Gracias. I wanted to extend my thanks to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences for organizing this event on Intellectual Freedom. As Arizona State University mutates and is being transformed before our eyes into the so-called “New American University,” it is important for us to proceed in an open and self-critical manner about our dedication to the democratic precepts of free speech, academic, artistic, and intellectual freedom.

As I have much to say, but little time, I will give you a brief introduction to my work and then immediately dig into the controversial artwork that, in part, has brought us together today.

I am a Xican@ public artist, performance artist, and cultural worker. I work in the tradition of Chicana/o art making, which has a strong history of performing art in the public sphere that is often critical, sometimes controversial, polemical, anti-imperialist…and definitely political. You can see much of this work manifest in community murals, public and street performance, poetry, political postering, etc.

Part of my job description as a Xican@ artist is to comment on society and culture and to critically engage issues that may be taboo, unpopular, and/or culturally sensitive…and to do this in a way which raises vital questions and complicates conventional discourse especially in times of war.

My latest artwork concerns many issues, but I want to highlight three themes that the work brings into question:

1. the social construction of war heroes
2. the branding and marketing of soldier images in order to glorify and promote war
3. the canonization of war heroes at the cost of truth

The work, of course, deals with ASU graduate, ex-Arizona Cardinal football player, and fallen U.S. Ranger, Pat Tillman. Approaching the subject of Pat Tillman and/or murdered soldiers in general is serious business. We should not treat these issues too lightly because we are dealing
with a dead son, a dead husband, a dead brother, a dead friend. This is serious business. At the same time, the death of Pat Tillman and the framing of his image as an untouchable American hero raises critical questions about militarism, truth, and America’s declared infinite War on Terror, questions that in a democracy we should not be afraid to ask.

Tillman’s death by friendly fire, by the way, was confirmed this past Sunday (Dec. 5, 2004) in a story in the Washington Post that stated Tillman died unnecessarily after “botched communications, mistaken decisions…and negligent shooting.” It also demonstrated how the military purposely distorted accounts of the events to make it appear as if Tillman died while fighting Afghan forces. I hate to say, “I told you so,” but it is good to see the corporate media finally taking a critical look at the framing of Tillman’s image.

The work is entitled, “Friendly Fire.” [Editors’ note: see the artwork featured at the beginning of Part 3.] This text is placed over the top of Tillman’s Ranger photo. On the left, there is text that reads, “Remember me?” Now, this is a memorial. It is a critical memorial, maybe an unorthodox memorial, but a memorial nonetheless (and I’ll address this idea in a moment). The text continues:

Remember me? I was killed by my own Army Ranger Platoon in Afghanistan on April 22, 2004 I am a hero to many of you my death was tragic my glory was short-lived flawed perceptions of myself my country and the War on Terror resulted in the disastrous end to my life

To me, this to me is a quiet piece. It is an emotional argument. It brings issues into question. It does not violently scream at you. It uses first person as an artistic strategy. It’s a declaration from the dead.

There are many explanations and points of entry to this piece, but I would like to say that this piece, for me, is a work for the Days of the Dead. As you know, the Days of the Dead/Días de los Muertos is a Mexican, Xican@ and indigenous tradition that ritualizes the CELEBRATION of the dead. We honor our dead during these fall weeks by creating altars and artwork with our dead’s favorite objects, foods, and drinks and by inviting the spirits back to our homes. We talk to our dead. This may seem strange to some of you, but it is an ancient tradition passed on to us. We create caricatures of the dead making fun of the living and caricatures of the living poking fun at the dead. We also use caricatures of the dead to comment on political and social contradictions. This tradition goes way back before the work of Jose Guadalupe Posada.

So the question put forth with this piece was, “What if Pat Tillman’s image/spirit came back to ASU speaking to us about the tragedy of his death and the mistakes and errors of war? What would happen?”

