneous ruptures and reformations that Connolly sees as transformational. These ruptures, I argue, open a window of possibility onto a new kind of Chicano political orientation, grounded in a radical rethinking of the body and subjectivity as emergent matter, as always in the process of becoming instead of always already subjected.

**Emergent Chicano Matter and the Rejection of Authenticity**

“Emergent” is the word Coole uses in describing the stakes involved in reconceiving materiality as distinct from the Cartesian mind/matter separation and as more in line with Merleau-Ponty’s ontological folds. Matter is not just inert stuff; when folds touch, matter becomes “emergent, internally productive” (96). In explaining how exactly this happens, how the folds come together, Connolly describes the difference between immanent and mechanistic materialism: one billiard ball will move when another ball hits it, exemplifying “efficient causality,” an action that occurs for a visible, mechanical reason. “But emergent causality,” Connolly explains, “the dicey process by which new entities and
processes periodically surge into being—is irreducible to efficient causality.” This is because emergent causality “is a mode in which new forces can trigger patterns of self-organization in a thing” (179). As a result, Connolly asserts that new things, including political formations, can emerge in the wake of such reorganization.

The human body, Coole explains, is one place among many where such new things emerge. The body “incarnates material capacities for agency” (“Inertia of Matter” 101). Bennett puts this much more succinctly when she explains how “eating constitutes a series of mutual transformations between human and non-human materials” (40). “A particular edible,” she continues, in a more grounded rendition of Connolly’s emergent causality, “can also act as an ‘assemblage converter,’” by which she means that it inclines an assemblage, or collection of things, in a particular direction (42). Stated differently, food produces effects by way of linked reactions. Bennett specifically refers to metabolism as a clear example of how “the outside and inside mingle and recombine” (50). Food catalyzes effects; it merges with other matter; it “enters into what we become” as it moves through our bodies (51).

The recurring idea across all three thinkers is that humans are not apart from nature but a part of it, constantly interacting with and transforming it. Humans are an ever changing part of the perpetual migration of matter, as Bennett’s chapter on food illustrates. Her examples contextualize my reading of the folds in Corpi’s description of what happens when Gloria eats a jalapeño pepper. A few hours before visiting Sister Rosa, a suspect in Licia’s attempted murder and a psychic with whom Gloria has made an appointment for a past-life regression, Gloria stops for lunch at her favorite taquería. Biting into a jalapeño, Gloria felt her “heart beat with renewed fervor” (48). Later, feeling queasy during her conversation with Sister Rosa, Gloria begins to regret “having had so many jalapeños earlier” (58). Once home, she feels better after vomiting (61). Her mother’s friend Nina, who had gone to Sister Rosa’s with her, tells Gloria over the phone, “It’s just a cleansing, a purging of bad karma,” but Gloria thinks, “that probably carne asada, not karma, was the culprit” (64).

Sarcastic pun aside, during her visit with Sister Rosa, Gloria does have a vision of herself, first climbing out of a dark hole then flying through the night sky. Gloria’s visions, which she refers to as her “dark gift” (10, 34, 35, 191), play a significant role in all her adventures; but
here they are interestingly paired with the jalapeño, an iconic Mexican food. Before falling into this particular vision of flight, Gloria hears Sister Rosa tell her that the spirit of both the owl and the fox inhabit Gloria’s soul and that she and Gloria are united. “We are one,” Sister Rosa says. “I cannot harm you, nor you me” (55). The implication is that Gloria is a traveling node on a vast network of time and space. She has lived multiple lives in multiple incarnations—has been of land, of air, and of people, as well as one with the universe. The jalapeño, that prototypical, pre-Columbian pepper, has traveled through her body, opening her spirit up to these connections. It represents a moment of rupture for Gloria, an assemblage converter that helps Gloria to see both within and beyond her self. In the end, the thing becomes part of Gloria.

