

in her essay "Postmodern Blackness" provides relevant insight. Hooks's argument would support Jottar's use of postmodern strategies to foil an overly rigid, static reading of border identity.³⁷ But hooks cautions that the facile deconstruction of identities and master narratives precludes the recognition that these narratives suppressed a voice yearned for by African Americans and other oppressed groups. Eloisa de Leon in a paper "Presente," about her role as performance curator at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, echoes this need as she writes about the importance of voice: "I see my work primarily guided by one essential thing: a need for REPRESENTATION."³⁸ Unfortunately, however, the voice allowed to African Americans, to de Leon, and to others who have been silenced by the dominant culture is often a voice circumscribed by the very expectations of that culture. Deconstructive strategies can provide a useful critique of these essentialist expectations. However, hooks argues that this critique of essentialism should not be coupled with a blanket dismissal of identity politics but with a discussion of the specificity of individual legacies. Like other feminist critics she advocates an embodied position, stating that it is precisely "the authority of experience," that can lead to a developed, multifaceted, complex voice.³⁹

As de Leon acknowledges, this "identity is as tricky as a coyote." For instance, when a Mexican filmmaker models a character after her and photographs her residence so that set designers can reconstruct a Chicana home, she worries about being stereotyped. On the other hand, when she sees the set she feels that they have gotten it all wrong, and together with Comadre Maria Kristina Dybbro Aguirre she intervenes to redesign it according to their specific ideal of a Chicana home. Though she and Dybbro Aguirre do not think they can speak for all Chicanas, they do have a sense of how they want to be represented.⁴⁰

Perhaps the "authority of experience" can mitigate Jottar's fear that border art risks losing specific focus and becoming a hip commentary on appropriation and consumerist culture on the one hand, or becoming overly codified as a specific border identity on the other. For Las Comadres, the process of sharing specific experiences, of giving voice to memories often buried or silenced, precluded simplified notions of self. For many of us one of the high points of the collaboration occurred during the development of *La Vecindad* and *Border Boda*, when we sat around an open fire sharing our families' stories. The experience functioned as a way of beginning to explore the multiplicity of identities as well as the borders and dualistic prejudices that we had inherited. Trinh T. Minh-ha describes the efficacy of this response when she states that feminist consciousness is a process "by which one has come to understand how the personal—the ethnic me, the female me—is political. Subjectivity cannot therefore be reduced to a mere expression of the self. The identity question and the personal/political relationship is a way of rewriting culture."⁴¹

The retelling of stories by daughters or granddaughters in recent works by several members of Las Comadres involves this continuous reexamination and reinvention of (his)(her)story. To cite one example, Anna O'Cain's installation *There Are No Snakes in the Garden* is centered on two multi-image portraits of her grandparents, Harold and Madge, accompanied by four short audiotapes of stories about their lives in Mississippi (fig. 5). The first story presents the U.S.-Anglo monocultural viewpoint, as her grandmother admonishes her, "Lands alive Anna, there are no snakes in the garden." But Anna refuses

