

Decoloniality through *Lo Cotidiano* in Delilah Montoya's Codex

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Delilah Montoya created *Codex Delilah: Six-Deer, Journey from Mexicatl to Chicana* for the 1992 exhibition *The Chicano Codices: Encountering the Art of the Americas*, which was held at the Mexican Museum in San Francisco (Figure 1). Curator Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino commissioned contemporary codices from twenty-six different artists, all of which reflect Mesoamerican precedents, thereby enacting indigenous histories and forms of knowledge production.¹ For Sanchez-Tranquilino and Chicana scholar Cherrie Moraga, the codices serve as a critical counterpoint to the many exhibitions that also took place in 1992 to commemorate the quincentenary of the “discovery” of the Americas.² Montoya's codex, along with the other works included in *The Chicano Codices* counters the Spanish colonists' destruction of codices in the effort to supplant indigenous culture and epistemologies with a colonial system of power. In this paper, I examine the multiple ways Montoya deploys Maya, Mixtec and Mexica imagery and histories, as well as female ways of knowing, to restructure and reframe the narrative of conquest and colonization.

Delilah Montoya (born 1955) grew up in Texas and Nebraska. Despite growing up in the Midwest, Montoya felt tied to northern New Mexico because of the longstanding presence of her mother's family in that region. Growing up, she spent summers visiting relatives in New Mexico, and eventually relocated “home” to Albuquerque.³ Her artistic practice as a photographer and printmaker is rooted in her exploration of ritual, the sacred, and the visual culture of Latino communities in northern New Mexico.⁴ Montoya has also consciously cultivated a *mestiza*, Chicana, and feminist perspective due to her experiences of strong matriarchs in her family.⁵ Her photographs and mixed media works often portray friends and family, and consider the distinctive aesthetics of Mexican-American popular and religious culture.

My analysis of Montoya's *Codex Delilah* uses a decolonial lens to analyze how the



FIGURE 1. Delilah Montoya, *Codex Delilah: Six-Deer Journey from Mexicatl to Chicana*, 1992. Copyright 2016 Delilah Montoya. Photograph by Katelyn Bladel.

artwork creates a new history of the conquest which privileges indigenous female experience and knowledge. In particular, I argue that Montoya's inclusion of nuclear weapons production in Albuquerque, and the female protagonist's negotiation of these weapons and their effects, reveal female indigenous knowledge and experience as a vital source for strategies of resistance to the continued effects of colonization. However, before delving into an analysis of this artwork, an explanation of its detailed narrative is necessary. Montoya worked in collaboration with playwright Cecilio García-Camarillo to produce the text included in the codex. The codex combines language and imagery to narrate the journey of a young woman across Mexico to Aztlán, the legendary origin city of the Mexica.⁶ Montoya employs multiple strategies to assert indigenous knowledges, connect histories and memories, and enact healing for both the earth and the colonized female body. The protagonist, a young indigenous healer named Six-Deer, leaves her Maya village in search of wisdom, traveling north to seek Aztlán. In her journey, Six-Deer also travels across centuries, moving from a pre-contact Maya village to the twentieth-century, and specifically to the symbolically significant year of 2012, which in the Maya calendar marks the end of an era.⁷

Montoya initially situates Six-Deer at the Late Classic Maya site of Palenque, in the highlands of Chiapas.⁸ In the first panel, Six-Deer asks her mentor Ix-Chel, "Will there be harmony among my people and respect for the earth mother?" In response, Ix-Chel directs Six-Deer to head north in search of Aztlán to find and consult with Crow-Woman, a wise healer who lives on a mountaintop. We follow Six-Deer's journey across seven panels as she traverses the Mesoamerican landscape, encountering female characters and experiencing, through their stories, the history of colonization. Montoya's use of Aztlán imbues her codex with the historical authority of a traditional origin story, asserting her text's significance as a redefining history of colonization. In addition, Aztlán's legendary location in New Mexico enables Montoya to acknowledge her own familial and ancestral ties to northern New Mexico, connecting Six-Deer's history with her own.⁹ Further, in the codex's final panel, Montoya uses a photograph of New Mexico's Sandia Mountains to geographically locate the culminating events of *Codex Delilah* (Figure 4).