While Gloria and the jalapeño interact—circulating in, around, and through each other—Black Widow’s Wardrobe deals with issues of movement much less abstractly in the story of Legorreta’s smuggling operation. The novel dramatizes an ongoing, pressing problem for Latin American countries. According to Mexico’s National Institute for Anthropology, more than two million art objects were stolen from the country from 1997 to 2010 (Fausset). Many of these are destined for galleries and private collections, but some are returned. In October 2012, for example, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) returned over four thousand pre-Columbian artifacts to Mexico. The collection of plundered items was, officials believe, the largest single trove ever to be returned by the United States to a single country. Even though this was a high-profile case, smuggling like this is by no means uncommon or novel, as Janice Ayala, an assistant director with ICE, explains: “The plundering of cultural property is one of the oldest forms of organized cross-border crime and has become a worldwide phenomenon that transcends frontiers” (ICE par. 5).

The four thousand items were returned in what one anthropology blogger referred to as a “media circus” (Barford), which ICE officials called a “repatriation ceremony,” during which Ayala emphasized ICE’s commitment to “restitution” and to “combating the looting and trafficking of Mexico’s cultural treasures” (ICE). Black Widow’s Wardrobe, however, is less interested in ownership, authenticity, or patrimony than in teasing out the relationship between things and their surroundings. There is an implied difference, for example, between the “Santa Fe style” (31) in which Lester Zamora, Licia Lecuona’s lawyer, decorates
his house and the ceremonial objects Gloria finds in Sister Rosa’s office. Lester’s house is “Fashionable,” “decorated” with “Navajo rugs” and paintings by “popular Native American artists” (31), while Sister Rosa’s office contains “American Indian drums of various sizes, a corn cob pipe, a black Oaxacan incense burner with white ash in it, a box of kitchen matches, and next to it a large crystal jar filled with leaves” (54). Immediately apparent are the geographical distinctions the objects suggest: Lester’s are rooted in the southwestern United States, while Rosa’s objects are transnational. Beyond surface variance, however, the objects associated with Lester are showy and ornamental while the objects associated with Rosa show signs of use and integration into her daily life. These degrees of integration complicate the characters’ status in the novel’s moral universe. Rosa is a criminal seeking to take advantage of Licia, while Lester is Licia’s love-struck, law-abiding lawyer. Rosa and Lester seem to be clearly evil and good, respectively, but the novel muddies these moral waters with intimations of how much they instrumentalize their indigenous roots.

Legorreta, however, is in a completely different league from either Rosa or Lester. His home office features a “beautiful collection” (77) of “pre-Columbian artifacts and jewels in . . . softly illuminated glass cases” (76). Taking offense at Gloria’s equation of cultural and physical anthropology, Legorreta chastises her: “You Mexicans—Chicanos—you are so ignorant. You don’t value what you have.” Legorreta is an obvious villain, both for the way he holds artifacts hostage but also for his attempt to attach value to them. For Legorreta, objective value, of which Chicanos and Mexicans are unaware, is historical. His hubris is to monetize the material connection to the past he sees embodied in these objects.

Thus far I have been describing the different ways in which people relate to stuff, which is precisely the approach I announced I would not be taking in looking at Chicano things in Black Widow’s Wardrobe. Indeed, the novel’s argument unfolds not from the triangulation of Lester’s, Rosa’s, and Juan Legorreta’s perceptions of things but from its articulation and rejection of Legorreta’s notion of authenticity as a direct, material, and preservable (in illuminated cases) connection to the past. Gloria does snap back at Legorreta, criticizing his belief that “any Juan has the right to walk away with Mexico’s national treasure” (80), but the novel’s explication of “treasure” relies not on a linear historicity but on an understanding of history as circular. The novel uses
circulation and travel to make an argument about the positive value of things despite the impossibility of authenticity. Authenticity does not give things value in *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*; rather, things derive meaning from their movement through space and time. Things cannot remain in boxes; they must flow in and through their own temporal traces. Things, in *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*, generate value through their ability to traverse the folds of their own matter.