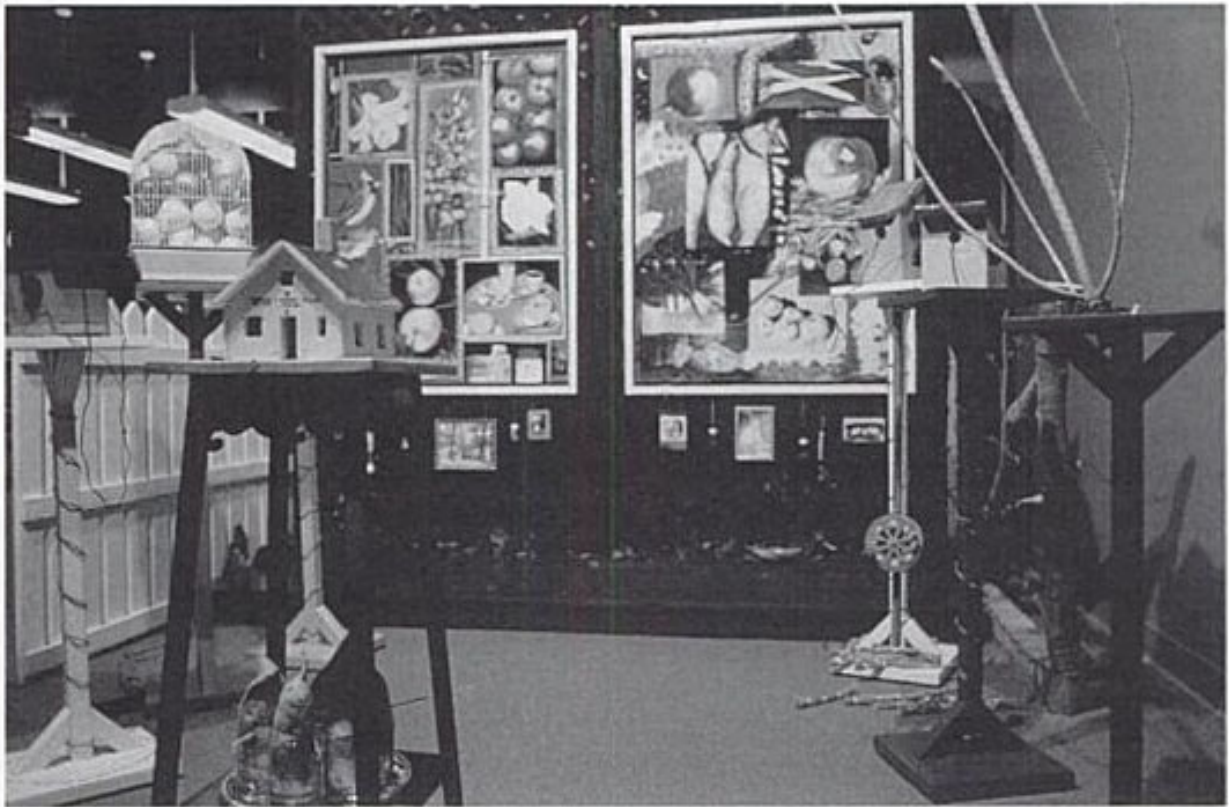


Figure 5. Anna O'Cain, "There Are No Snakes in the Garden" (1992), mixed-media installation with four audio recordings, in SITE, Tijuana, Mexico, 1993. Reprinted with permission of Anna O'Cain.

feigned innocence. She has seen the snake, the line dividing the garden, and uses this knowledge to examine the contradictions, the paradoxes of her southern heritage. The piece presents a series of dualities. Her conservative, fundamentalist grandmother is the only family member to give her a vote of confidence to go north; her courageous grandfather, who teaches her to hunt and fish, cowers in the face of integration. The work suggests that maturity involves learning to navigate these dualities. As O'Cain recognizes that racism is based on fear, she begins to deconstruct its hold. The recognition of the vulnerability of her grandparents also allows her to respect their warmth and nurturing. Instead of crossing the border north never to return, she can work with the ambiguities of her past. Had she made the decision simply to repudiate her southern heritage, she would have maintained the dichotomy between South and North. Instead, because she situates herself amid the dualities, they begin to loosen their hold.

As feminist citizen artists in the border region we are located in the midst of multiple codes. While recognizing "the authority of our experience" as ground, we also appreciate the diversity of border culture. I would argue that our function as translators is crucial. The border translator is able to establish relationships and create dialogue between differing cultural codes. In using the term *translator*, I am following the lead of Emily Hicks, who in her book *Border Writing* suggests that the border artist must function as translator because her position is multidimensional and deterritorialized, often requiring the reconstruction of events from the position of an outsider. She argues that there cannot be a strict division between original and translation. Instead, the border crosser as translator accepts the continuous parallax shifts, the fluidity of categories every time she changes