The underlying problem Six-Deer attempts to resolve in her journey to Aztlán is the chaos of the universe, which Six-Deer's mentor Ix-Chel attributes to the quarrelling of the deities of the four directions. However, over the course of Six-Deer's journey, this chaos manifests as Hernán Cortés's violent conquest of the Mexica, and the subsequent oppression of indigenous peoples. For instance, in the second panel, Six-Deer finds out about the arrival of Cortés and the violent conquest from the figure Llorá-Llorá-Malinche, who cries out in Spanish, "The conquistadors are killing my children!" (Figure 2). Montoya uses Llorá-Llorá-Malinche, among other female characters, to construct an alternative history of the conquest from a female



FIGURE 2. Panel 2 depicting Lloro-Lloro-Malinche from *Codex Delilah*. Copyright 2016 Delilah Montoya. Photograph by Katelyn Bladel.

perspective. Lloro-Lloro-Malinche is Montoya's conflation of the historical figure Malinche, consort to Cortés, with La Llorona, a ghost of Mexica folklore who is wracked with grief and despair.¹⁰

Montoya emphasizes the location and date of each panel to connect with and reframe pivotal historical events: Lloro-Lloro-Malinche reframes the arrival of Cortés and the conquest of Tenochtitlan as a terrible massacre. The artist encodes the time and place of each panel in date glyphs and photographs of the relevant sites respectively, calling attention to Six-Deer's journey across space and time. Using Mayan glyphs for the dates and also for name glyphs throughout the codex acknowledges the complex and valid systems of recordkeeping and thinking that existed before the conquest, and establishes that Montoya seeks to honor the indigenous precedent to her contemporary codex, thus crafting a lineage for her work outside the realm of the Western-European canon.¹¹

As the codex progresses, the young healer Six-Deer also meets Lupe-Lupita, whom we recognize as the Virgin of Guadalupe both because of her familiar iconography as well as Montoya's inclusion of a date glyph for 1531, the year that the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego at Tepeyac Hill (Figure 3).¹² Lupe-Lupita explains to Six-Deer that the old religion and ways of life are "now called Christian," and that disguising indigenous tradition is a "matter of survival." Montoya's portrayal of Lupe-Lupita not only engages the traditional understanding of the Virgin of Guadalupe, but also asserts that the old ways of knowing and being still exist beneath the new façade of Christianity. For example, Lupe-Lupita bears the same Mayan name-glyph which also identifies Six-Deer's mentor Ix-Chel, whose name refers to the Maya moon goddess of midwifery and medicine (Figure 3).¹³ Six-Deer then continues north where she crosses the Rio Bravo with a female soldier for the Mexican Revolution, Lucha-Adelucha. Finally, in the penultimate panel Six-Deer meets La-Velia, a Chicana activist for the United Farm Workers movement on her way to Albuquerque for a protest. After explaining to La-Velia that she is seeking a sacred mountain that turns red at sunset, Six-Deer joins the activist on the road to Albuquerque in hopes that the Sandia Mountains are the sacred mountains, and thus, Aztlán itself.

La-Velia forms a vital link of solidarity between Chicana/o and indigenous identities. When Six-Deer asks whether she has arrived in Aztlán, La-Velia replies, "Many say Aztlán is right here in New Mexico, and others say it's just a state of mind." La-Velia's multivalent understanding of what Aztlán is reveals the connection Chicana/o communities establish with indigenous bodies of knowledge. Further, when Six-Deer asks whether La-Velia is an Indian, she responds, "I guess I am...We're *mestizos* who are proud of our indigenous heritage." With La-Velia's help Six-Deer finally reaches the Sandia Mountains. In the seventh panel Six-Deer discovers that her long-sought mentor, Crow-Woman, is the spirit of the Sandia Mountains, but cannot help the young healer restore harmony to the universe because of the deathly illness caused

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by the missiles buried in her breasts (Figure 4). Crow-Woman is weak; her face like a death mask. She tells Six-Deer, “The scientists have implanted missiles in my breasts...I can feel them multiplying, growing and spreading throughout my body.” Six-Deer performs a healing ritual, making small cuts in Crow-Woman’s breasts so that her energy will push the missiles out. She promises to stay with Crow-Woman until she is well again. Six-Deer hopes that once the wise woman is well that they can work together to restore the harmony and balance of the universe.

Montoya uses La-Velia and the other female figures included in the codex as metonyms for important events and collective cultural memories—the appearance of the Virgin to Juan Diego, the Mexican Revolution, and the United Farm Workers movement, for example. Doing so creates a history of Mexico that privileges the perspective of indigenous and *mestiza* women, acknowledging their intersectional experience of colonial oppression and gender.

Montoya’s reliance on indigenous epistemologies, forms, texts, and images appropriate indigenous tradition, and by doing so, reassert these epistemologies as valid, while also making connections between Chicana/o thinking and its indigenous roots. The inclusion of important female figures reveals a collective female memory of the conquest and its horrors. Further, the final panel of the codex references the



FIGURE 3. Detail from Panel 3 depicting Six-Deer and Lupe-Lupita, *Codex Delilah*. Copyright 2016 Delilah Montoya. Photograph by Katelyn Bladel.

particular history of nuclear weapon production in Albuquerque today, providing a concrete, local example of the military-industrial complex as a result of the colonization of indigenous peoples, knowledge, and land.¹⁴ By linking contemporary nuclear weapons production to the Spanish conquest of the Americas, Montoya asserts that colonization continues to have real and significant effects.

