MAKING PLACE OUT OF DISPLACEMENT: EMBODIED DIASPORIC IDENTITIES IN THE WORKS OF ANA MENDIETA AND COCO FUSCO

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Making Place Out of Displacement: Embodied Diasporic Identities in the Works
of Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco

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My art is grounded in the belief of one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant from plant to galaxy. My works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world.

― Ana Mendieta

I think that not all performers want to put themselves at risk, some want to put their audiences at risk (…) But I do think that a lot of performance art has been oriented toward challenging some sort of established rule or frontier of some kind: between art and life, between what is socially acceptable or unacceptable, between what is desirable and non-desirable, between what is comfort and discomfort.

― Coco Fusco
I remember when I first learned about the powerful work of Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco. I was an undergrad student majoring in Art History in my hometown, Mexico City. The class was called Contemporary Art Theory and while the material seen thus far was absolutely interesting, it was nonetheless—at least from my incipient feminist perspective at the time—too male dominated. That day, however, the work of Ana Mendieta (b. La Havana 1948–d. New York 1985) appeared projected on the classroom screen and it was like a breath of fresh air. I immediately felt a connection with both her aesthetics and politics. There she was, a young woman relying on her body as her main means of expression and using almost exclusively natural elements to create her pieces. After briefly going through some of her oeuvre, the professor then showed us a video in which two artists, Coco Fusco (b. New York 1960) and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, toured the world appearing caged and dressed as indigenous people from an “undiscovered island” in their performance piece *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Discover the West* and again, I couldn’t believe my eyes. The fun, audacity and defying power of such art and performance stays with me until this day. I had, finally, two contemporary women referents within the male dominated art world.

But there was yet another common trait among Mendieta and Fusco that I was to find quite appealing: the fact that they were both of Cuban origin but who ended up living in the U.S. This fact, which probably would have not had so much relevance had I continued to live in Mexico, took on much more meaning now that I am both living in the U.S. myself and pursuing a masters’ degree in Women’s Studies. Hence, my personal experience as a border-crosser in the most metaphorical sense of the word, even if in my case it was a voluntary and conscious decision, has definitely shed some light into what it means to be a Latina in this Anglo dominant country. I have come to grasp the complexity of self-definition in a reality where my identity (a Mexican woman) is constantly confronted by an exogenous discourse that either puts me down or just simply annihilates my being. I mean, I grew up thinking that I was a woman and that America was a continent, but now I have learned how contingent those two categories are. So yes, just by changing my location I have acquired a woman of color status and America has been reduced into a country.

My respect and admiration for these women, then, drives not only from my academic, art historical interest in their works, but it also draws from my feminist and personal empathy to their life experience. Choosing Mendieta and Fusco as my object of study is thus an honor and a challenge that I am willing to undertake in order to further explore their achievements both at a personal and at a professional level.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO DIASPORA: A CUBAN, GENDERED, RACIALIZED AND ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVE

In a postcolonial world in which millions are displaced by the violence of poverty, neocolonialism, and political turmoil, a rather new literary genre has emerged that grapples with experiences of displacement and exile. In “Reflections on Exile,” Palestinian-born theorist Edward Said tackles the question of geographic displacement from a global perspective and states “the exile lives an anomalous (…) life, with the stigma of being an outsider” (362). Furthermore, he goes on to assert that “although it is true that anyone prevented from going home is an exile, some distinctions can be made between exiles, refugees, expatriates and emigres” (362).

Focusing particularly on the Caribbean exile experience and drawing from Octave Mannoni’s work, Barbadian writer George Lamming invokes Caliban the Shakespearian character from “The Tempest”, and argues that he “functions as the image of the West Indian who is alienated from himself (…) through the very tools he has at his disposal to disrupt that exile, (that is) his modes of communication, words, language, (and) writing” (qtd. in Chancy 4). However, as Haitian-Canadian writer Myriam J.A. Chancy stresses, the efforts to theorize exile have been foremost gender-blind and so “(…) if we have to come to know

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1 In 1950 French professor Octave Mannoni published *Psychologie de la Colonisation*. The book, which in its 1956 English edition was significantly titled *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, was the first to use William Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” as an analogy of the process of colonization. Opposing Prospero and Caliban as colonizer (white) and colonized (black), Mannoni’s thesis consisted in developing what he called “Prospero’s complex”, that is, the neurosis of the racist colonizer who perceives the other as a dangerous and savage threat.

2 The classic play that narrates both the story of Prospero, a white man, who is shipwrecked along with his cohort in an island where Caliban is the only indigenous “creature” and the power dynamics that occurred among the two, has long been used by Caribbean, Latinamerican, and Latina/o theorists as a key reference to understanding the history and psychology of both regions. The parallels of the island, the clash of different cultures, and the imperialist and racist implications of the story’s outcome are just some of the elements that have made “The Tempest” a required reading within Caribbean and Latinamerican imaginaries.
the condition of exile through literature, we have to come to know it primarily through the male prism” (3). Along this line, efforts such as her *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* and that of Cuban-American Jewish writer, Ruth Behar, in *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba* expanded what used to be a male-dominated field by bringing in a lens that puts Caribbean women’s experience (Haitian and Cuban) front and center. However, limiting their research almost exclusively to analyzing the work of exile women writers, Chancy’s and Behar’s texts leave the experiences of Caribbean exile women that manifest through other artistic means in obscurity.

As if taking up the challenge of studying the creative response to exile experienced by people from that islandic region of the world, Margarite Fernandez-Olmos’s and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert’s *Healing Cultures. Art and Religion as Curative Practices in the Caribbean and Its Diaspora* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* offer an interesting first approach to studying the link between exile and art making from a Caribbean standpoint. While the former is interested in the inclusion of ‘popular’ knowledge and traditions, and religious rites into the artistic-practice realm, and the latter focused on presenting the dilemmas of being immigrants who create despite, or because of, the horrors that drove them from their homelands, both of these works examine what it means to be an immigrant artist from another country and therefore pinpoint the healing aspects of their art.

Centered in the Cuban context, however, books like Andrea O’reilly Herrera’s *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora. Setting the Tent Against the House*, Eduardo González’s *Cuba and The Tempest: Literature and Cinema in the Time of Diaspora*, Flora González-Mandri’s *Guarding Cultural Memory: Afro-Cuban Women in Literature and the Arts*, and to some extent the compilation of texts found in both *Identity, Memory, and Diaspora: Voices of Cuban-American Artists, Writers, and Philosophers* and *Art Cuba: The New Generation*, fail nonetheless to take into account gender differences therefore obscuring, once again, women’s experiences.

That said, it seems that the scholarship about exile in the Caribbean context, but most specifically that focused on Cuban culture and displacement has undergone a process that started out with a specific interest in male literature (mainly fiction, short stories and poetry), then it opened up to the analyses of female writers, and more recently it turned to artists in
general. The scarcity of existing literature focusing exclusively on exiled Cuban female artists hence, points to the need of contributing to the extant scholarship by bringing in a feminist postcolonial approach; and it is precisely that gap that I hope to fill through my research.

In contrasting and comparing the works and lives of Cuban-American artists Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco, I first analyze their exile condition and hence their experience as diasporic subjects. And in so doing, I complicate the patriarchal and monolithic conception of national identity as well as the geopolitical affiliation that either the artists themselves strategically adopted or else others have imposed on them. Secondly, drawing from feminist and postcolonial literature, I explore the ways in which some of their works contribute to both decolonizing the artworld and bridging aspects of their identities that would traditionally be conceived as fractured (i.e. using performance art, redefining geographic boundaries, and resorting to ancient ritualistic practices). Finally, paying close attention to their main discursive tool, that is, their body or, perhaps, its absence, I examine the ways in which their marked physicality both as women and as women of color serves more as an agent than as an ailment from which to theorize alternative ways of being and existing in the male-centered, racist and elitist world we live in.

**ANA MENDIETA AND COCO FUSCO: CUBAN ARTISTS BEYOND THE ISLAND**

Cuba offers a particular case study in terms of migration and displacement. Cubans have left the island for different reasons and under varying circumstances. However, the most significant exodus occurred in the aftermath of Fidel Castro’s Revolution in 1959, but most specifically after the U.S.’s Bay of Pigs invasion and the declaration of the island as a Marxist-Leninist state in 1961 (Gracia xi).³ After the revolution, then, the Cuban nation split apart between those who stayed and those in the diaspora. Since Ana Mendieta and Coco

³ Known as *La batalla de playa Girón* in Spanish speaking countries, Bay of Pigs was an unsuccessful invasion of the island conducted in 1961 by a paramilitary group backed by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.). This attack intended to overthrow the leftist revolutionary government of Orvaldo Dorticos Torrado. The local revolutionary forces, however, under command of the at the time Prime Minister, Fidel Castro, defeated the invaders in three days. The relevance of this victory has to do with the fact that it both was a symbolic defeat of U.S.’s imperialism by a Latin American country and it strengthened Castro’s figure as a leader hence paving its way to the center stage of the successful revolution.
Fusco were among the latter group, what I focus on is the way in which their diasporic experience informed some of their works. In so doing, I stress their ability to bridge, just as in Behar’s analogy, the distance that separates their two countries, their two cultures. Thus, I underscore the efforts of both artists as knowledge creators who, going beyond the official discourses of the Cuban and the U.S. governments, the Miami-based Cuban Right, and the Cuban supporters in the United States, “allow ethnic, kinship, and emotional ties to override ideological difference; (…) whose intellectual and political perspective is less nationalist and less invested in fictions of separate development” (Fusco, *English is Broken Here* 3).