The fold is a moment that brings things together into synergistic instances of vibrant matter. In *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*, the fold is a place of emergent chicandad. An exaggerated example of this is when, before they are officially introduced, Gloria and Dora get into a car accident with each other (82). Gloria, aware that Dora has been following her, shifts her manual transmission without braking, causing her own car to suddenly stall, forcing Dora to hit her. From that accident a relationship develops between the two Chicana detectives, and they join forces to solve Licia’s case. Dora’s and Gloria’s is a literal collision, a bombastic instance of a generally more subtle chain of folds in the novel figured as repetitions. *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* hinges on a series of imperfect copies —failed repetitions —that never perfectly replicate a thing, but always repeat it with a slight difference, a slight difference that creates a space for, in my analysis, an emergent chicandad.

Two linked instances illustrate the significance that *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* places on these copies, on the connections between things and their traces. In the first instance, Gloria confiscates a “small package, wrapped in banana leaves” from Bernardina, Licia’s double-crossing maid. Inside is a large piece of jewelry featuring a profiled head and face made of turquoise: “A slanted jade eye stared from beneath an arched, silver-inlaid brow and elaborate plumed headdress” (103). Later, looking for insight into the artifact, Gloria finds “an illustration of a stone rubbing” in a book on Pre-Columbian art. On comparison, she discovers the rubbing to be “almost an exact replica: the ancient God Tepoztecatl” (108). In this moment when Gloria brings the jade-eyed god into contact with its trace in the book, she has a flash of insight as to its provenance. The indigenous Tepoztecas, worshippers of Tepoztecatl, live in Tepoztlán, a small town in the Mexican state of Morelos, near where Legorreta owns a ranch. Gloria realizes these connections as she studies an atlas and “begins to feel giddy” (108), feelings produced in part by Tepoztecatl’s travels and his confrontation with his own image.
Gloria’s feelings of giddiness become a compulsion to travel when she discovers Licia has fled to Mexico. Carmelo, Licia’s handyman, tells Gloria and Dora that he saw Licia writing on a pad before she left. When they find the pad, Dora does a pencil rubbing, revealing a flight number and the words “Conchita” and “Coyoacán” (139). Their act of translation, of rendering legible Licia’s hidden words, parallels La Malinche’s translation work for Cortés. The act of rubbing thus folds these four women together and catalyzes Gloria’s and Dora’s plans to travel immediately to Mexico City, where a colleague of Gloria’s employer, who happens to be from Tepoztlán, will aid them further. Just as a distant someone created the rubbing Gloria found in the book, she and Dora must make their own rubbing to get the information they need. Tepoztecatl and Licia’s writing are folded together as rubbed objects, creating a fold supporting Licia’s understanding of herself as the reincarnation of La Malinche, who rose to prominence in a world defined by Aztec cosmology, the same worldview that defines Tepoztecatl. Further, in addition to linking the two objects of rubbing, these two examples of Gloria’s detective work link the two moments of rubbing across time to the same place—Mexico City, and its environs—to which Gloria and Dora travel.

‘SAINT’ CHRISTOPHER

When Gloria tells her mother she is leaving for Mexico, her mother says, “I’ll ask Saint Christopher to watch over you.” Gloria does not “have the heart to remind” her mother that Catholic dogma no longer recognizes Saint Christopher as a saint. There is, however, no reason for Gloria to assume her mother does not know or has forgotten that Saint Christopher was stripped of his saintly power, along with many other legendary figures, when the Roman Catholic Church revised its calendar in 1969. In all likelihood, Gloria’s mother, like the large number of Catholics who continue to worship Saint Christopher, is cognizant of his official status within the church but chooses to be unaffected by it. Gloria muses, “But if things in Heaven worked as on earth he had probably been replaced, and his substitute might hear my mother’s prayers” (141). Gloria’s recourse to this “substitute,” however, while framing the novel’s use of repetition as a narrative evocation of Merleau-Ponty’s metaphysical folds, misses the larger point of Saint Christopher’s continued relevance.
His enduring significance speaks to the larger themes of identity, authenticity, and value that the novel is working through. Christopher, according to Catholic legend, agreed to carry a child across a river; the child, who turned out to be unimaginably heavy, is thought to have been Christ bearing the weight of the world. The fact that there is no evidence to corroborate the details of his legend, and the fact that the Roman Catholic Church removed him from their official calendar, does not deter individual churches from displaying statues of him by their main entrance, to oversee comings and goings. *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* offers readers two ways to conceive of Christopher’s authenticity, a word I use here to indicate the quality of being real or genuine: the church, for lack of evidence, has deemed Christopher officially *inauthentic*; but the fact of his worship is real and genuine, thus establishing his authenticity through the lived experience of his followers.