By revealing how the violence of colonization continues to impact both the earth and the female indigenous body through contemporary repercussions, Montoya asserts that colonization is not a past historical event, but rather, actively continues in the present moment. In this case, *Codex Delilah* demonstrates the connection between the Spanish conquest, and the harmful presence of nuclear weapons in Albuquerque today. This very connection between the long narrative of colonization and the present moment illustrates the concept of *coloniality*—a term which identifies the continuity of colonization to the present, and which is a central component of the critical lens of decoloniality.¹⁵

My analysis of the codex is rooted in the ideas of decoloniality, a way of thinking that considers the continuing implications of colonization today. Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano developed the term *coloniality* to refer to the continuing effects of colonization. These effects function in a system which continues to concentrate wealth in the hands of Neo-colonial powers by extracting resources, knowledge, and labor from the Latin-American and Afro-American “Others,” including indigenous peoples.¹⁶ Quijano, along with members of the modernity/coloniality research project at Duke and UNC Chapel Hill, recognizes that the racial hierarchy of colonial domination continues to perpetuate cultural and economic domination today through the destruction of indigenous culture and the colonization of knowledge.¹⁷

Decolonial thinking responds to the logic of coloniality by revealing the effects of colonization and by working to restore indigenous epistemologies and sources of power. Through a decolonial lens, I ask, why is it significant that Montoya links nuclear weapons production in Albuquerque to the long history of colonization? What does it mean that in this narrative, the power to restore harmony and balance rests in the hands of a young indigenous woman?

My initial impetus for examining Montoya’s work through the lens of decolonial thinking came from realizing that Mesoamerican codices and their production before the conquest encoded complex epistemologies, equally as profound, but substantively different from Western understandings of knowledge.¹⁸ For example, “legitimate” Western knowledge is strongly tied to the “logical” system of alphabetic script, texts, empiricism, and linear perspective as a system for representing space. Mesoamerican systems of knowledge instead prioritize the visual, iconic representations of space, and the narrative as an important component of cultural history. Thus, Montoya’s narrative codex format and specific references to Maya, Mixtec, and Mexica

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predecessors assert ways of understanding the history of the conquest grounded not in Western histories, but rather in indigenous and Chicana epistemologies. Art Historian Anne Marie Leimer has documented the specific details and appropriations by which Montoya's codex enacts the significance of the Maya codex as a repository of knowledge.¹⁹ In building on this previous scholarship, I consider how *Codex Delilah* connects the significance of the codex format with that of the Chicana and indigenous female body, revealing the efficacy of embodied experiences, female wisdom, and the negotiations of daily life as strategies of resistance.

To delve into Montoya's work from a decolonial perspective, and in particular, to analyze Montoya's commentary on nuclear weaponry and weapon production, an overview of the artwork's facture is necessary. *Codex Delilah: Six-Deer, Journey from Mexicatl to Chicana* comprises seven panels of handmade amate paper, which open in a traditional screen-fold format. Amate paper, handmade from fig bark, links the materiality of Montoya's codex to Mesoamerican precursors, which utilized either amate or animal skins.²⁰ Montoya uses a variety of media and techniques to construct the imagery and narrative, organized into four registers. The use of gouache, collage elements, and photographic printmaking transfer techniques enable Montoya to layer images excerpted from Mesoamerican codices such as the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, the Dresden Codex, and the Mixtec *Codex Zouche-Nuttall*.²¹ Montoya also incorporates prints by Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada as well as the original photographs and drawings she created for the project. Leimer emphasizes in her dissertation on *Codex Delilah* that this conceptual and material method of incorporating various kinds of imagery from across history parallels Montoya's effort to gather and connect histories.²² The act of including date and name glyphs derives from Mayan codices alongside Posada's imagery and Montoya's photographs of Chicana actors makes visible the connections that coloniality forges across space and time, and reclaims the narrative of colonization from a Chicana perspective. In addition, the dense and varied visual stimuli prompt the viewer to examine and explore the various texts, images, and glyphs, synthesizing the richly allusive content of the different registers rather than following the narrative in a passive manner. As the viewer actively pieces together visual and verbal cues to the narrative, she participates in the codex's representation of history and memory. Further, the various ways Montoya encodes information ensures that viewers achieve different levels of understanding based on their knowledge of English, Spanish, Mayan glyphs, Mexica cosmology, and colonial history. Thus, Montoya makes her work accessible to a variety of viewers, but also keeps certain knowledge legible only to indigenous or Chicana/o viewers.