Using art as a medium to express their sense of displacement but also to reinvent themselves and hence theorize identity in ways that allowed them to inhabit multiple spaces, Mendieta and Fusco are arguably the two most important and influential Cuban-American women in the contemporary art world. Nonetheless, I argue that their sphere of influence does not stop within the artistic confines for both their corpus of works formulate and propose a discourse that complicated the rigid boundaries and borders of fixed notions of geography, nation, culture and gender. Hence, challenging the status-quo at so many different levels, in Mendieta’s case even before the 1980s boom of feminist writings by U.S. women of color (e.g. Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks) and in Fusco’s case practically at the same time, these two Cuban-Americans acted out an agenda that could be paralleled to that of the U.S. feminist movement. In this light, along the following lines I explore the ways in which Mendieta and Fusco contributed to the recovery of what the homogenous Anglo mainstream culture refers to as outer or peripheral expressive forms, while centering gender,

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4 In her book *Bridges to Cuba/ Puentes a Cuba*, Behar collected a series of texts that, according to her, spiked the conversation among Cubans inside and outside the island. In her own words, the book is “a meeting place, an open letter, a castle in the sand, an imaginary homeland. It is a space for reconciliation, imaginative speculation, and renewal” (5).

5 Cubans who exiled themselves in the U.S. did not uniformly adhere to one position in terms of the politics on the island and the role of the U.S. policy vis-à-vis Castro’s regime. In that sense, Miami, which became the primary base for Cuban exiles, was and still is mainly characterized by a more conservative, bourgeois, essentially nationalist, anti-Castro/anti-communist sentiment that hence approves of U.S. official discourse regarding the status of the Caribbean country. More scattered throughout U.S. territory, however, there exist other Cuban voices and U.S. voices also that, while remaining critical of Castro’s authoritarian position, they are too about the U.S., the embargo, and its role as a key player in the island’s condition before, during, and after the Cold War era.
ethnicity, nationality and sexuality and thus, proposed an alternative discourse through their work. A discourse that I contend is a healing one.

Studying visual arts at the University of Iowa, Ana Mendieta began exploring representations of her self in many different ways. In early 1972 she produced a couple of series called *Facial Hair Transplants* (Figure 1; Mendieta, *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)*) and *Cosmetic Variations* (Figure 2; Mendieta, *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*), which entailed either masquerading as a man with beard and moustache or reimagining her appearance by pressing her face against a glass. Later on, informed by the rituals and practices of both pre-columbian groups such as the Taíno and Afro-Cuban traditions such as Santería or Yoruba spiritualities, she introduced the use of blood and chickens into her performance pieces (Merewether; Viso) (Figures 3, 4; Mendieta, *Untitled (Chicken Piece Shot #2); Mendieta, Bird Transformation*).

![Image](image.jpg)


However, Mendieta is most known for her *Silueta Series* (Figure 5; Jacob), a group of works in which she used her body primarily as a means to merge with nature, ephemerally leaving her traces in the land (in Mexico, Cuba, Miami and Iowa), or covering herself in leaves and mud. This link to the earth and the landscape led to art critics such as Lucy Lippard and Gerardo Mosquera locating Mendieta’s practice in relation to other feminist
artists of the 1970s who reclaimed goddess imagery and a celebratory identification with nature (Raine 261).

More recently, authors like Irit Rogoff have analyzed Ana Mendieta’s work through the lens of the postcolonial and postmodern theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari therefore underscoring the process of “determinization” she underwent in numerous
occasions through her lifetime: from Cuba to the United States, from Iowa to New York, then to work in Mexico and Cuba and finally to study in Rome. Along this same line, in Where is Ana Mendieta?, Jane M. Blocker points out to the difficulty of categorizing Ana’s work both iconographically and geographically while also alluding to the place she occupies in today’s art world. However, both Rogoff’s and Blocker’s approach, focus much more on locating Mendieta’s work beyond the boundaries of the mainstream art world than in actually analyzing her personal experience of exile and thus, fail to consider her work simply as a self-portrait in which her diasporic experience is clearly reflected. This is a gap that I hopefully contribute in filling not only by pointing to it in Mendieta’s work, but also by contrasting and comparing her aforementioned pieces to those of Fusco.

Coco Fusco, on the other hand, is an interdisciplinary artist and writer who began her career in 1988 and is currently a full-time faculty at Parsons, The New School for Design. Born in New York in 1960 into a lower-middle class Cuban family that migrated to the U.S.

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6 “Deterritorialization” is a term coined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book Anti-Oedipus in 1972. In this first volume of their 2 volume Capitalism and Schizophrenia, the French scholars tackled Marxist and Freudian theories in order to reconceptualize materialism and psychoanalysis while analyzing the relationship between desire and capitalism. Hence, their use of the concept referred to the liberation of labor power from specific means of production. Later on, however, anthropologists reappropriated the term to designate, as the online Oxford dictionary puts it: “the severance of social, political, or cultural practices from their native places and populations” (Encyclopedia.com). This latter definition is the one I hereby consider important to my analysis of Mendieta’s life and work.
in 1954, Fusco went back to Cuba just after her birth when her mother got deported to her country of origin. Managing to resettle again in America in 1962 thanks to her U.S. citizenship, Fusco nonetheless grew up in a household that was constantly surrounded by incoming relatives and friends who had just recently left the island.

Constantly negotiating between the Cuban and the Anglo worlds, Fusco soon developed a special sensibility to identify the power dynamics of living between races, cultures, languages and nations. In her own words:

I had turned the pressure that was put on me to be cultured into an obsession with culture, and couldn’t have shed it even if I had tried. I decided that I wanted to make a sense out of the clashes between cultures that cause so many of us so much trouble and pain, but chose to do so within the realm of art. (…) through media-based art, performance, and other experimental forms that dramatize, in their production and reception, the process of cultures meeting, clashing, and mixing. (Fusco, English is Broken Here x)

As a way to understand the tensions of her own personal experience, then, Coco Fusco pursued a Masters degree in Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford University,
and a Doctorate in Visual Culture in Middlesex University. Such background has allowed Fusco the versatility of going back and forth from the academic to the artistic worlds, hence her oeuvre includes both written and performance works that have allowed her to better comprehend, among other things, the nature of her Cuban diasporic identity. Setting off “in search of my (her) tribe”, as she calls it, Fusco has been blessed to have traveled around the world to find it in London, Havana, Brooklyn, San Francisco, Merida, Paris, San Antonio, Chicago, Berlin, Montreal, Miami, Santiago, Denver, Managua, Barcelona, San Juan, Mexico City, Toronto, and Porto Alegre (Fusco, *English is Broken Here*).

Entrenched in postcolonial discourse *Norte Sur* (1990) (Figure 6) is one of Fusco’s first performance pieces. An interdisciplinary arts project commissioned by the 1990 Festival 2000 in San Francisco, this work was composed of installation, multi-media, experimental radio program and performances. The project was produced in collaboration with Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Rene Yañez as a means to explore the cultural, linguistic, political and demographic presence of Latin America in the United States and vice versa. After gaining recognition for her collaborative subversive works with Gómez-Peña, Fusco went solo and started working on pieces that allude to more personal issues such as life in diaspora woman’s perspective. *The Last Wish* (1997) (Figure 7) was a site-specific piece performed at an art gallery in Cuba in which, seemingly dead, Coco Fusco lied on the ground surrounded by flowers in order to honor the death of exiled Cubans and address the issue of their repatriation. Continuing this line of research, in 2000, Fusco performed *The Suspended Event* (Figure 8) at an underground gallery in Old Havana. In it Fusco buried herself up to her chest in Cuban soil for three hours, where she repeatedly wrote a letter, leaving copies for the audience to take. The letter, which contained the actual words of an allegedly disappeared Cuban woman who was actually alive and exiled, intended to be an homage to both the exile and the kinship she left behind.

As this brief overview of the artists’ life and art shows, Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco have produced a body of work that not only is important, but is also aesthetically and politically compelling. Not so much speaking, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would question in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” but rather performing discourse as subaltern beings, Mendieta and Fusco also deal with the relationship between knowledge and power. Furthermore, I argue that these artists make use of specific creative resources that enable
them to produce different forms of knowledge about themselves, their culture and their experiences while ambivalently identifying themselves as either Cubans, Cuban-Americans or more generally as Latinas in the globalized world. In this light, my research breaks ground in applying the scholarship on both postcolonial literatures (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”; Said, “Reflections on Exile”; Fanon; Canclini García) and feminist women of color theory (Hooks; Lorde; Behar; Levins Morales, Remedios; Anzaldúa) to analyze their work. Focusing on comparing the way these two visual/performance artists used art to address issues that relate to their specific social location as exiled Cuban-American women, my work
contributes to the discussion of cultural displacement by focusing on art as a medium to redefine the meaning of Cuban identity outside of the geographical boundaries of Cuba. My line of inquiry is significant because Mendieta and Fusco use performance not only to meditate on the experience of exile and displacement, but also to reinvent identities beyond traditional boundaries of genre, art, nation and gender.

METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

I am aware that a comprehensive or definitive definition of ‘Cuban’, ‘Cuban-American’ or ‘Cuban Diasporic’ identity(ies) is impossible to achieve. Hence the attempt to determine a fixed definition of what constitutes a Cuban-American experience, or to that extent, Cuban-American art, or both “is additionally complicated by the complexity of defining identity, especially that of exiled artists belonging to different generations” (Gracia 2). Nonetheless, by conducting a parallel study that compares and critically assesses the artistic productions of both Mendieta and Fusco through an intersectional feminist lens that will draw from literature on the experience of exile (Said “Reflections on Exile”; Chancy; Fusco, English is Broken Here; Behar; Pérez Firmat, Life on the Hyphen; Agnew; Diprose and Ferrell), on women of color identities (Anzaldúa; Levins Morales, Remedios; Hooks; Lorde), and on postcolonial studies (Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?”; Appadurai “Disjuncture and Difference”; Hall), I analyze the way in which these artists have embodied and performed their exiled identities while elaborating an alternative discourse that

challenges U.S.’s patriarchic, racist, and nationalist stances. And in so doing, I point out to how both Mendieta and Fusco can be considered subaltern producers of knowledge since their art is more often circular than linear, more fluid than static, more achronological than chronological, and more dependent on harmonious relationships of all elements within a field of perception than western masculinist, monolithic modes of culture creation. These characteristics, which I consider to be alternative or perhaps I should say gynocentric forms of knowledge, as I further explain in the following chapters, guide my analysis throughout.