In Christopher’s case experience collides with documentation. That juxtaposition, which Gloria only alludes to, echoes the earlier juxtaposition of Rosa’s and Lester’s indigenous *stuff*. In each instance, the novel argues, use and interaction with the surrounding environment generate an object’s authentic value. Christopher is not locked in a lit box like one of Legorreta’s relics. Unlike Joseph—Christ’s father and current, official, patron saint of travelers—Christopher is free, having been removed from the official church calendar, from his official feast day (25 July). Liberated from such institutional confines, Christopher’s following remains steady as he and his story circulate freely amongst the traveling things he protects.

What matters in the novel is not whether or not Christopher is doctrinally authentic—Gloria’s glib dismissiveness signals that to readers—but how he continues to mean things in the world. In other words, what matters in the novel is how matter folds around Christopher and what happens when he meets his trace, as when Gloria hangs up the phone with her mother and turns immediately to Carmelo, who gives her a protective amulet, “a very small, worn-out leather sack” containing a green stone (141). In that instance, as the lay cult of St. Christopher intersects with a putatively indigenous spirituality, syncretic practices meet and form a fold in the novel.

This fold, and folds in general, depend upon the motion of matter; matter is always shifting and shaping meaning and value. Christopher may not be *officially* real, but he is *really* real in the realm of lived, world
experience. Christopher is a copy of sanctioned sanctity (Joseph), but he is a copy with a difference, and his circulation around his own point of origin grants him authentic value: authenticity accretes in distance from and motion around one’s starting point. That point, that original location, is significant, but motion must be involved for that place to have continued meaning in the world. Put differently, although we see how authenticity gathers around motion rather than rootedness — Saint Christopher facilitates movement and Carmelo’s stone gains power through changing hands—readers need to keep in mind that place still plays an important role in the novel. This idea, illuminated in Saint Christopher’s correlation to Carmelo’s amulet, underpins two other themes of repetition in *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*:

**Mapping Abstraction**

Maps are points of origin, but the significance of place emerges only through human interaction with space. The characters in the novel depend on maps to orient themselves in unfamiliar spaces, but the power of place exceeds the novel’s imperfect maps. Places always signify, for Gloria and others traveling in them, much more than the maps can document. Similarly, and most significantly in the novel, people exceed their documenting objects, as seen in the papers and history books that pale in comparison to the characters’ lived experiences, both past and present. The incommensurability of maps with space, or people with paper, is a red herring, however, distracting from the novel’s broader argument about the dynamic authenticity of migrating things.

One such migrating thing in the novel is Gloria’s compass. A compass is the material sign of human interaction with space; it symbolizes motion, direction, and change rather than a map’s static image of an unchanging landscape. The relationship between maps and Gloria’s compass embodies the competing notions of authenticity and value gathering in the novel around the opposition of stasis and transit. Gloria always carries her compass, a gift from her deceased father, on trips, along with her flashlight, phone, and gun (88). In addition to orienting her in physical space, the compass also forges a spiritual connection to her father and the past, thus orienting her in an emotional place. While it helps Gloria move forward in a linear fashion from point A to point B, the compass also functions as a symbol of return. Though she throws it out of a cave to distract her pursuers (179), the compass
makes its way back to Gloria at the novel’s end, found and returned by Dora and Mario (188). The thingness of the compass is thus represented as exceeding its symbolic value. Its total materiality, not just its simple function, saves Gloria from her pursuers, and its return implies a relationship between her and the compass that is comparable to the latter’s attraction to the magnetic pull of the North.