Montoya's inclusion of *bacab* figures exemplifies the way her use of indigenous visual language enriches the narrative of Six-Deer and her retelling of history. The codex follows four different registers, each of which provides different kinds of information, utilizing different visual and storytelling strategies. The first register includes depictions of the figures known in Mayan cosmology as *bacabs*, four brothers known

as skybearers, each of whom is associated with one of the four cardinal directions and holds up a corner of the universe (Figure 2).²³ Leimer has shown how the *bacabs* deepen the narrative power of *Codex Delilah*; with each successive panel, and the mounting impact of coloniality, the *bacabs* become more chaotic, reflecting the chaos and destruction wrought by colonization.²⁴ Montoya's inclusion of the *bacab* figures comprises a direct appropriation from the Dresden Codex, prioritizing the indigenous perspective, and validates the Mesoamerican codex tradition as a valid way of knowing. Furthermore, it marks this object as being specifically for a Chicana/o audience and keeps some levels of information hidden and restricted from the uninitiated, thus de-linking from Western knowledge systems which prioritize the indiscriminate unveiling of knowledge of the Other.

Six-Deer's journey through space and time emphasizes the interconnectedness of events in the ongoing history of conquest. In particular, Montoya uses Mayan cosmology to reveal a fundamental connection between gender inequality and coloniality. Ix-Chel identifies that the central problem affecting Six-Deer and all peoples is that "the whole cosmos is at odds with itself. The quarreling of our deities of the four directions has put everything out of balance." As a solution, Ix-Chel directs Six-Deer to consult with Omecihuatl, the female side of the male-female god, cautioning her that it is critical that the female god know that "chaos and destruction" are occurring because of the fighting of her sons, the gods of the four directions. Ix-Chel's wisdom about the disharmony of the universe suggests that the conflict is related to gender inequality, especially if the female half of a male-female god is the one she wants to entreat for help. In addition to her thinking through the problem of gender inequality using Maya cosmology, Montoya also counters gender inequality herself by constructing the women in her codex as active agents in history rather than as passive vessels of tradition.

Montoya activates the female characters in the codex to create a female lineage and emphasizes women's epistemologies by having several characters share wisdom with Six-Deer. In the first panel, Six-Deer's teacher, Ix-Chel advises the young healer about the state of disorder in the universe, and as the codex progresses, Six-Deer receives key advice from Lloral-Malinche, Lupe-Lupita and La-Velia as well. As she travels through space and time, learning more about the changing state of her peoples and colonization, the way Six-Deer engages with each character shifts from confusion to careful listening, asking questions, and finding commonality. For example, when Six-Deer meets Lloral-Malinche, her first instinct is to tell the distraught woman to sit down, to rest and gain her composure, rather than to listen to the message Lloral-Malinche brings. Similarly, when Lupe-Lupita assures Six-Deer that the old ways are not destroyed but hidden under new appearances, Six-Deer questions her, saying "But I was told the invaders destroyed our gods and our old way of life." However, when Six-Deer meets Lucha-Adelucha and hears of her fight against the oppressors or "mad capitalist dogs," she recognizes that the oppressors the *soldadera*

speaks of are those who used to be called invaders and says, "I like what you're saying, it makes sense." Similarly, she asks La-Velia to explain the goals of the United Farm Workers movement and says, "I understand what you're saying with my heart." This shift in Six-Deer's language and responses to the women she meets indicates that the young healer is gaining wisdom as she travels. In the fifth panel, Six-Deer looks at her reflection and notices her eyes seem different. "Could it be that I'm learning to see truth?" By the end of the codex, Six-Deer listens carefully and has learned to keep her mind open to new information, and to understand the underlying structure of coloniality even as the names of the oppressors change.

I. Strategies of Resistance and the Indigenous Female Body

The story of Six Deer's journey represents the embodied movement and experiences through time and space of an indigenous woman, mother of a *mestizo* child, and later, as a self-identified Chicana. In addition, Six-Deer's journey to Aztlán, though mythical in its proportions and defiance of the bounds of time, is filled with references to embodied experience. The trail of footprints that demark Six-Deer's journey are an important visual element which leads us through the narrative progression of events, but which also operates as a physical index of her body. These footprints act as a record of Six-Deer's travels, but also enact them, allowing the viewer to imagine her progress along the path of footprints as we follow them to understand the story. In addition, in the third panel, when Six-Deer's feet begin to bleed, the footprints change to a red color. This change in color not only reveals the physical toll that Six-Deer's journey takes on her body but also emphasizes the physical act of walking over the land. This indexical record of movement and action both refers to the embodied experience of movement, and gives agency and power to Six-Deer's indigenous female body. In addition, the repeated index of the footprint and its specific references to movement create the sense that the codex is not only a story to be read silently but also in the manner of Mesoamerican codices, a series of cues for an oral performance of the story.²⁶