Given the nature of my thesis, my research contains a two-fold qualitative approach that includes an image and content analysis as well as the discussion regarding the aesthetic, political and theoretical meanings of both Mendieta and Fusco’s work in relationship to their lives. I hereby integrate a three-pronged approach to the analysis of Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco's biographies and performance pieces: the first is informed by Jane M. Blocker’s *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, a rather thorough analysis of Mendieta’s work and life from a feminist art history perspective; the second draws from Coco Fusco’s postcolonial approach to other minority artist’s work in her compilation of essays titled *English is Broken Here*; and the third line of thought is based off of Andrea O’Reilly Herrera’s *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora. Setting the Tent Against the House*. I do this by critically reviewing both the selected works (pictures and video) and literature produced by the artists, and then putting them in conversation with the aforementioned theorists.
CHAPTER 2

CUBA BEYOND ITS BORDERS

In the first section of this chapter I set out my theoretical framework and explain my use of key terms. Hence I start off by presenting a general theoretical discussion where I am to locate Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco’s life and work. Following a funnel-like structure, I first touch on the general discussion on the experience of exile and the concept of diaspora (Cohen; Chancy; Rajan and Mohanram; Said “Reflections on Exile”) in order to then analyze the literature that focuses on Cuba’s particular case (O’reilly Herrera; Weimer; Torres; Behar; Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban Condition*). Stressing the nuances and specificities of this Caribbean country, I then spend some time presenting a brief historical overview of Cuba’s conformation as a nation in order to point to its culture’s inherent hybrid and diverse character (Gracia; Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban Condition*; Ortíz). Next, given that both of these artists migrated to the U.S., I provide some historical context in regards to the ambiguous relationship between the two countries concentrating specifically in the era after Cuba’s revolution in 1959.

In section two, then, I connect the previously discussed concepts to Mendieta and Fusco, underscoring the diasporic aspect of their identities as a strategy from which to read both their life and work as subaltern creators or knowledge producers.\(^7\) In order to do so, I analyze three pieces – *Untitled (Creek Piece)* and *Isla* by Mendieta, and *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* by Fusco— in which there appears to be a clear link to the notion of island. Although aware of the differences in their artistic creations, in this first approach to

\(^7\) Originally used in the British military as a word to define a position of subordinate or lower rank officers, the concept subaltern was then used by Antonio Gramsci in his work on cultural hegemony. Interested in the analysis of the North-South relations, the Italian scholar identified social groups that were politically and geographically located outside the margins of the power structure of the colonial empires and were therefore excluded a voice in society. However, his use of the word subaltern, clearly drawing from a Marxist framework, could be easily interchangeable with that of the proletariat. In that vein, more interested as I am in the post-colonial use of the term (Said, “Reflections on Exile”; Hall; Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”), I will hereby use it in a broader way to refer to that Other also marked by ethnicity, place of origin and gender, whose possibility of self-representation is subject to the stereotypes imposed upon her/him by the ruling and normalizing mainstream culture.
interpreting their artistic creations, I am more interested in pointing to the similarities of their performances and hence stress Mendieta and Fusco’s ability to both (re)construct an imaginary territory and (re)tell its story from a woman’s point of view.

The third and last section of this chapter is also based on the analysis of the three pieces I delved into in the prior section. However, at this point my approach emphasizes the particularities of both artists’ experiences as Cuban-Americans. In order to do so, I start off exploring the notion of “transculturation” coined by Fernando Ortíz, and then Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s theorization of what he called “life on the hyphen.” Contrasting the differences between Pérez Firmat’s sugar coated approach to the actual artists’ testimonies, I underscore the presence of racism, and its subversion thereof, as a central marker in these women’s development of a highly politicized consciousness, which I argue clearly shines throughout their lives and work.

**Theorizing Diasporic Identities**

The term exile has a history of its own and has long been used to theorize the experience of certain cultural groups, such as the Jewish diaspora (Ruggiero; Gruen; Cohen; Menache). From a contemporary perspective, however, postmodern and postcolonial discourses have taken the lead in resorting to it as a means to explicate the transcendental sense of homelessness that characterizes the subject living in the current global era. In this light, exile is conceived as the experience of having lost one’s territorial moorings, of being cut off from one’s roots, from one’s sense of identity, therefore leading to feelings of alienation and isolation. However, as Edward Said states, “The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason of necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience” (“Reflections on Exile” 356). Exile, Said continues, “carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality” (362), and through this perspective, as Myriam J.A. Chancy asserts, “Said’s exile is a nostalgic incarnation of a poet-figure” (3), the perfect stereotype of the modernist, bohemian writer who creates not inspite of, but rather because of his sense of not
belonging. Linking, then, the experience of exile with the proneness to write, Said’s approach puts forth literature, and with it, the exilic author too “as an ambassador of culture, (who) mediates between the spatial pole of history and the temporal pole of modernity (and postmodernity)” (Rajan and Mohanram 4).

Such ambivalent positionality, one that posits both loss and gain as inherent emotions of the subject in exile while locating her/him in a blurred chrono-topos location, when analyzed from a more general, global perspective, has been a leitmotif not only in the literature but also in the art of diasporic cultures both in past and present times. Diaspora, then, generally conceived as one group’s dispersion out of its national boundaries, implies a sense of community that is not present in the individual experience of exile. In this light, even if exile and diaspora have often been used interchangeably, especially within postcolonial discourse (Rajan and Mohanram 4), it is important to point to some nuances in order to distinguish these terms’ particularities. According to James Clifford, the main difference between exile and diaspora has to do with temporality for exile covers the span of an individual’s life while diaspora refers to the same experience across generations (Weimer 18). Finally, what becomes evident is the fact that diaspora is a more comprehensive term under which different categories of migratory status such as exile, refugee, immigrant, and expatriate can be included (Weimer; Rajan and Mohanram). This said, although I will sometimes use the words exile and diaspora indistinctively, I will do it with caution and consciousness of their particular nuances and histories.

Generally speaking, diasporic identities tend to articulate networking discourses that link dispersed people through the evocation of a common and idealized past in a concrete location and hence “accomodate to, but also resist, the norms and claims of nationalism”

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8 Edward Said specifically talks about the male writer and hence offers a gender biased approach to the subject matter. As postcolonial feminist theorist, Myriam J. A. Chancy, states when referring to Said’s work: “(…) if we have to come to know the condition of exile through literature, we have to come to know it primarily through the male prism” (3). In this light, Chancy continues, it is important to acknowledge the fact that “women are not only forced to strike a balance between the land of their exile, which is usually also that of a colonizing force, and their homeland (…), but they must also overcome the negation of their identities as women in a world that defines itself as male” (3-5). Through a feminist gaze, then, women exiles further complicate the analysis for their bodies form the very nexus of the battle that begins at home (sexism) and carries into exile (sexism and racism).
(Cohen 135). In this light, when talking about Cuba and the construction of Cuba outside the island, that which paradoxically becomes an essential part of the discourse, even as it is absent, is the territory itself. But as Andrea O’reilly Herrera states, even if the landscape can serve as a “unifying, iconic signifier”, reducing or bounding the nation to one single factor “diminishes its historical and cultural complexity” (1). What, then, is that place Cubans call home? What is Cuba?

Cuba is one of those countries that exerts certain magnetism in the Western imaginary both because of its alternative political stance, and its cultural and artistic contributions. When one mentions Communism and Fidel Castro as well as tobacco, rum, and the rhythmic cadences of the Son, one immediately appeals to the richness of this Caribbean country.9 However, after delving more into its history, the idea of a monolithic Cuba easily dissolves into that of a “geographical space with mutable and porous borders”, what is more, into that of an island that “has never been a fixed cultural, political or (even) geographical entity” (O’reilly Herrera 2).

As is well known, the people that were indigenous to Cuban territory such as the Taínos, or Arawaks, as they are called in the Anglo world, and the Siboneys, were practically eradicated after the Spanish invasion in 1492 (Cohen; Pérez Firmat, The Cuban Condition). However, what these authors fail to consider is the fact that although the autochtonous inhabitants were almost exterminated, aspects of their culture and traditions actually outlived them since they were somewhat passed on to the newcomers (Puerto Rican Jewish writer Aurora Levins Morales, herself part of the Caribbean diaspora, proves this in Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas). Consequently, Cuban culture has been conformed by both those remnants of the original people and what Cuban scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls “exogenous ingredients” (2) among which the Spanish, the trafficked Africans and later on, the Japanese are perhaps the most preminent groups.10 Furthermore, drawing from Jorge Manach’s essay entitled “El estilo en Cuba y su sentido histórico,” Pérez Firmat goes on to assert that the absence not only of people but also of

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9 The Son, literally meaning sound, is a music genre that originated in Cuba in the 1930s. As in most things Cuban, it is a mixture of Spanish and African rhythms.

10 However, this is not an extensive list for there exist other populations in Cuba, such as Koreans.
precious metals located Cuba, in the eyes of the Spanish New World empire and until the beginning of the nineteenth century, exclusively as a strategic geopolitical territory. That is, as a mere crossroads or temporary haven for passerbys (2). Interestingly though, in consequence of its strategic location, the island became on the one hand an open place for convergences and interactions, a “prismatic site of rupture and continuity resulting from continuous outmigrations and scatterings” (O’reilly Herrera 2), and on the other, a metaphor of Cuba’s “geographical and cultural separateness” (Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen* 2). That is, the island as concept became both the explication of Cuba’s cultural diversity and the foundation of a Cuban cultural identity that, due to the nation’s historical mobility, is not necessarily exclusive to that specific territory. Thus, when speaking about Cubans and Cubanness, one is referring to people and their identification both on the island and across the diaspora.