Gloria’s connection to her compass embodies a tension between lived and abstracted space that is also seen in the attention the novel pays to the confluence of natural and political spaces. Looking out the window as her plane descends into Mexico City, Gloria thinks about how Cortés and his men marveled at Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital upon which Mexico City stands, “unparalleled by any city in the old world in the sixteenth century” (143). She ponders how the modern space of Mexico City has incorporated the ancient spaces of Tenochtitlan and then her thoughts shift seamlessly to the city’s natural features: its nearness to sea level, its ascent up surrounding mountains, and the fact that the city is guarded by two volcanoes (143). Later, taking in mountain views extending beyond the Valley of Mexico, Gloria makes a similar move, shifting from thoughts of the physical layout of Cuenca to the shape of the Valley of Cuauhnahuac, which she saw during her vision at Sister Rosa’s.

Gloria’s spiritual connection to this land suggests that place has a power that exceeds both political and geographic space, much as the compass exceeds its symbolic function. The novel plays with this idea in exploring Tepoztlán’s official designation as a “Pueblo Mágico” by Mexico’s secretary of tourism, who defines a “magic place” on their website as “una localidad que tiene atributos simbólicos, leyendas, historia, hechos trascendentales, cotidianidad, en fin MAGIA que emana en cada una de sus manifestaciones socio-culturales, y que significan hoy día una gran oportunidad para el aprovechamiento turístico” (SECTUR par. 3). The secretary’s attempt to monetize magic through a domestic and international program aimed at increasing tourism is at slight variance with the novel’s use of magic. Mario calls Tepoztlán, his hometown, “magic and sacred” (153) while Gloria notes its “energy and . . . magic” (155). Nevertheless, both the secretary of tourism and the novel’s intrepid investigators rely on migration and movement to make a case for the power or magic of place.

Migration, in other words, makes magic, with “magic” signifying, in this instance, a kind of authenticity that can be neither mapped nor, as
with “Saint” Christopher, documented. The lists of dates and facts the Mexican secretary of tourism generates cannot compare, in the world of Black Widow’s Wardrobe, to Gloria’s spiritual vision and Mario’s experience of exile and return to Tepoztlán. Tepoztlán is a fixed point around which the other characters travel, and their travels generate the significance and value of the place. The novel’s emphasis on maps, like those Mario draws of the area, therefore calls attention to the incommensurability of space and place. A crucial symbol of this disjunction is the entrance to a cave included on Mario’s map, one that runs underneath the Lecuona family ranch (161).

Mario’s map, however, is incomplete, and when Gloria meets Isabel (Juan’s wife) in town, Isabel tells her that there is “another entrance to that cave” (165). In fact there are two separate caves that connect underground in a passage where, Isabel confesses, “Juan and my father . . . store . . . things” (165). By “things” Isabel means the pilfered artifacts, but she also tells Gloria that Juan has taken Licia to the cave. The caves meet underground in a fold where relics and persons are brought together, lexically as “things,” in an isolated and insulated natural space that Mario is unable to capture on his map. The map, furthermore, can only take the investigators so far: not only is it unfinished, but the actual space the investigators move through bears only a proximate relation to the world outside. When they are underground, Gloria, Dora, and Mario are unsure of what is above them, and much of their movement through the cave is based on intuition (168). When Gloria finally throws her compass away, she has to rely on the power of place to bring her ultimately to a safe space.

Maps are therefore a way for characters in the novel to connect to space, but the power of place derives from the free circulation of things through it. Things originate in places, the novel acknowledges, but to remain trapped at those points of origin thwarts the magnetic pull places have over things, and that things have over one another. The authenticity of things, in other words, derives from their freedom to move. This is the point Mario makes in his conversation with Gloria about his experiences in the United States. In his youth, Mario, bored with his life in Tepoztlán, ran away to Chicago but struggled to make a life for himself there. He comes to realize that Tepoztecos share with “Chicanos [and] most indigenous communities” the fight to retain “cultural equilibrium” as they move between communities (149). Mario’s
realization of the simultaneous particularity and universality of his experience comes only through his travels to another place; marking these experiences as “indigenous” and pulling Chicanos into the fold of indigeneity suggests that authenticity is a function of diaspora and syncretic change, not origin.