In addition to her footprints as embodied indices, Montoya asserts the reality of Six-Deer's body in another important way. When the young traveler learns of the conquest from Llorá-Llorá-Malinche, the agonized woman tells Six-Deer that she carries the child of the invader, who will be born *mestizo*, or of mixed Spanish and indigenous parentage. Upon hearing this, Six-Deer contemplates her belly and massages it (Figure 2). This gesture connects the conquest directly to the frontiers of the young girl's body. Although Montoya depicts no violence befalling Six-Deer, the inclusion of pregnancy is a direct reference to the exploitation of women's bodies both during the conquest and continuing today. Theorists of Chicana/o epistemology Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta explain how bodies carry the physical traces of the oppression of knowledge and cultures, quoting from Mayra Rivera-Rivera's essay within the same edited volume, "Bodies ... are the site where we can uncover

the ways in which ‘subjugated knowledge’ has been suppressed by both physical and rhetorical violence.”²⁷ By revealing the impact of colonization on the indigenous female body, Montoya’s work reshapes the narrative of conquest by depicting the violent nature of historical events that tend to be sanitized in the United States, in this case, represented through the young girl’s pregnant body.

Montoya’s connections between the bodies of indigenous women and the history of colonization participate in what decolonial thinker Linda Tuhiwai-Smith defines as the indigenous project of *Remembering*. The project of *Remembering* is one of twenty-five scholarly strategies Tuhiwai-Smith identifies as ways that indigenous researchers can reclaim knowledge and histories to support the goals of survival and cultural restoration. This remembering involves not only a remembrance of a history, but a “remembering regarding connecting bodies with place and experience, and importantly, people’s responses to...pain.”²⁸ Without histories that connect bodies to place and experience, events become naturalized, generalized, and acceptable. For instance, we in the United States may learn as children that “the Spanish conquered the Americas.” While other details may flesh out a more robust understanding of the conquest, this basic framework presents colonization as acceptable, or even neutral. Montoya’s participation in the project of *Remembering* interrupts this narrative by creating an individualized story of an indigenous woman, connecting her to the specific events of colonization, and to the present. In addition, there are subtle visual cues layered into the collaged imagery behind the principle events that remind us of the physical consequences of colonization. For example, in the second panel, Montoya includes a transferred image of a woman with smallpox, as well as a lynching, reminding us that Llorá-Llorá-Malinché’s grief, though it may seem exaggerated and even manic in her hysterical actions, is founded on overwhelming, accumulated trauma (Figure 2).²⁹ Thus, Montoya’s work connects the actions of Six-Deer to the grand narrative of colonization, connecting the pain and oppression of the colonized female body to historical events that tend to be sanitized and even celebrated in the United States.

In addition to the violation and trauma Six-Deer’s body suffers in her journey, García-Camarillo’s text also refers to small moments in which Six-Deer attends to her physical, bodily needs, or receives encouragement through embodied interactions with the other women she encounters. From the beginning of the narrative, Ix-Chel assuages Six-Deer’s anxieties through physical touches as the two healers’ warm interaction shows. Ix-Chel also gives Six-Deer a physical reminder of the embodied practices of healing: the sacred flint, which all the healers of her people have worn. The flint represents a collective body of knowledge and experience, and also provides a source of comfort for Six-Deer on her journey — at various points, she touches it or holds it when she feels uncertain. Further, Lupe-Lupita heals Six-Deer’s bleeding feet with caresses (fig.3), and Lucha-Adelucha holds the young woman’s hand as they cross the Rio Bravo together. Six-Deer also pauses at various moments to rest, to bandage her wounds, or to wash her face. These moments of physical care and respite provide a

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counterpoint to the epic journey across time and space that Six-Deer undertakes, connecting her efforts to gather wisdom and be a successful healer for her people with the small moments that comprise *lo cotidiano* — a concept Chicana scholar Ada María Isasi-Díaz defines as “the immediate space-time and place — of daily life, the first horizon of our experiences, in which our experiences take place.”³⁰