Cuba, as I have briefly mentioned above, provides a particular case of historical migration and displacement. Cubans have migrated across time for different reasons and under varying circumstances. However, the most significant outgoing flow occurred after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, and most specifically after the Bay of Pigs invasion and the declaration of the island as a Marxist-Leninist state in 1961 (Gracia xi). Since then and until Russia’s fall as a communist state, a period commonly known as the Cold War, Cuba played, again, a rather strategic geopolitical role. Being Russia’s ally while being located just ninety miles away off Florida’s coast, the island further split itself between those who stayed and those in the diaspora. This split, however, implied much more than a defiance to nationalistic stances for, as Ruth Behar remarks in regards to those Cubans who exiled themselves in the United States, “after the revolution the nation split apart (…) between those who stayed, to live with their backs turned against the great power to the North, and those who left and took refuge in the belly of the beast” (2). The ideological and (geo)political oppositions that sprung out of the manichean Cold War framework and permeate even today’s approaches to the subject matter can be hence analyzed through the eyes of the popular Mexican saying “so far from God, so close to the United States”.11 Because, on the one hand, if taken literally,

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11 Typically attributed to Porfirio Diaz, president of Mexico from 1877 to 1880 and then from 1884 to 1911, the complete remark was “Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States”. By removing the
the saying implies the presence of the U.S. is some sort of heavenly or salvationist option offering the cornucopia of values that spring from a capitalist, neoliberal and democratic paradigm vis-à-vis Cuba’s communist and authoritarian regime. On the other hand, however, when adding a satiric twist such reading is completely reversed: rather than in a celebratory exclamation, the phrase becomes more of a lament. Let us remember that, throughout history, most U.S. presidents have supported the taking of Latin America’s land and produce. In fact, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Teddy Roosevelt “all regarded (the) country’s domination of the region as ordained by nature. (…) And to justify it all, (the) leaders popularized such pivotal notions as “America for the Americans” and “Manifest Destiny”, the latter term emerging as the nineteenth-century code-phrase for racial supremacy” (González 28). Hence, as early as the late eighteenth century Cuba already appeared to the eyes of the heads of state as a rather ‘interesting’ territory. In the words of Jefferson himself:

I candidly confess that I have ever looked on Cuba as the most interesting addition which could ever be made to our system of States. The control to which, with Florida Point, this island would give us over the Gulf of Mexico, and the countries and isthmus bordering on it, as well as all those whose waters flow into it, would fill up the measure of our political well-being (…) Could we induce her to join us in granting its independence to all the world? (qtd. in Danticat 102-103)

In this light, the U.S. takes the place of an imperialist, hegemonic, omnipresent quasi-God power imposing itself on an alternative system that intended to be more egalitarian, at least in its inception. The irony of this lies on the fact that such oppositional stances have Cubans, both inside and outside the island, as well as U.S. citizens divided in its perception about the Cuban-U.S. relationship. These oppositional tensions that have some justifying U.S. efforts to further isolate Cuba through an embargo on the basis of continued repression and human rights violations talking place on the island, and others claiming that despite all first part of it, however, I contend that this saying can be extended to the Cuban situation for two main reasons: (1) its vicinity to the U.S. has significantly determined its fate as a country and (2) the complex nature of the two countries’ relationship throughout history can not be read as either exclusively positive or exclusively negative. Include citation

12 The imperialist implications of using the word America to refer to the North American Country located between Canada and Mexico, as can be seen in this quote, are the reason why I deliberately use America when talking about the whole continent, and United States when talking about the country. In this same line, I omit using American as the gentilic for people of U.S. origin and refer to them as U.S. citizens. However, when talking specifically about the experience of exile Cubans in the U.S., I found no other choice but to resort to the nonetheless problematic compound term of Cuban-Americans.
U.S. imposed hurdles, Cuba has been able to maintain higher standards of living among most of its neighbors, are then proof of the “nuanced and complex vision of how Cubans on the island and in the diaspora give meaning to their lives, their identity, and their culture” (Behar 2).

As I have stated thus far, Cuba, because of its colonial past, its geopolitical location and its complex modern history, is a nation characterized by both the constant flux of people and the coexistence of people of the most diverse cultural backgrounds. Hence concepts coined by Caribbean scholars such as Fernando Ortíz’s “transculturation” or Stuart Hall’s “hybridity” become key to analyzing the identitarian traits of the people who, just as Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco, trace their roots to this region of the world even if they live exiled in the U.S.

In Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar Ortíz underscores the existence of power structures underlying the making and unmaking of cultural formations. Recognizing the way in which sovereign centers define themselves in terms of dependent peripheries, something which in Cuba’s case should be read through the lens of its relations with both Spain and the U.S., Ortíz “celebrates the self-fashioning of these peripheries, the counterpoint through which people turn margins into centers and make fluidly coherent identities out of fragmented histories” (Coronil xiv) (my emphasis). Coining transculturación (transculturation) as a term that explicates both losses and gains in specific historical periods affected by colonialism and imperialism, Ortíz’s thesis offers a rather optimistic perspective (Coronil xv). That is, one in which creativity, read as a self-affirming action involving knowledge creation, provides the most sense of agency to those living under oppressive conditions. But since I am focusing on the ways in which those who left the Cuban physical territory behind configured their identity and culture, it is important to bring in Hall’s vision regarding the exile experience for, he reminds us, diaspora “is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite difference; by hybridity” (402).

Although I will delve further in discussing transculturation in the second subsection of this first chapter, I want to stress the fact that, if the production of knowledge is in fact always a collective effort, “a series of back-and-forth conversations that produce multiple results” as Diana Taylor asserts (The Archive and the Repertoire xx), and the concept of
diaspora implies both a collectivity and its interconnectedness, the (Cuban) diaspora seems to be the perfect setting for Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco’s creativity. That said, in the following section I will analyze Mendieta and Fusco as far as being diasporic identities themselves and will hence posit their experience as Cuban women exiled in the U.S. not only as the site that informed their every day lives, but also as the site that propelled their urge to create and ennunciate alternative cultural expressions.

**NO (WO)MAN’S AN ISLAND: DIASPORA AS A SITE FOR CREATION**

No (wo)man is an island, entire of itself; every (wo)man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

--John Donne

In this seventeenth century passage, when talking about the universality of the Catholic Church and the interconnection that binds all of God’s creation together, the English poet John Donne makes use of the concept ‘island’ as an independent entity and compares it to that of an ‘individual’ as a means to assert that no human exists fully in an autonomous manner. This analogy which underscores the way in which no person, and as I suggest, no country exists as a self-contained, self-sufficient or even as a fixed unity, points to the complications of defining one’s identity in terms of nationality and/or geographic location. In this light, distinguishing the nuances between the terms *cubanidad* and *cubanía* seems rather relevant.

*Cubanidad*, as several scholars have acknowledged, is a word that dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century and is used to denote Cubanness in a somewhat restrictive way, that is, referring exclusively to the birth or civil status of a person (Ortíz; Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban Condition*; DeRojas). *Cubanidad*, then, as defined by Pérez Firmat, is “generic rather than individual, uniform rather than idiosyncratic. In its narrowest sense, *cubanindad* designates the junction of nationality and citizenship. As such, it is a civil status embodied in birth certificates, passports and naturalization oaths, and for this reason perhaps the most fragile manifestation of our nationality” (qtd. in DeRojas 180). On the other hand, *cubanía*, a word first used by Fernando Ortíz in 1940 in an essay called “Los factores
humanos de la cubanidad”, entails “‘la conciencia de ser cubano y la voluntad de quererlo ser’ (the consciousness of being Cuban and the will to want to be Cuban)” (qtd. in DeRojas 181). Offering a broader definition of Cubanness, that is, one that transcends the physical limits of the island and stresses the existence of a Cuban spirit based on a conscious, felt, and voluntary decision, *cubanía* offers the possibility of claiming Cubanness as a national identity that is, in fact, transnational (DeRojas 180). Through this lens, because *cubanía* survives in exile and because it defines more a state of mind or longing than an actual official citizenship, both Ana Mendieta who was born in Cuba, and Coco Fusco, who was not, embody this fluid sense of Cubanness first by individually embracing it and, second, by performing it.

In these two pieces that I have chosen for their iconographic similarities, for instance, Mendieta, informed by a sense of nostalgia for an ideal past, for a hometown that no longer exists as it once did, evokes the form of an island. Figure 9 (Mendieta, *Untitled (Creek #2)*)) is a still from an untitled piece in which Mendieta videotaped herself for a few minutes submerged in a creek in San Felipe, Mexico in 1974. In this early work she uses her own body to incarnate the territory herself, a piece of land that floats in a body of water, in a rather poetic way of (re)presenting the act of inhabiting the ‘floating’ location of diaspora, of existing suspended between a past over there and a present over here, knowing that neither the chronos nor the topos of yesterday can be recovered or revisited except through her imagination and creativity.