**Paper and People**

In linking a Chicana (Gloria) with an indigenous man (Mario), in other words, *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* makes an argument for Chicano indigeneity by positing diaspora as that which generates authenticity; the point here is similar to the novel’s earlier argument about “Saint” Christopher. Like Christopher, Gloria and Mario connect to people and places through embodied experience and not through maps (or Catholic doctrine, as in Christopher’s case); their travels allow them to carve out their own authentic places of connection. Just as artifacts cannot be kept in illuminated boxes, people, the novel argues, cannot be trapped in texts or limited by an uncritical faith in paper. For example, Sister Rosa promises Bernardina, Licia’s maid, a green card in exchange for finding a stash of “some papers and photos” (104) that Rosa believes Licia has taken from her. Sister Rosa preys on Bernardina’s vulnerability, while Bernardina allows her need for documents to cloud her judgment.

Both Bernardina and Sister Rosa see the “papers and photos” that Licia has in her possession as bearers of truth and freedom; Sister Rosa believes the papers will expose her partnership with Legorreta, and Bernardina sees them as the only way she will gain legal status in the United States. The documents they seek, however, reveal only lies and generate more confusion. After confronting Bernardina, Gloria finds the documents on her own in a secret compartment in Licia’s wardrobe. Among some cryptic letters and photographs, she finds two photocopies; one is a death certificate for Licia’s stillborn twins and the other “must have been handled quite a bit, or a poor copy made of it, for, without the aid of a magnifying glass [Gloria] was unable to make out most of the data” (107). Eventually Gloria pieces together the story: Legorreta and Isabel paid prison officials to fake the deaths of Licia’s children so that they could adopt them as their own. Since then, Legorreta has been engaging in the cross-border trafficking of drugs and artifacts. The documents lead Gloria only partway toward this discovery, how-
ever. They are confusing and illegible in places, offering partial truths or outright lies.

It is not only primary documents that muddy the waters in *Black Widow’s Wardrobe*. The novel also highlights the limitations of historiography and the narratives that other writers have constructed from similarly opaque material. For example, looking through contemporary histories about La Malinche written by Chicanas, Gloria realizes that representing “Malinche’s life accurately had to be quite a task, if not impossible. All the available information on her, complimentary or not, had been provided by men [many of whom] had quite an historic ax to grind with [her]” (97). Gloria’s mother and her friend, Nina, confront this difficulty firsthand while researching Malinche to aid Gloria’s case. “You know,” Nina tells Gloria, “Octavio Paz is a great writer, but even he calls Malintzin *la gran chingada*” (86). Gloria and her assistants realize that history books confuse as much as they clarify, distorting material to suit the needs of the writer.

Licia dwells on the consequences of historical bias when she asks Gloria why people believe the things they do. Gloria responds with the following: “I suppose we believe what historians tell us, if that’s what you mean. . . . We would get a rounder view only if all sides were presented, but that’s rarely the case” (120). All four women come to their own understanding of the old adage about history being written by the victor. Despite Gloria’s realization that in thinking about La Malinche all she can do is “speculate on the speculation of others,” the novel presents a counterpatriarchal historiography in the figures of Nina and of Gloria’s mother, who consult with librarians and conduct their own research. When her mother presents Gloria with “two old volumes in which she had bookmarked some passages with, respectively, a comb, a nail file, a pencil, and a variety of hairpins,” Corpi gives readers a compelling visual of women inserting themselves into narrative and thus history, creating a Chicana feminist fold where gendered, everyday objects meet the textual traces of historically patriarchal oppression (72).