In further defining the concept of *lo cotidiano*, the quotidian, Isasi-Díaz elaborates that our experiences always take place as embodied experiences and that the choices and situations which *lo cotidiano* comprises are never neutral, but transpire in often unequal social structures. For those in uncertain financial situations, making the choices necessary to navigate *lo cotidiano*—what to wear, what to eat, how to get to work— necessitates more deliberation and worry than for others. However, Isasi-Díaz also discusses how power can arise from the navigation of *lo cotidiano* under straitened circumstances. She uses the example of Chicana women who repurpose one bus fare for two people by having one woman step on the bus, then quickly pass her ticket to the woman waiting outside. This strategic negotiation mitigates the necessary expense of transportation through supportive female communal ties. Similarly, by connecting Six-Deer’s epic journey to her embodied experiences of fatigue, hunger, and encouraging touches between women, Montoya asserts that these experiences are significant and also connects to the real experience of immigrants or workers whose lives are conditioned by physical hardship or difficult choices necessary for the basic project of survival.

Six-Deer’s interactions with various women as she journeys north culminate in her eventual arrival to the Sandia Mountains to find Crow-Woman wasting away from sickness (Figure 4). She assures Crow-Woman that she will stay beside her and heal her by using her sacred flint necklace to make small cuts on Crow-Woman’s breasts, and will make the cuts a little bigger each day until Crow-Woman’s energy pushes the nuclear missiles out of her body. This conclusion, in which Six-Deer performs a healing ritual and caresses Crow-Woman emphasizes the importance of the female body both in Six-Deer’s journey and in the conditions of coloniality. Crow-Woman is the elder whom Ix-Chel sent Six-Deer to consult in hopes of restoring the balance of the universe and healing her people, but she is extremely sick and thus unable to work for the harmony of the universe. This indicates that the chaos of the universe is tied to the health—or in this case, the sickness—of the female body. Leimer proposes that Six-Deer successfully begins the healing process for Crow-Woman because she has learned from the gestures of Ix-Chel and Lupe-Lupita the power of a healing touch.³¹ Crow-Woman embodies the damage coloniality has wrought not only upon the female body but also upon indigenous wisdom and the earth. The specificity of Crow-Woman’s location and ailment reveals that conditions of coloniality continue to manifest in measurable, significant ways.



FIGURE 4. Detail from Panel 7 depicting Crow-Woman and Six-Deer, *Codex Delilah*. Copyright 2016 Delilah Montoya. Photograph by Katelyn Bladel.

II. *Lo Cotidiano*, Crow-Woman, and Nuclear Weapon Production

Crow-Woman embodies the power and wisdom of the Sandia Mountains as well as that of sacred temples—both of which can be understood to be indigenous sites of knowledge and culture.³² Leimer’s analysis of the codex’s final panel (Figure 4) argues that the form of Six-Deer at right, with her hands clasped behind her back, standing in the sky above the mountains, but looking up at the mausoleum-cum-temple, serves to “illustrate the Mesoamerican conflation of temple with mountain as sacred container.”³³ However, beyond the idea of mountains in general, Montoya is careful to mark these particular mountains as the Sandia Mountains. Crow-Woman explains that she is “no longer the nourisher of life, but sickness and death itself” because “the scientists have implanted missiles in my breasts.” This information

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reveals that the wise woman's body and the mountain are one, and also draws attention to the contemporary and local siting of Crow-Woman. Montoya's inclusion of nuclear missiles at the climactic resolution of Six-Deer's journey calls attention to weapons reproduction as a specific way the logic of coloniality continues to operate in Albuquerque today, linking this contemporary reality to the destruction of indigenous ways of life and epistemologies.

Across New Mexico, nuclear weapon production and testing, as well as uranium mining and other affiliated activities have scarred the earth and contaminated water sources. While the environmental damage caused by nuclear weapons production affects all people, the most drastic impacts on land, water and health have often been confined to Native lands.³⁴ These lands are exempt from environmental protection laws, and Native governments frequently have no means to impose independent protective legislation. Scholars Susan Dawson and Barbara Rose Johnston elaborate that, "as a result, native lands...have become the site of choice for hazardous and radioactive waste disposal."³⁵ After the Trinity Site test of the first atomic bomb in 1945, a radioactive ash rained down in the surrounding populated area, contaminating crops, water sources, and homes. In 1945, Colonel Stafford Warren, chief of the Manhattan Project's medical section recommended that no test be conducted at that site again, because of the lingering presence of radioactive dust in populated areas. However, the government did not notify nearby inhabitants about the bomb test, nor inform them of the dangers of radiation.³⁶ Many of those who lived nearby, including Navajo, Pueblo, and Mescalero Apache peoples continue to experience unusually high incidences of rare cancers, and frequently, multiple cancer varieties attack individuals.³⁷ In 1979 at the northwestern New Mexico Church Rock uranium mining site located within miles of the Navajo Nation, a uranium tailings mill dam broke, releasing 100 million gallons of highly contaminated water into the Rio Puerco, the single water source for the Navajo and their flocks of sheep. The contaminated water caused severe injuries such as severely burned feet for those who unknowingly waded in the contaminated river. Some injuries required amputation due to complications and high incidences of cancer were reported.³⁸ These examples of nuclear weapon production and its severe impacts on indigenous peoples support Montoya's characterization of nuclear missiles as a continuing effect of colonization and a deep-rooted cause of the chaos present in the universe.