Born in 1948 into a wealthy, politically connected family, Ana Mendieta came to the U.S. without her parents at age twelve as part of Operation Peter Pan, a plan backed by the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A), and the Cuban Catholic Church through which parents were encouraged to send their children off to the U.S. in order to ‘save’ them from the ‘menace’ of the communist, atheist regime imposed after Castro’s Revolution in 1959 (Bravo). The origins of the operation, as Cuban-American scholar María de los Ángeles Torres states, “are still open to speculation, but it is clear that U.S.-backed propaganda frightened Cuban parents into thinking that the Castro government was going to take their children away and send them to the Soviet Union for indoctrination” (7). The fear regarding Castro’s program, even if he denied such intentions, were, in part, the outcome of the marked economic differences that the Cuban conversion to socialism had underscored (Blocker 51-52). In fact, the Revolution itself was the response to the dividing gap between classes that had increased as a product of the substantial foreign investments (primarily U.S. capital) in the Cuban economy. Raquel (Kaki) Mendieta, Ana’s cousin, explains the effect this context had for the Mendieta family: “At that point began the contradictions typical of a Revolution. Class contradictions. Well, we came from a bourgeois family and we had to make a class jump, so to speak, we had to break away from a classist background, and incorporate ourselves into revolution. Ana’s family did not do it, and very quickly they drifted towards a position against the Revolution” (qtd. in Blocker 52).

Arriving to the U.S. at such young age, Ana and her sister Raquel spent their first five years in this new country living in different foster homes, orphanages and juvenile correction centers in the state of Iowa for, even if the official discourse had sustained that parents would soon follow to meet their children in their final destination, the U.S.-Cuba relations

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13 The program was also known as Operation Pedro Pan, especially among Cubans both inside and outside the island. What is interesting, however, is the fact that the organizers used J.M. Barrie’s 1902 character as code name for the operation. Probably more informed by Disney’s 1953 adaptation of the story, though, Peter Pan was the leader of the ‘Lost Boys’, a band of boys who were lost by their parents, and came to live in ‘Neverland’ a place where they would never have to go through the pains of growing up. Ironically, the Neverland to which Cuban children arrived was actually some sort of anti-Neverland in the sense that they would have to immediately grow up without the presence, love and comfort of their parents. Ed Candler, one of the Peter Pan children, describes his experience in the documentary by Estela Bravo Operación Pedro Pan: Volando de vuelta a Cuba as follows: “I was ripped away from Cuba, when I think about it it’s… it’s like pulling a young tree out of the ground, and feel the roots cracking and snapping, and… That’s what happened to you. You left family, friends, school, language, country… You left everything behind. You had to grow up.”
deteriorated as the revolution moved leftward and the U.S. stepped up its fight. Hence many of the fourteen thousand ‘Pedro Pans’ were not reunited with their family until after four years and some others were even forever separated (Torres 7). In Mendieta’s case, this experience was marked not only by the racism and ostracism inherent to both the cultural ignorance of a homogenous U.S. American environment and the sense of loss inscribed in her exilic condition, but also by the violence of living among child delinquents. Such an experience, I suggest, defined not only Mendieta’s character, but also her artistic urge in such a way that she “constantly relive(d) and recapture(d) each one of the characteristics of (her) patria (fatherland), and so strength(en) the binding of the union, creating a new sense of nation” (Hilly Nelly Zamora qtd. in Sugg 141). Having lost her family, her language, her country, her culture—in one word, her home—her Untitled (Creek piece) (Figure 9) thus connotes Mendieta’s intention to freeze in an act “the historical shifts of time and space in order to maintain the desired object —this personal and collective past— and to preserve the libidinal investments that it holds for her” (Sugg 141).

In this performance Mendieta also emulates the actual territoriality of her country of origin. A contoured island floating in the water, her naked body nonetheless turns her back to the world as if avoiding the looks, judgements or even impositions of whatever or whoever surrounds her. A means of evasion, one may ask, or even a a strategy for protection? If we assume this to be the case, we are then automatically assuming both the presence of (menacing) others and a rather passive role on Mendieta/the island’s part for although she is the one performing the action, the artist is nonetheless portraying herself as the object that is looked upon rather than as the subject that looks. But who exactly would those others be given that Mendieta/the island seems to float amidst nothing but seemingly calm and tranquil natural elements? Water, soil, air, light and some greenery appear as part of the scene, but when it comes to the presence of humans, there seems not to exist a definitive and categorical answer. The illusion of apparent isolation, one can argue, disappears when taking into account the fact that Mendieta is purposely placing a camera in front of her action hence enabling or even enticing others to see her. But is being seen necessarily the same as not being isolated? Or rather is she, by ‘artificially’ opening up a window to her action, that is, by inviting others to witness her isolation mediated by a screen TV, evidencing the here and there, the then and now thus underscoring the notion of chronotopic displacement?
Furthermore, after analyzing the piece more carefully, one cannot avoid the fact that her face is sunk in the water. Through this light, the at-first-sight seemingly peaceful image conveys a sense of anguish. Mendieta/the island is clearly not lying there looking downwards into the water as a Narcissus spellbound by her own reflection as art critic Donald Kuspit interprets. According to his psychoanalytic take, “Mendieta clearly had a troubled sense of self, as her very self-centered art—in which there are not only no men, but no other women—suggests” (Kuspit 217). Furthermore, Kuspit continues, “One might say (...) that Mendieta preferred to have narcissistic intercourse with Mother Earth than sexual intercourse with man” (217). This gender specific solipsism of which he accuses her, as feminist art scholar Jane M. Blocker points out, does nothing but “pathologize Mendieta’s sexuality as ‘narcissitic and geophilic’” (14). What is more, by claiming that Mendieta prefers the female gendered earth as opposed to a presumably male counterpart as consequence of her narcissistic pathology, Kuspit’s problematic evaluation also alludes to homophobic heterosexism. Instead, we can perhaps read that position of hers as an intent to capture the mirrored refractions of blurred memories, of that past reality that cannot be viewed directly into the face given her diasporic condition. But the truth is that, in this light, Mendieta/the island appears covered by that ‘sea’ of memories. And although it is them, the liquid souvenirs, that keep her afloat, it is also them that overwhelm her to the point that she/it practically drowns in them. She/it needs to breathe to live, and in order to be able to do that, she needs to turn around and face the world. Interestingly though, despite that sense of restriction that evokes Mendieta’s/the island’s face-down position, the view of her floating with open arms in a body of flowing water provides a rather mellow and lilting impression of movement. A movement that not necessarily implies a beginning and an end as in the traditional western teleology, but rather a simple idea of process, of low and high tides, this work points to what José Muñoz calls a “geography calculated in relation to affective considerations of space” (403). That is, “an affective geography of cubanía” that can be read through the harmonious relationship with Mendieta’s/the island’s surroundings (Muñoz 403). A woman/territory who simply lets herself flow accompanied by the forces of basic elements: water, sun, air and soil. In this light, by choosing a creek as the setting, Mendieta retreats back to nature as a way of rekindling the connection to her origins, to the origin of life itself. And by adding the concept of movement and making it a key element to Untitled
(Creek Piece), Mendieta immediately subverts the notion of fixity that traditionally contains both territories and bodies in western patriarchal and monolithic frameworks.

Figure 10 is a later work called Isla (Island) realized in Iowa in 1981 and, although I will come back to it in the next section to further analyze it, I just want to briefly touch on it here given both its iconographic similarity with Creek piece and its overt reference to the concept of island. In it, instead of resorting to her own body, Mendieta relies on a kind of surrogate for her own presence, a silueta made out of mud situated again within a body of water that, in this case, is still. Despite the unmoving nature of this piece, Mendieta’s choice to videotape it for a period of over two minutes conveys her intention to see how that seemingly inert piece of land interacts with the air, the light and the water hence bringing it to life. She is not using photography as the medium to record the instant but rather video thus pointing to the interest of capturing the process of enduring the passage of time, of witnessing the way the piece becomes. The use of soil mixed with this liquid element as the basic material in this work points more directly to the notion of an emerging piece of land than does the previous one, however, as the island itself is molded according to the exact measures of Mendieta’s corporeality, the emulated territory becomes all the more complex. Is it Cuba? Is it Mendieta herself? Is it both? According to art critic and curator Charles Merewether, one of Ana’s favorite stories—a story she recurrently wrote about in her notes and statements—told the custom of the people of Kimberly (144). The men of Kimberly would leave their village in search for a bride. When they brought their new wife to live with them, the woman would carry along a sack of earth from their homeland. Every night, the woman would eat small amounts of that soil so as to alleviate the transition between their place of origin and their new home (Mendieta qtd. in Merewether 144). The significance of this story, says Merewether, is that “The earth itself is disinterred in the woman’s body as a gesture of depatriation” (144). By the same token, in Isla (and in other pieces as well) Mendieta transformed herself into earth as a means to explore her relationship between herself and nature. As Mendieta writes:

The making of my silueta in nature keeps (make) the transition between my homeland and my new home. It is a way of reclaiming my roots and becoming one with nature. Although the culture in which I live is part of me, my roots and cultural identity are a result of my Cuban heritage (qtd. in Merewether 144).
Somewhat along the same exploratory line, but perhaps more entrenched in postcolonial discourse, Coco Fusco, in collaboration with Mexican born artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, performed *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*. First staging this performance on Columbus Plaza in Madrid as an oppositional response to the commemoration of the quincentennial of Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of the New World in 1992 (Taylor, “A Savage Performance” 163), the performance piece had a long two-year exhibition history, which included performances at different but clearly hand-picked locations. Choosing not only countries with a history of colonial exploitation but also institutions or sites publicly deemed as both creators of knowledge and depositories of the ‘world’s’ historical and artistic patrimony, the couple’s touring itinerary included the Covent Garden in London, the National Museum of Natural History at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C., the Field Museum in Chicago, the Whitney Museum's Biennial in New York, the Australian Museum of Natural History and, finally, an art foundation in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

For the piece Fusco wore a grass skirt and a leopard bikini-like top, braided hair, and a painted face, while Gómez-Peña was dressed in an Aztec style breastplate, complete with a leopard skin face wrestler's mask. Responding to Gómez-Peña’s strategy of occupying “a fictional central space, fully knowing that it’s fictional, and to speak always from this fictional center, to push the dominant culture to the margins, to treat it as exotic and unfamiliar” (Vercoe 246), the performers emphasized the stereotype of ‘indigenous’ behavior while contrasting it with ‘western’ practices such as wearing sunglasses, baseball caps and sneakers, and listening to rap music or watching TV. Their aim, as Fusco states, “was not to
represent an actual existent indigenous culture, but rather to re-enact the idea of Otherness” (Vercoe 233) hence making reference to her own personal experience as a Latina mulatta living in the U.S. This, however, is a point I will further delve into in the next subsection of this chapter.