Pat Tillman was a complicated fellow, no doubt. If we examine Tillman, the man, it’s evident that he was complex, not seeking heroic status, constantly questioning, searching, and a self-declared atheist. But this work deals more with the use of his image rather than Tillman the man; it’s a memorial about the manufacturing of heroes by the military and the quasi-religious and dogmatic adherence to Tillman’s mythological heroic image by mainly conservative male Americans.

I put these posters up in downtown Phoenix and on the ASU campus on October 1, 2004. One week later, local ABC and CBS Nightly News did stories on this. It was then picked up by CNN and broadcast nationally over the weekend that preceded the presidential debate here.

Many questions came from angry viewers. Among them were: “How dare you use his image for your political message? How could you speak for him?”
I was compelled to create this image because I was bothered and, on a bad day, frankly, was
disgusted by the marketing and branding of Tillman’s image by certain contingencies at this
university, professional sports teams (specifically the Arizona Cardinals), and by the right wing
that canonized Tillman as the ultimate, god and country-serving American hero.

So, who is speaking for Tillman? Well, if we look at popular culture we see that two (unau-
thorized) books have already written about Pat Tillman. A Hollywood screenplay is in the works
and coming to a theater near you may be a film in which an actor will be literally speaking for
Tillman. There is merchandizing galore—hats, jerseys, helmets, pins, photos. There is constant
nationalistic memorializing, like this pamphlet, produced by ASU, juxtaposing his heroic foot-
ball images with his military portrait and a waving American flag. There is outright profiteering
going down. The Arizona Cardinals sold tickets on his name offering free rubber bracelets with
Tillman’s name and number on them for the first 10,000 fans to the stadium for a game a few
weeks ago (those same bracelets are now being sold for up to $70 apiece on Ebay).

All of the branding, profiting, and pro-war usage of Tillman’s image and name are OK as long
as they fit into a certain ideological framework that portrays Pat Tillman as a perfect, fixed and
untouchable hero. But, as soon as someone comes out and says, “Wait a second. He was killed
by ‘friendly fire.’ His death is tragic and revealing of a misguided war on terror.” If this happens,
then all hell breaks out.

I have been flooded with phone calls and email messages (300 emails to date) [Editors' note:
Leaños ultimately received over 500 emails, and several threatening phone calls, entries on
blogs, etc.] spewing hate, anger, bigotry, racism, homophobia, death threats, promises of vio-
ence, posting of my home address on the Internet. Some examples:

Fuck you, you fucking piece of shit. I hope to meet you someday so I can show you honor
a true American Hero. Faggot ass pussy wimp dick licking cock smoker…Fuck you

Big mistake, Puto. Maybe you should get back to mowing my lawn. I mean, that IS what
chicano studies teaches, right?

Fuck you and your cultural ways

I fight for your freedom and liberty…and you take advantage of it. If I see you on the
street, I’m going to run you over with my truck.

You are a sick fuck. the only thought that your work provokes in my mind is “why isn’t
he picking strawberries” i hope you get syphilis.

I hope you are a Mexican fag with AIDS and die soon.

This is horrible stuff. I have 53 pages of this. Not all of it is as vile and hateful as this, but the
majority of it is. It’s also, by the way, great material for my next project.

Of course, this reaction is business as usual for the right to launch hate campaigns, ad hom-
inem attacks, character assassinations, intimidation tactics on those who breach their ideologi-
cal fronteras. It’s business as usual.

What does this reaction to the Tillman piece reveal? It reveals the imperial dragon lifting its
head and spitting fire…it is reveals the underbelly, the dark history of American “democracy,”
a history that is anchored in hate, racism, homophobia, imperial intolerance—all in the name
of freedom, liberty, and justice for all. This is not the version of justice, freedom, and liberty
that I’m fighting for. This is the version of freedom that I and many others have been speaking
out against for many generations. This reveals the hypocrisy of the macho militaristic right that
runs deep in this country, in this state, and in this city. This also reveals that these are indeed perilous times for free speech.

In this dense and divided political time of war, can we not ask essential questions like:

Who owns our dead?
Who speaks for our dead?
Who profits and benefits from our dead?
Why are the narratives of our dead being controlled?