In 2005, Sandia National Labs covered a landfill containing volatile, high-level nuclear waste with only a layer of rocks and three feet of dirt, rather than the sealed containers that are federally mandated for high-level waste.³⁹ This landfill, known as the Mixed Waste Landfill, is located near the Sandia Mountains and Isleta Pueblo. Insects, plants, and animals in and around this area are susceptible to radioactive contamination because Sandia National Labs stored the waste improperly.⁴⁰ Although this case postdates Montoya's creation of the codex, it exemplifies the relevance of her commentary. Crow-Woman says that the missiles are buried deep inside her breasts,

and that she can feel them spreading throughout her body. As previously discussed, this information reveals that Crow-Woman is a figure for the Sandia Mountains, since that is where the production of nuclear missiles takes place—deep in the mountains, in facilities like Sandia National Labs. However, the specific nature of Crow-Woman’s affliction also emphasizes the real effects of nuclear waste and contamination: missiles buried inside Crow-Woman’s breasts, and spreading throughout her body, connote cancer, an illness directly associated with exposure to radioactive material. Crow-Woman represents the effects of coloniality at multiple levels: on the earth, in the form of environmental crisis, on the female body, and on indigenous epistemologies. Montoya shows the damage to the earth, women’s bodies, and indigenous knowledge to be deeply intertwined, and to manifest in specific ways as a result of coloniality.

Beyond drawing attention to nuclear weapons production and its ensuing effects on the earth and indigenous peoples, the conclusion of *Codex Delilah* holds further significance in its relationship to the narrative as a whole. By the time Six-Deer has reached Albuquerque and Aztlán, she has journeyed through centuries and walked over a thousand miles. Her single goal is to ask Crow-Woman to speak to Omecihuatl about the fighting between the gods of the four directions, in hopes that the balance of the universe may be restored. However, Crow-Woman is too sick to be able to handle such a concern: rather than seeking wisdom, Six-Deer must instead use her wisdom to heal Crow-Woman. Crow-Woman says, “*Estoy muy enferma,*” (I am very ill), but Six-Deer responds, “*Yo la curo,*” (I heal you). Here, Montoya emphasizes the power of quotidian actions as a strategy of resistance; it is this healing touch that begins to undo the damage of colonization. In many instances throughout Montoya’s female history of the conquest, women convey a healing and loving gesture in the context of daily life. Montoya’s repetition of these powerful touches and embraces reveal that the healing gestures of *lo cotidiano* persist as an important strategy of coping, survival, and resistance to coloniality, through female tradition, through the body, and across time.

Montoya leaves the ultimate result of Six-Deer’s quest unknown, never revealing whether Crow-Woman recovers and the young healer can finish her quest and return to her people. Leaving out the conclusion of Six-Deer’s quest instead emphasizes her healing ritual of making tiny cuts on Crow-Woman’s breasts (Figure 4). Because Crow-Woman is unable to contact Omecihuatl, power remains in the hands of Six-Deer, and in her healing gestures. The story concludes in the context of *lo cotidiano*, healing one particular woman’s illness rather than consulting the gods to achieve a shift in the balance of the universe. This narrative structure privileges Six-Deer’s ways of knowing and being as an indigenous woman, as well as her compassion for Crow-Woman. Further, this illustrates that quotidian actions and decisions can be a part of the ongoing effort toward decolonization. Finally, by leaving the story unresolved, Montoya allows it to speak to those who continue to search for justice.

DECOLONIALITY THROUGH LO COTIDIANO

Although Montoya produced *Codex Delilah* for an exhibition within the institutional structure of a museum and from the perspective of academic training, her work represents a detailed investment in indigenous systems of knowledge, such as that of the Mixtec, Aztec, and Maya. She devises meaningful ways to integrate these epistemologies into her work, and her appropriation of imagery is in solidarity with the original texts. Montoya's act of identifying nuclear weapons production as a specific, tangible example of coloniality has been little discussed, perhaps because her work is so dense with signifiers and encoded meanings. However, this connecting of histories calls viewers to develop a critical consciousness and examine the long roots of present day institutions. In particular, Montoya's codex exposes the continuity of coloniality by connecting the current presence of nuclear weapons to the long history of the conquest. Finally, Six-Deer's concluding ritual of healing demonstrates the power of the decolonial gesture, rooted in the healing touches of *lo cotidiano*.