Blending realism and fiction, both artists enclosed their own bodies in a cage against a background of ‘authentic’ paraphernalia from their homeland and presented themselves as two previously unknown specimens representative of the Guatinaui people, a culture located in an ‘undiscovered’ island off the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. As proof of their veracity, ‘realistic’ details were provided in the presentation. Some of the details included the presence of docents giving informed explanations to the public and presenting evidence in the form of maps and texts which showed specifically the location of Guatinaui (Vercoe 234). Creating such historical and geographical justification to contextualize the piece and render it more ‘real’, Fusco and Gómez-Peña posited an island as the place of origin of these two ‘exotic’ individuals. In so doing, the notion of an island appears, too, as a leitmotif of her work. And even if the work does not refer precisely to Cuba, I contend that the fact that Fusco and Gómez-Peña chose a ‘floating’ as opposed to a ‘mainland’ territory, is of deep significance, especially through the lens of diasporic identities. However, what I want to stress here is the fact that, in the end, this piece satirizes the seemingly objective construction of knowledge, of how people are taught to accept the ‘evidence’ of science, in this case under the banner of anthropology, as the unquestionable proof of ‘truth’. Hence Fusco, not only demonstrated how knowledge tends to be created by a powerful few—western, white males—in order to serve their particular needs, but she also played with the authority of certain institutions—particularly museums in this case—as guardians and providers of such knowledge. As paradoxical as it may seem, then, by locating herself in an actual and metaphorical cage, that is, as the object of study, she was nonetheless the actual subject creating knowledge and hence a subaltern cultural producer.

Coco Fusco, unlike Mendieta, was born in New York in 1959 into a lower-middle class Cuban immigrant family. As Fusco herself shares: “I am a daughter of a Cuban who emigrated to the United States in 1954 and who was deported in 1959, shortly after the triumph of the Revolution. My mother hid from the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) until after my birth. She then returned to the island with me. My United States
citizenship enabled my mother to return to New York City within weeks, while the lines of Cubans seeking exit visas at the American Embassy grew and grew” (*English is Broken Here* 4). The constant migration of relatives and friends in the decade that followed made the Fusco’s household a receiving center for those who had just recently left the island. Because of this constant presence of ‘islanders’ Fusco says, “I grew accustomed to living with the presence of an imaginary country in my home; it spoke to me in another language, in stories, rhymes, and prayers; it smelled and tasted different from the world beyond the front door. Still unlike other immigrants who could return and replenish their repertoire of cultural references, we could not” (*English is Broken Here* 4). These nostalgic references to that imaginary location that marked Fusco’s connection to her origins lead us, again, to the concept of island as a central repository of creativity for Cubans in the diaspora.

Islands, however, at least from an imperialist geographic perspective, are not the ‘main’ land and therefore tend to be more elusive, in every sense of the word, than those territories that form continents. Not only because of their smaller size, but also because of their insularity, that is, their detached positionality in regards to the larger masses (of land, of people, of thought), can be easily sent to oblivion by simply eliminating their presence in the mapa mundi. Following this logic, *Two Undiscovered…* underscores the imperialistic stance that obscures the importance of archipelagos such as the Caribbean region itself. However, in this performance Fusco actually reverses that not only by including a piece of land in the audience’s scope but also by demanding its recognition inspite of its ‘undiscovered’ status. Calling it Guatinaui, a faux word that derived from “what now” but was transformed to resonate with Guanahani, the first island in which Christopher Columbus set foot in his 1492 expedition, this new territory manages, then, to concentrate the attention in ‘the island’ as the central place of enunciation, as the foundational place for this poetic and political act. And in so doing, Fusco also manages to subvert the existence of the island as a peripheral and colonized space. Something that clearly alludes to Cuba and its positionality in the world order.

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14 In Spanish the phrase “estar fuera del mapa” (to be out of the map) means to be practically non-existing and therefore to be of no importance, or to have no take on a matter.
Interestingly, then, after analyzing these three pieces what becomes evident is the fact that they all accommodate to, but also resist, the norms and claims of nationalism by both presenting multiple Cubas and enacting them in different countries (i.e. Mexico and the U.S. in Mendieta’s case, and Spain, United Kingdom, Australia, Argentina and the U.S. in Fusco’s case). It is noteworthy that not necessarily repeating but rather ‘insisting’ in the recreation of multiple forms of self as a territory, Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco embrace difference in their representations of perhaps the same theme. And in so doing their work falls into the domain of what art critic and collector Gertrude Stein calls “insistence” as opposed to repetition where each mark or trace evolves in a “continuous succession” (176). Furthering this idea Joanna Walker argues that “repetition commonly implies an empty reproduction of a lost origin, while the retracing adopted in Mendieta’s re-creation involves an almost additive, progressive sense of remembering” (90-91), and this, I contend, can also be applied to Fusco’s work. In this light, the Untitled Creek Piece, Isla, and Two Undiscovered… all subscribe to the idea of cubanía for, as Pérez Firmat asserts, cubanía finds its expression in the abstract and ineffable notion of patria however imaginary (DeRojas 182).

But it is precisely in this imaginary condition of that homeland that I want to stop for a minute. As seen in these three pieces, when (re)constructing Cuba or even the notion of cubanía outside the island, the territory itself appears as a crucial element. In this vein, it is interesting to see how Mendieta and Fusco both from the distance, and through their personal memories are able to generate a new patria. One that I contend is different from that of male exiles in that it offers a gynocentric perspective. General definitions of Cubanness, be it through the rigorist definition of cubanidad or through the more comprehensive asception of cubanía, have slighted gender issues. In this light, it is clear that “(…) women producing culture in the second half of the twentieth century still must correct the overwhelming cultural erasures regarding (…) female (gender) subjectivity and creativity” (González Mandri 4).

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15 Interestingly or perhaps ironically, the term in Spanish used to refer to the homeland is gendered. The term patria finds its roots in the Latin word pater and hence literally translates to English as ‘fatherland’. But perhaps even more interesting is the fact that, throughout the Hispanic Latin American countries (where Cuba is clearly included), it is common to listen to people say ‘la madre patria’ (the mother fatherland), as contradictory as it may sound, when referring to Spain, the country to which many trace their actual origins.
As if aware of such gendered cultural omissions when analyzing *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Memory Mambo*, the literary works of Cristina García and Achy Obejas, scholar Maite Zubiaurre points to the way in which these two female Cuban exiles living in the U.S. are able to (re)construct Cuba through their writing. In these two novels, Zubiaurre argues, Cuba appears as a distant and blurred reality given the distortion induced by memory and history, both male-centered and with capital letters, as a symbol of an identity not yet consolidated, and as an object of desire (3). However, she continues, “Es precisamente la fuerza apremiante del deseo la que construye, con ayuda de una serie de microrrelatos sobre las existencias femeninas, un espacio híbrido, cambiante, una Cuba a veces mítica, a veces burlesca, que desafía el concepto ortodoxo y masculinista de nación” (3). (It is precisely this pressing desire, along with the series of microstories about women, that constructs a hybrid and changing space, a sometimes mythical and sometimes burlesque Cuba that defies the orthodox and masculinist concept of nation) (my translation). In this logic, although changing the means of expression from writing to the performatic, I posit that, just as García and Obejas do, Mendieta and Fusco’s above described pieces evoke not necessarily the desire to go back to the place of origin, as is the case of most male exiles, but rather the desire to both retell the stories of that past through the lens of a woman, and recover that lost space in a different way. And in so doing, they subscribe to the discourse of female displaced voices, which, although still founded on nostalgic references, brings in a more critical and transforming gaze than the traditional male-centered approach. In the words of feminist literary scholar Nancy K. Miller: “To reread as a woman is at least to imagine the lady’s place; to imagine while reading the place of a woman’s body; to read reminded that her identity is also re-membered in stories of the body” (355). Making (Cuban) women visible and revealing their experiences and contributions to culture and society, something which tends to be ignored or denied, are perhaps the two most evident contributions of the female standpoint either in literature or in the plastic or performative arts. Furthermore, as these women speak/write/paint/perform from their gendered subjectivity they become producers of culture, hence unearthing the sexist biases of a patriarchal order under which women’s bodies are conceived exclusively as reproductive entities and whose labor is overtly undervalued. When women create, then, they bring in topics like difference and injustice to the table. As Levins Morales states:
Puerto Rican women have always held four-fifths of the sky. Ours is the work they decided to call un-work. The tasks as necessary as air. Not a single thing they did could have been done without us. Not a treasure taken. Not a crop brought in. Not a town built up in its plaza, not a fortress manned without our cooking, cleaning, sewing, laundering, childbearing. We have always been here doing what had to be done. As reliable as furniture, as supportive as their favorite sillón. Who thanks his bed? But we are not furniture. We are full of fire, dreams, pain, subversive laughter. We were always here, working, eating, sleeping, singing, suffering, giving birth, dying (…) Not one of those books that ignore us could have been written without our shopping, baking, mending, ironing, typing, making coffee, comforting (…) This is our story, and the truth of our lives will overthrow them. (Remedios XXXII)

In this introductory paragraph, Morales Levins assumes herself as part of the pletora of women who have played multiple roles in the history of that Caribbean nation and raises her voice to attract the attention of an unspecified ‘them’. Whether she is talking to the men or, given the island’s history, to the colonial invaders who conquered the territory while controlling and exploiting the local populations is not clear, but assuming that she is actually engaging with both the options, what becomes more relevant is the fact that she is actually following many of her own precepts to tell stories from a curandera standpoint.16 The most healing and therefore most noteworthy of which are the way in which she both puts the spotlight into women’s active participation in everyday’s history and narrates those untold stories she calls “the truth of our lives” therefore offering a challenging and refreshing gaze into mainstream History (Levins Morales, Remedios XXXII). But where do Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco fit into this?