It seems that any deep and profound treatment of our war dead is labeled as “anti-war, liberal” politics and dismissed as unpatriotic. If we can’t talk about our dead, our war heroes in complex and multi-dimensional ways, then we are truly a “death denying and death defying culture” as Cornell West so acutely observes about America, and we are condemned to repeat the mindless sacrifice of not only our own men and women, but of those innocent men, women, and children of this and future generations across national borders.

In a democracy, in a university, we must have dissent. It must be tolerated. It must be encouraged! This country was founded on dissent and breaking of the law at the Boston Tea Party and American Revolution. We must have polemic art and scholarship that opens up debate, complicates discourse and that attempts to shift the level of discourse in order to develop a more profound understanding of our government, our time, and our humanity. Voices of dissent that don’t take on the mainstream, militarist, imperial points of view should not face ad hominem attacks, character assassinations, threats on their lives and well-being, and witch hunts to destroy them professionally.

Which brings us to the question of how the “New American University” of Arizona State has dealt with this controversy.

President Crow told me he has received 800 emails, most of them calling for my job. The Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) got many emails with the same message. The President’s office and ABOR sent public letters decrying the poster, separating themselves from it. This institutional response was somewhat expected as ASU has benefited from the heroic branding of Tillman. You could say that they were just covering their assets.

ABOR characterized the letter as an “ill-advised poster…and an unforgivable affront to an American hero.” President Crow denounced it as being “offensive and insensitive.”

Of course, if you ask the university and the Arizona Board of Regents if they protect free speech, their answer will be an unequivocal “Yes, of course.” In fact, it is the job of such a public institution to protect the basic democratic rights. However, when presented with an unpopular view like that of the Tillman piece—and let’s remember this work is not slanderous, obscene, racist, or pornographic—ABOR backtracked on its full support of free speech and launched an investigation into my classroom activities and copyright issues (a fishing expedition on ideological grounds to catch a morsel that could lead to discipline and even dismissal). This effort was not headed by ABOR, but by conservative men on computers. Over 90% of the email I received came from men who are probably conservative and somewhat intolerant.

The “New American University,” of course, is a philosophy and vision steeped in corporate influence and metaphor, aspiring to the MIT and Carnegie Mellon University model that stresses techno-science for the principal benefit of government, military, and corporate profit. It is a model that further entrenches the paramilitary and corporate function of the university into the larger global economic structure. The humanities and arts in the “New American University” model are said to be necessary, but are ultimately devalued as these disciplines just don’t bring in as much capital. As we sit here and contemplate intellectual freedom in the “New
American University” of Arizona State, the critical question remains: are the democratic principles of public university (intellectual freedom, freedom of speech, Socratic questioning, and open dialogue, etc.) being compromised? If we look at the last six months at ASU, it appears that this is indeed the case as ASU has endured an exceptionally controversial semester in terms of free speech. The university has been cited five times in the last six months for questionable handling of free speech issues:

1. There is a possible lawsuit pending by the ACLU regarding the suppression of dorm postings of political signs.
2. They have been cited by the American Association for University Professors (AAUP) for meddling in the curatorial process of the exhibition “Art and Democracy” at the ASU Art Museum.
3. AAUP cited ABOR and the university for investigating my public memorial to Pat Tillman.
4. The administration postponed the play *Banging the Bishop* because of its controversial subject matter.
5. The upper administration has been in a disagreement with the *State Press* over the use of an image of a bare breast.

The clumsy handling of these free speech issues tells me that, at best, the university has had a bad, bad semester defending intellectual, artistic freedom and freedom of speech and, at worst, it is a symptom of the “New American University” corporate-paramilitary model that shies away from controversy, self-criticism, and self-awareness by micro-managing crises to make them disappear as soon as possible. It is probably a combination of the best and worst scenarios. But it definitely reflects a crisis in leadership here at the university and in the state.

Thank you very much.