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NOTES

¹ Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino, "Forward," in *The Chicano Codices: Encountering the Art of the Americas*, ed. Patricia Draher (San Francisco: The Mexican Museum, 2006), 3-7.

² Ibid.

³ Anne Marie Leimer, "Performing the Sacred: The Concept of Journey in Codex Delilah" (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2005), 184.

⁴ Leimer, "Performing the Sacred," 185-86.

⁵ Holly Barnet-Sánchez, "Delilah Montoya (b. 1955) Fort Worth, Texas," in *Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States*, vol. 3, eds. Suzanne Boiler and Deena J. González et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 170-71, quoted in "Biography," Delilah Montoya, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.delilahmontoya.com/Bio.html>.

⁶ Leimer, "Performing the Sacred," 16-17.

⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸ Ibid., 132.

⁹ Ibid., 184.

¹⁰ Ibid., 135.

¹¹ Michael D. Coe, "The World of the Maya Scribes," in *The Art of the Maya Scribe* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 89-90.

¹² Leimer, "Performing the Sacred," 34.

¹³ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴ For specific examples of the effects of nuclear weapons production in New Mexico, see discussions of the Churchrock uranium tailings spill, and the Sandia National Laboratory Mixed Waste Landfill, below. For a discussion of the economic and environmental effects of uranium mining on Navajo peoples in particular, see Stephanie A. Malin, *The Price of Nuclear Power: Uranium Communities and Environmental Justice* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

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15. Walter D. Mignolo states in his 2007 article “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Colony and the Grammar of De-Coloniality” that “In the past three or four years, the work and conversations among the members of the modernity/coloniality research project, decoloniality became the common expression paired with the concept of coloniality and the extension of coloniality of power (economic and political) to coloniality of knowledge and of being (gender, sexuality, subjectivity and knowledge), were incorporated into the basic vocabulary among members of the research project.” The members of the modernity/coloniality research project were Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Catherine Walsh, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Freya Schiwy, José Saldívar, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Fernando Coronil, Javier Sanjinés, Margarita Cervantes-Salazar, Libia Grueso, Marcelo Fernández Osco, Edgardo Lander, Arturo Escobar, and Walter D. Mignolo.

Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Colony and the Grammar of De-Coloniality” *Culture Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 451.

16. Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 545.

17. Quijano, “Coloniality of Power,” 549, 551-53.

18. Michael D. Coe, “The World of the Maya Scribes.”

19. Leimer, “Performing the Sacred,” 25-38, 95-183.

20. *Ibid.*, 105.

21. *Ibid.*, 97, 129, 141.

22. *Ibid.*, 106.

23. *Ibid.*, 118.

24. *Ibid.*, 134-35.

25. *Ibid.*, 150.

26. Garcia-Camarillo staged performed renditions of the story of Six-Deer in Albuquerque, but Montoya was not able to be involved due to her teaching positions elsewhere at that time. Leimer, “Performing the Sacred,” 324.

27. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, “Introduction: Freeing Subjugated Knowledge,” in *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 14-15.

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28. Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, "Twenty-five Indigenous Projects," in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 147.
29. Leimer, "Performing the Sacred," 139-40.
30. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Mujerista Discourses: A Platform for Latinas' Subjugated Knowledge," in *Decolonizing Epistemologies*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, 49.
31. Leimer, "Performing the Sacred," 332.
32. Ibid., 181.
33. Ibid.
34. Barbara Rose Johnston and Susan Dawson, "Resource Use and Abuse on Native American Land: Uranium Mining in the American Southwest," in *Who Pays the Price: The Sociocultural Context of Environmental Crisis*, ed. Barbara Rose Johnston (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994), 142-43.
35. Johnston and Dawson, "Resource Use and Abuse," 143.
36. Tanya H. Lee, "H-Bomb Guinea Pigs! Natives Suffering Decades After New Mexico Tests," Indian Country Today Media Network.com, March 5, 2014: 3. <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/03/05/guinea-pigs-indigenous-people-suffering-decades-after-new-mexico-h-bomb-testing-153856>.
37. Ibid.
38. Valerie Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental Ruin in the American West* (New York, Routledge, 1998), 27.
39. Eric Nuttall, "Comments on the Hearing Officer Report by Citizen Action New Mexico and Dr. Eric Nuttall, Ph.D" Citizen Action New Mexico, accessed December 7, 2015, <http://www.radfreenm.org/index.php/home?view=featured>. <http://www.radfreenm.org/>.
40. Ibid.