Clearly, the two pieces by Mendieta I have touched on thus far (Figures 9 and 10) are self-representations of the artist-either through her own body or a semi-sculpture of her figure—in an open dialogue with the notion of island and hence with Cuba’s history. In this light, they can be read as an enactment of some of Levins Morales’ tenets such as centering

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16 In her essay “The Historian as Curandera”, Levins Morales enlisted fifteen tenets for her and others to follow in order to conduct historical work having the healing curandera perspective in mind: (1) Tell untold or undertold stories, (2) Centering women changes the landscape, (3) Identify strategic pieces of misinformation and contradict them, (4) Make absences visible, (5) Asking questions can be as good as answering them, (6) What constitutes evidence?, (7) Show agency, (8) Show complexity and embrace ambiguity and contradiction, (9) Reveal hidden power relationships, (10) Personalize, (11) Show connection and context, (12) Restore global context, (13) Access and Digestibility, (14) Show yourself in your work, and (15) Cross borders.
on women, telling untold stories, making absences visible, showing agency, and personalizing, just to name a few. However, when it comes to Fusco’s piece (Figure 11), the idea of providing a liberating female perspective becomes less clear because of her working together with Gómez-Peña. In fact, as Diana Taylor argues, this performance was successful in critiquing colonialist and thus ethnic and nationalist structures, but far less poignant regarding sexism or heterosexism (*The Archive and the Repertoire* 68). According to Taylor “The performers played the male and female referred to in the explanatory panels” (2003: 68). There was, she continues, “something very alluring about Fusco with her beautiful face painted and wearing a grass skirt and skimpy bra, and the frequent sexual overtures by men suggest that perhaps the erotic pleasure of her performance eclipsed its ethos” (Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* 68). Regarding the masculine representation, Taylor asserts, Gómez-Peña’s appearance was also problematic to the extent that it portrayed an image of a threatening macho with “spiked gloves and dog collar” (68). Interestingly though, in response to Taylor’s critiques, Fusco wrote a document in which she stated the following:

Regarding how traditional the gendered division of labor was in the piece - I couldn't agree more with Diana! At the time, I thought that such extreme gender stereotyping would read as irony but very often it didn't. In fact, the first time Guillermo Gómez-Peña(GGP) and I performed the piece at UC-Irvine some women professors complained that my role was too passive. Part of the reason we divided activities in a way that made me "speechless" was a question of skill - GGP's been refining his fake Nahuatl for years, and I just couldn't speak it.
(. . ) In the middle of a collaboration in which I was struggling daily to be taken seriously as an artist, I had trouble seeing that the very dynamics of the piece hindered my goal. Strangely enough, I actually did lose my voice a few times during the tour, which at the time I attributed to chronic jet lag and excessive exposure to cigarette smoke. In retrospect, I often wonder if I didn't get ill so often during that tour because I was feeling too caged, too silenced, and too exposed as silenced. ("Fusco Responds" 10)

That said, despite the different strategies and the interests reflected in and achieved by the works of Ana Mendieta—the creation of a female and fluid diasporic identity/space—and Coco Fusco—the centering of otherness conceived as both a racialized and sexualized subject/territory—what I wish to stress here are their similarities. Both artists managed to create a discursive space through which they explain themselves as well as their culture. According to Stuart Hall there are two ways of conceiving one’s cultural identity. There is, on the one hand, a sort of essential cultural identification derived from “(…) the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (393). It is through this definition that one can understand how, by embracing cubania, understood as a voluntary identitarian trace more than as a chronologically and geographically fixed category, Mendieta and Fusco both manifested a sense of belonging to a culture—more than a territory—that recreates itself through the artists’ performative representations. On the other hand, however, Hall broadens the spectrum of what cultural identity is by acknowledging there exist “points of deep and significant difference (…) (given) the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (394). In so doing, he admits personal nuances into the general overarching definition of culture and hence leads this analysis to a point where the two artists’s positionality needs to be taken into account. For, although they both coincide in terms of gender and nationality, they differ significantly in terms of ethnicity, generational connection to the island, and personal experiences in the U.S. This fact thus chisels away views that cast the Cuban exile experience and community as monolithic.

Given that life in diaspora is all but the same to everyone, in the next section I explore in detail the diasporic experiences of Mendieta and Fusco, and shed some light into their particular positionings within dominant Anglo culture. In so doing, I then identify the
differences and/or similarities regarding the ways they produced both their identities and their art.

**THE CUBAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

What does it mean to be Cuban or American? Can these two cultures coexist in one’s body/perspective/memory? Should one decide for one or the other? Is one’s self-definition a choice or circumstantial? How painful is the experience of living between two cultures/countries? Although I am aware the academic discussion around hibridization and the hyphenated way of living goes beyond the Cuban-American population, I will hereby limit myself to analyzing the issue from an exclusively Cuban perspective. As previously mentioned, Fernando Ortíz’s notion of transculturación is key to understanding the cultural integration of the Cuban people. Ortíz, who is deemed as “Cuba’s Third Discoverer” or “Mister Cuba” because of the way he personified and distilled in his life and work the Cuban ethos (Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban Condition* 20), was convinced that in order to understand Cuban culture one necessarily needed to trace its European and African antecedents as well as those that were indigenous to the area. For the writer of *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, the term acculturation means “the acquisition of a new culture by an outsider or newcomer” (Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban Condition* 21). However, the process of two cultures being in contact, he continues, is much more complex than that. According to him, the phenomenon is actually composed of three stages: ‘‘deculturation’, or the shedding of certain elements from the culture of origin; ‘acculturation’, or the acquisition of elements of another culture; and ‘neoculturación’, or the new cultural synthesis created by the merging of elements from the old and new cultures” (Pérez Firmat, *The Cuban Condition* 21). Aiming to substitute transculturation for acculturation, Ortíz then managed to propose a more comprehensive and precise term to invoke the complicated process of this phenomenon.17

Pérez Firmat built on Ortíz’s analysis of this process to develop the thesis of his book called *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (1994). Based on Ortíz’s famous

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17 Interestingly, in the introduction to the 1995 edition of Ortíz’s book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, Fernando Coronil points to the irony of how, “on the basis of (Bronislaw) Malinowski’s minimal use of the term transculturation in this book (A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays, 1944) , the Oxford English Dictionary credits Malinowski as introducing the word; needless to say, it does not distinguish the term from acculturation, which was Ortiz’s intent in coining it” (xlv).
metaphor of comparing Cuban culture to *ajiaco*, a Cuban stew “that accepts the most diverse ingredients” (Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen* 15), Pérez Firmat’s stretched the term to theorize about the permeable and maleable character of constituting a Cuban sentiment outside the island. Concentrated on analyzing such experience through the eyes of perhaps two of the most popular Cuban-Americans, actor Desy Arnaz and singer Gloria Estefan, his study posits that Cuban-American culture “heightens and draws out certain tendencies inherent in mainland island culture–most prominently, the tendency toward hyphenation” (Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen* 15). According to this Cuban theorist, the hyphenated condition does not imply an assimilationist stance but rather an act of adding. As the term Cuban-American itself denotes, it is not a matter of effacing the Cuban part but rather of letting the U.S. influence emerge in one’s identity as well. The Cuban island itself, as Pérez-Firmat adverts and as can be seen in Figure 12, even has the form of a hyphen floating in the Caribbean sea, and linking the American continent with a farther away territory conformed by Europe and Africa.


Perhaps a romanticized idea of Cuba playing the role of a connecting piece between continents and cultures, the image of the hyphen nonetheless iconographically leads us back to both the aesthetics and politics in Mendieta’s performances recreating islands (Figures 9 and 10). However, Pérez Firmat falls rather short in considering the complications and even the pain of the diasporic subjects experience given the power dynamics entrenched in the nationalist, racist and sexist principles American society tends to follow. Choosing to analyze the lives of two exemplars who actually succeeded in the process of crossing-over –Arnaz
and Estefan–, his main argument is that, when living in the U.S., Cubans, with the help of some translating abilities, just need to follow the simple equation of “A+B=C” (read cubanía + americanness= cuban-americaneness). But as Ortíz had accutely identified, there are both losses and gains in the process of transculturation, and hence substractions as well as additions. In the words of Cuban-American Francisco Soto, “As much as Pérez Firmat would like to stress the positive side of those of us who live on the hyphen–how we feed on what we lack, how we are free to mix and match pieces from each culture, how we are excellent negotiators, and so forth–I believe that we pay a high price for this duality of being part Cuban, part American–a duality that at times can and does fragment the soul” (105).