The image of the women’s things wedged into library books is one way *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* argues that human connections to the past must be visceral and exceed the text; Licia’s story is different. When Dora tells Mario that Chicanos “are like the abandoned children of divorced cultures,” she is arguing for Mexicans to acknowledge Chicanos as part of their diasporic history, using the loaded language of paren-
tal love to make both an emotional and rational case. People find their place in the past, not through adequate counternarratives but through a deep affective connection to places, people, and things symbolized in the novel by Licia’s belief in her reincarnation. When in a deep trance, speaking as Malinche, Licia states: “I have been called a traitor to my people. . . . But who were my people?” (121). She offers her mother (who sold her to slave traders), as well as her Mayan and Tabascoan masters (the Aztecs and the Spaniards respectively), as candidates for “her people,” foreshadowing Dora’s argument that Chicanos are historical orphans. Licia’s reincarnation of Malinche—her visceral embodiment—stands as a counter to the distorting paper trails Gloria, Nina, and her mother try to follow.

The fullness of human experience, Black Widow’s Wardrobe suggests, cannot be found in books alone, since it is also perceived in connective moments between things, in the folds. One such fold happens when Gloria finds Licia hiding in her wardrobe. The wardrobe comforts Licia; it puts her to sleep in times of distress; she keeps her most prized possessions in it. It is also a touchstone, the place where she can transform herself, where she can “live the life of another woman who’d been dead 463 years” (123). The wardrobe is a fold where Licia can access her other self, her other life, and in that meeting we see histories of Chicana oppression and possibilities for progress. Gloria’s gun serves a similar function for her. Arming herself before setting off for Legorreta’s caverns, Gloria notes that “the gun became an extension of [her] hand and the caliber of [her] conscience” (162), a wonderfully alliterative phrase in which the repetition of the hard “c” mirrors the gun’s repetition of—and connection to—her body. Both Licia and Gloria are alternately comforted and empowered by things they see as extensions of themselves, a specific instance of the novel’s broader strategy of offering the lived experience of the past as an alternative to history books and objects as connected to—or perhaps constituting the basis of—human ontology. In doing so, Black Widow’s Wardrobe argues that history and ancestors cannot be locked in words. They and their stories must travel.

AGENTS OF RETURN

Things in Black Widow’s Wardrobe, including humans, migrate across time and space. They are smuggled across borders; they leave their homes to come into adulthood in foreign cities, and they leave
their bodies for spiritual visions that connect them to the folded flesh of the natural world. These travels sometimes have clear destinations, but often not; often they are as much about return as they are about departure. Travel in the novel is about repetition, about reiterating the moment of arrival. Thus, books repeat reality, maps repeat space, and paper repeats people, but not as fully as Licia repeats Malinche. While imperfect representations, these copies, these iterative instances, nonetheless create a sense of rupture, a fleeting awareness where the points of the fold meet but do not match. *Black Widow’s Wardrobe* is a series of moments where copy meets the real thing, creating a fold that vitiates the stranglehold of linear time, as with Licia’s reincarnation or the jade-eyed artifact’s timeless power to pull Gloria across space.

At stake in all this circulation and repetition is whether or not Chicanos are imperfect copies of Mexicans or something else altogether. That question is as old as Chicano/a studies itself, but I would like to reimagine it here: can we think of Chicanos as a new temporal, material formation emerging from a series of ontological folds, and what would we gain from that approach? Chicanos may be, as Dora tells Mario, historical orphans seeking love from “an absent neglectful parent,” but they are also, according to *Diario de Morelos*, the local newspaper, “heroes” who “had saved the nation from being looted of its national treasure” (147). The front page of the paper “showed a photo of Mario and Dora, holding some of the pre-Columbian pieces [they] had seen in the cave” (187). The language of the description makes it unclear whether they are each holding separate items, or if they are holding things together. Either way, the ancient things unite old and new, as contemporary indigenous communities, embodied in Dora and Miguel, meet and mingle over a Mexican artifact, a thing whose lively materiality has brought them together.

We can read this as an assertion of Chicano indigeneity and authenticity, yet there is a certain irony in having Chicanas, the orphans of culture, be the keepers of the Mexican national treasure and the primary agents responsible for its return “home.” The novel invites us to put a little pressure on this irony in one of its final images. Along with a good-bye note, Licia gives Gloria her gold *arracadas* that Gloria had seen her wear every day during their time together (190). *Arracadas* are a kind of hoop earring characterized by intricate detail and often elaborate, interlocking networks of loops (Fig. 3). In the novel’s last scene, as
Gloria watches Licia’s house burn, she feels “the coldness of Licia’s gold arracadas brush the skin on [her] neck” (193). The changing temperature introduced by the earrings suggests their vital materiality, their sensitivity to and imbrication in the physical world. Their involuted loops and swirls intimate a similar enmeshment, a materialized argument against authenticity and primacy.

