



## MY WOMB ES MI ALTAR

AFRO-LATINADAD VISIONS OF THE SACRED:  
IMAGES & TRANSCRIPT FROM EXHIBITION & ARTISTS' TALK  
ON JANUARY 18, 2019, at ROOTWORK GALLERY, CHICAGO, IL

With Liz Gomez, featured artist; Verónica Isabel Giraldo-Puente, featured artist; Gloria “Gloe One” Talamantes, featured artist; Teresa Silva, invited moderator; and Tracie D. Hall, founder, Rootwork Gallery and exhibition curator. The live discussion was transcribed by Kayla D. Johnson, Rootwork Gallery Assistant. Photographed by Angela E. Mejía.



Preface by Tracie D. Hall

Let me begin with the beginning. “My Womb es mi Altar—Afro-Latinadad Visions of the Sacred” was inspired by the writings and liberation theology of Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (1942–2004), whose work re-presented itself to me during a morning meditation. I had been reflecting from the sidelines for a while on millennial generation conversations around Afro-Latino identity and wondered what an exhibition anchored by Anzaldúa’s texts, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (coedited with Cherrie Moraga) might contribute to this conversation.

I had issued an open invitation to Chicago muralista and graffiti writer Gloria “Gloe One” Talamantes to create an original mural for Rootwork Gallery, my three-year-old community art space in Chicago’s historic—though rapidly gentrifying—Mexican/Mexican American neighborhood of Pilsen. Though Gloe had been among Rootwork’s most ardent supporters, she’d been somewhat elusive when it came to

showing her own work. One day shortly after her namesake, Gloria Anzaldua, inhabited my meditation, Gloe took me aside at one of the gallery's activations and said, "I think I'm ready."

I went to work immediately, first asking Liz Gomez, a bright and promising artist recently graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and then, after being mesmerized by her incorporation of sacred symbols and complex iconography, self-taught young painter Verónica Isabel Giraldo-Puente to work with Gloe on a group show. I invited this trio to meet each other for the first time over breakfast one morning. To break the ice, I read them this often cited passage from Anzaldua: "I am playing with my Self, I am playing with the world's soul, I am the dialogue between my Self, and el espíritu del mundo. I change myself, I change the world." It was their introduction to the author and would propel, after deeper readings of her work, conversations about the connectivities in mestiza identity between African, European, and Indigenous notions of the sacred and would move the exhibition and the various engagements programmed around it towards often profound explorations of Afro-Latina spiritualities, sexualities, and politicalities and the overlapping of these three states of being.

What follows is a direct transcription of the artists' talk featuring Gomez, Giraldo-Puente, and Talamantes moderated by Teresa Silva, Director of Exhibitions and Residencies at Chicago Artists Coalition and a writer and curator whose insights and sensibilities I deeply admire. In addition to ways in which the artists situate themselves in relationship to the themes of the exhibition, I believe that the transcription reveals the role that spirit and a sense of connection to the divine play in everything that occurs at Rootwork. There were moments in the flow of discussion when the speakers—myself included—were inspired to say or share something that drove the conversation to another level or place altogether. Though not fully recorded here, by the time the evening shifted to open dialogue with the audience, they were also moved to share in profoundly intimate ways.

One note about the exhibition, photographed by Angela Mejía, is that most of the paintings are paired with small altars that offer the yellow and white corn meals found throughout the Afro-Latino diaspora. I created these as a part of Rootwork's practice of building altars for each exhibition, I also invited each artist to create individual altars.



TRACIE D. HALL: As we begin tonight, I want us to focus on this red sun, this red moon that in many ways is the focal point of the exhibition. What Gloe One is connecting us to is a notion of a geography that is somehow cosmic but also very real. I think that in giving us an image that could be either sacred or imagined space or a depiction of the topography of a “borderland,” she is setting the tone for us to have this conversation. And she is leaving room for the conversation to move across those spaces: the sacred, the imaginary, and the geopolitical.



"Red Sun/Red Moon" by Gloria Talamantes

This is why for me, this exhibition begins with Gloe agreeing to paint the walls. The walls are now anointed, and that means that magic and transformation can happen here. The reason I am saying this is because when we enter into Rootwork, what we're really trying to do is leave skepticism behind. What we want to do is just be completely in the space and be whole. Just listen, and when you get the chance to talk, really testify. We want to build a space where there is no wrong. We are not in class. We are not trying to build a theory that will get us a PhD or impress our neighbor. But what we are really trying to do here is unearth some things we haven't thought about. And the art is the vehicle for that. We are not serving the art. The art is serving us. So, I really want us to be in that space. I say that because there are so many people here that might not have been here ever before. And if you haven't yet been introduced to the space, this is the quick "Rootwork 101." This is why Rootwork exists, to have the conversations that my grandmother introduced me to. And a lot of that conversation is like gumbo ya ya: where a whole bunch of stuff goes in and revelation and deeper knowing comes out.

I am so happy for each of these artists, to hear what they have to say about their work. They are after my own heart. I fall in love with the artist first, *and then* I ask them to make some work. But first, let's introduce our moderator, Teresa Silva. Teresa is somebody—there are a lot of people here that make me feel happy to be on this plane with them—that I don't get the chance to spend a lot of time with, but when I am around her, I feel energetically that she is my fellow sojourner. I would say sister, but that doesn't fully describe it, because I feel like we are striving toward something similar, and our paths keep intersecting because though we are doing different things, we are doing the same things too. We will turn the program over to Teresa now.

TERESA SILVA: So with how the show is arranged, there is a lot of flow happening. I am going to really just get to know these artists, and I want you to have this opportunity to listen to their process, their narratives, what has really inspired them. So, I want to hear more from each of them about their biographical information: Where did you grow up? What I am also interested in is who inspired you to think about becoming an artist? How did you arrive from that to this moment right now?



"Altar" by Gloria Talamantes

VERÓNICA ISABEL GIRALDO-PUENTE: I grew up here in Chicago. I was always a creative child, but I don't really think I was always pushed necessarily to explore that fully. But I will say that in high school, I had the privilege of having a really great art teacher and studio space where I was able to paint. And I think it was in high school when I realized I really wanted to be here in the studio. I was there using all my lunch time and all the extra time I had. And if it was not for that little studio space, high school would have been hard. I mean high school is hard, but it would have been harder without it. It also gave me in a sense of pride and belonging as there were so many other spaces where I did not fit in. After high school, I did not pursue painting that much until

I sort of fell into becoming a teaching artist. Working with youth was definitely a passion. It was when I became a full-time art teacher that I decided to focus more on my personal practice.