The arracadas thereby suggest, as does the novel as a whole, a chicanidad that is always already emergent, always in the process of becoming itself. Such constant catalyzing refutes notions of originality, finding authentic value instead in change over time. Through this lens, chicanidad shifts from being a condition of abject subjectivity to being a historically and geographically specific confederation of matter coerced into a particular relation to the world. Chicanas and Chicanos have shared points of origin but generate enduring value by moving through and interacting with other confederations of matter. Articulated more concretely, such a notion of emergent chicanidad as I am drawing from Black Widow’s Wardrobe supports political attention to the network rather than the self, a focus on interconnection and collectivity rather than individual rights. Of course Chicanas/os are no strangers to collective political organizing, but assuming an emergent chicanidad rede-
fines the political subject as human/nonhuman assemblage. It asks us to consider ourselves not as subjects engaged in agonistic struggle with Anglo America but as instances of harmonious being in the world. Political struggle looks very different from the perspective of an emergent chicanidad, and so, perhaps, from such a position new political solutions might emerge.

NOTES

1. New materialist philosophers draw on scientific research just as much as they do on Merleau-Ponty, Spinoza, and others. Connolly, Brian Massumi, and others working in this vein have been taken to task for their supposed misappropriations of science (see Leys and Papoulias, e.g.), but at the core of their reappraisal of the real is a laudable desire to understand the body as free from the ideological constraints of cognition. They aim to demonstrate how the body can sense certain things that the brain cannot know and the mouth cannot speak. Central to this idea, as Coole and Frost explain in their introduction to their edited collection *New Materialisms* is an idea of matter as indeterminate rather than fixed, as having an energy and texture derived from evolving interactions between animate and inanimate objects. From new materialists like Connolly, I take the idea of matter as an emergent force whose constant shape-shifting underpins, in Coole’s and Frost’s words, “subjectivities being constituted as open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes” (10), or, put another way, as agents always already capable of experiencing and affecting change.

2. As Coole explains it, Descartes, breaking from Aristotle, imagined matter as “devoid of animistic or human spirit” (95). Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, imagined matter as a great mass of something he called flesh, which was divided into folds. Out of these folds emerge physical nature, life, and mind. Merleau-Ponty imagines no distinction between the three, seeing them as instances of the same flesh. He himself writes, “To have a body is to possess a universal setting, a schema of all types of perceptual unfolding and of all those inter-sensory correspondences which lie beyond the segment of the world which we are actually perceiving. A thing is, therefore, not actually given in perception, it is internally taken up by us in so far as it is bound up with a world, the basic structures of which we carry with us, and of which it is merely one of many possible concrete forms” (326). He imagines life and perception, in other words, as an endless series of folding and unfolding flesh.

3. Bennett uses “vibrant matter” to indicate material in motion, with its own internal energy. See note 2 for more on the genealogy of the fold.

4. By “emergent” I mean to indicate a chicanidad that is not a static object in the world, defined by history or geography, but a mode of being in the world, a quality that is always in the process of becoming itself.
5. I am drawing here on the work of Yi-Fu Tuan, whose germinal *Space and Place* (1977) was one of the first geographic studies to assert the significance of human experience of place. “‘Space,’” he argues, “is more abstract than ‘place.’” In Tuan’s analysis, “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. . . . From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place” (6).

6. “A place of symbols, legends, history, of daily life and important events that transcend the quotidian; in short magic emanates from each of its socio-cultural aspects and offers great opportunity for increasing tourism” (my translation).

7. Malintzin is a variation on Malinche; chingada is Mexican slang for “fucked.” Paz traces the Nahuatl etymology of chingada in his essay “The Sons of La Malinche” collected in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*.

**WORKS CITED**