Ana Mendieta arrived to the U.S. in a time when the civil rights movement was at its pinnacle as well as the protests against the Vietnam war, hence it was also the time when intense battles regarding racial purity, class privilege and an obliged sense of patriotism were taking place (Blocker 52). Such political context in which her personal journey through the U.S. welfare system was framed, drastically changed the perception she had of herself. Born and raised in a prominent Cuban environment, which nonetheless traced its roots to Spain, Ana and her sister Raquel have never before had to question their race or ethnicity. In the words of Raquel: “it never entered our minds that we were colored” (qtd. in Blocker 53). In an interview with Blocker, Manuel Pardo a friend of Ana’s, talked about how she was not prepared to face the institutionalized racism she found in the U.S. For instance, one time, when the girls’ current foster mom found some money missing out of her purse, she immediately blamed the ‘suspicious’ latinas. Such an event, according to Pardo, was just one example of how the dark skin of the Mendieta sisters was their mark of undesirability (Blocker 53). María de los Ángeles Torres, herself an exile who was friends with Mendieta, and was also relocated to Cleveland, Ohio at age six as part of the Pedro Pan iniciative comments about the experience: “Raised outside the closely knit Miami émigré enclave, I was not protected from dehumanizing clashes with racism. These contributed to my search for alternative politics and my desire to return ‘home’” (xiii). The color of the Mendietas, being darker than most of Iowa’s inhabitants, was the source of the increasing racism of which they were subject. Raquel remembers how, when attending high school in the mid sixties, “we first experienced racism from our peer group” (qtd. in Blocker 53). Furthermore, she remembers how Ana would get anonymous phone calls where she was called “nigger”
followed by a candid cry that said “Go back to Cuba, you whore!” (qtd. in Blocker 53). This connection between Ana’s ‘ethnic’ or Latina physicality and the Anglo’s immediate reading of her as a sexually menacing being, something which links her experience of sexism to that of racism based on nationalistic stances, has been widely studied by sociologist Joane Nagel. According to her, the interconnection between sex and ethnicity although generally hidden is nonetheless extremely powerful. In her own words, “Sex is the whispered subtext in racial discourse. Sex is sometimes the silent message contained in racial slurs, ethnic stereotypes, national imaginings, and international relations” (Nagel 2). Aware of the ethnosexual seteotying she was subjected to Mendieta herself wrote a note that reads as follows:

I was looked at by the people in the midwest as a erotic being (myth of the hot Latin), aggressive, and sort of evil. This created a very rebellious attitude in me until it sort of exploded inside me and I became aware of my own being, my own existence as a very particular and singular being. The discovery was a form of seeing myself separate from others, alone. (qtd. in Merewether, 142)

Incorporating these words into the analysis of Creek piece (Figure 9) and Isla (Figure 10) enables both pieces to take on yet another layer of meaning: one in which Ana (re)presents, not without a subtle touch of condemnation and transgression, the racialized features imposed upon her by the U.S.’s Anglosaxon discourse. What Mendieta clearly emphasizes in both of them is the body as woman. Interestingly enough, in the early Creek piece performed in 1974 her actual corporality is the material for production whereas in the later 1981 Isla an earth sculpture made out of her own silhouette is the actual piece. And so, when put face to face, these two works offer different phases of Mendieta’s creative process. According to Merewether, this process shifted when the artist removed herself as the material object of her art and replaced it with land replications of herself (143). Hence, in the former piece the artist appears as is, presenting no other than her skin shining through the transparencies of the running water of the San Felipe river, while in the latter her surrogate figure sends out the color of the damped soil extracted from the banks of Old Man’s Creek in Iowa City. However, I contend that such change of materiality also implies a change in Mendieta’s self-identification and self-representation processes. Going from the ‘dark’ natural color of her nude body in Creek piece to the ‘darker’ tones of the earth in Isla, I find that Ana both assumed and transcended her condition as a racialized minority. As if saying, “ok, this is me, here is my body, and if a woman of color is what everyone sees in me, I might even represent myself exaggerating the colored traits that mark me as different,” she
was able to go beyond that category by dissociating her actual self from it and presenting a mud figure instead. In fact, contrary to Kuspit’s psychoanalytical approach through which, totally ignoring the influence of social pressures, he conceived Mendieta’s work as the representation of “the body as it is experienced from the inside, rather that the body as it is understood from the outside” (Kuspit 214), I believe that Isla (Figure 10) is an example of Mendieta’s “own exploration of the relation between the interiorization of the foreign and exteriorization of the self” (Merewether 144). As in the Kimberly story I referred to above where the displaced women managed to cope with their sense of loss by ingesting soil, Mendieta metaphorically ‘ate dirt’ but managed to appropriate the negative aspects of the stereotype of Latinidad by letting her most dear cultural traces shine through. In the artist’s own words, her experience in the diaspora reached a point of both “discovery within the self of a capacity to survive and grow in the environment, and transcendence” of her condition of exile (qtd. in Merewether 144).

Coco Fusco, on the other hand, also points to the way in which the children of her generation, a generation in which I include Ana Mendieta for there were only eleven years of difference between the two artists, “didn’t choose to leave or to stay—the wars that shaped our identities as Cuban or American are ones we inherited” (English is Broken Here 4). Constantly negotiating between the Cuban and the Anglo worlds, I nonetheless suggest that Fusco underwent a perhaps smoother road than Mendieta given the more abrupt conditions of the latter’s journey to the U.S. –she left her parents and friends behind to arrive in the predominantly white Iowa, while Fusco was born in New York, a city known throughout as perhaps the most culturally diverse in the world. However, in the documentary I Like Girls in Uniforms Fusco talks about how her identity has always been a problem for most people. “They are constantly trying to change it”, she says. “When I was born, the nuns in the hospital thought they were making my parents a favor by classifying me as white. Then, my mother got deported and took me to Cuba with her where everyone saw me as a mulatica clarita. Well, my parents tried to raise me without a sense of race but that was unrealistic” (Farkas). In her introduction to English is Broken Here, Fusco relates how her parents resorted to certain strategies as a means to ease their children’s experience growing up as mulattos in the U.S. Her mother, she says, hid from the real estate agents in order to get into a neighborhood that was not a barrio, and constantly cleaned the front of the house “in case
anyone dared to get any wrong ideas” (viii). Her father, Fusco continues, unrolled the American flag during specific patriotic holidays, the kids attended a mostly Jewish school, and the family as a whole went to church with the Irish on Sundays (viii). In fact, the artist asserts, “we somehow managed to believe that we weren’t really in America (…). America, we believed, was somewhere else. It was in any direction going away from New York” (viii).

In this light I contend that in *Two Undiscovered*… (Figure 11) Fusco, by emphasizing herself as a racialized and hence ‘primitive’ being, dissociated herself from whiteness and reenacted in a satiric way the experience of a woman of color in public sites in so-called First World countries. Alluding to the power dynamics that exist in the act of looking and being looked upon in terms of the local and the foreigner, this performance piece was clearly not complete without the presence of an audience. As Taylor, in her critique of the piece, stated:

The ‘primitive’ body as object reaffirms the cultural supremacy and authority of the viewing subject -the one who sees, interprets, and records, from the divine Columbus to the ethnographer (a la Malinowski, Mead, and Levi-Strauss), who poses as a neutral observer, an authorized, disinterested professional dedicated to the discovery and analysis of societies of which the ethnographer forms no part. The native is the show; the civilized observer is the privileged spectator. The objectified, ‘primitive’ body exists, isolated and removed. ‘We,’ those viewers who look through the eyes of the explorer, are (like the explorer) positioned safely outside the frame, free to define, theorize, and debate their (never ‘our’) societies. The ‘encounters’ with the native create ‘us’ as audience just as much as the violence of definition creates ‘them’- the primitives. The drama depends on maintaining a unidirectional gaze, and stages the lack of reciprocity and mutual understanding inherent in ‘discovery’. ("A Savage Performance" 163)

The ‘encounter’, however, needs not to be exclusively read as something that happened back in the fifteenth century but rather as a phenomenon that has been happening ever since. In fact, never have there been so many ‘encounters’ caused by the massive flows, not only of people as is the case of Mendieta and Fusco’s exilic experience, but also of capital, goods, and ideas across national borders than today. The increasing rate of these flows, consequence of the current global transnational trends, has many scholars concerned about the changes this may generate in terms of nations and cultures. One of the main discussions on this matter has to do with whether nations will become less diverse as western culture and products more quickly make their way into the rest of the world. Arjun Appadurai, one of the principal scholars of cultural flows via media, says that the answer is no. He suggests that, in this sense, transnationalism is good, that it has “ushered in a new
period of weakened nationalism and deterritorialized citizenship” that "has been liberatory in both a spatial and political sense, for all peoples" (Modernity at Large 56). However, I find that Appadurai’s approach fails to consider the negative responses to the Other’s presence in migrant-receiving countries, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Other’s grounded experiences and agency in their new settings.

Tuned into this and other discussions regarding the purity of cultures and the processes of cultural production in the globalized era, in Two Undiscovered… Fusco and Gómez-Peña enacted a diorama seemingly having the concept of transculturation as backbone. In Fusco’s own words: “We were trying to blast this myth that the non-western other exists in a time and place that is completely untouched by western civilization, or that in order to be authentic one would have to be devoid of characteristics associated with the west” (Johnson 51). This is why, presenting artifacts commonly deemed as western—a laptop, a TV, a bottle of Coca-Cola, a radio, among others—while pretending to be ‘authentic’ savages this piece tore down the binary structure that conceives the world in terms of East and West, North and South, First World and Third World, center and periphery and so on. Hence, this performance problematized and dramatized, in a perhaps fun and irreverent manner, the process of cultures clashing, meeting and mixing as well as the consequences such process has on the people that embody the ‘primitive’ or ‘uncivilized’ traditions. However, most important to me is the fact that this piece is an excellent example of some sense of agency publicly manifested by so-called ‘people of color’.

This category under which the Anglosaxon world lumps in all women and men who are not ‘purely’ white, although quite problematic, has proven to be convenient in terms of effacing differences among the ‘otherness’. Maintaining a clear distinction between those who are in and those who are out this category ‘of color’ hence safeguards and promotes the status quo. In Fusco’s words: it is “bad habits which have enabled the U.S. government and the American media to turn to hundreds of ethnic groups into one (...) and systematically promote its misinterpretation as a racial term, for the benefit of a segregationist system that sees only in black and white, no matter what the other’s color is” (English is Broken Here 23). Rather interestingly then, the truth is that Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco’s displacement from the island seemingly erased the nuances between them in terms of class and ethnicity (read Mendieta’s bourgeois and Spanish origin compared to Fusco’s lower-middle class and
Afro-Italian origin) and blurred them into the ambiguous and undefined mass of ‘women of color’. And although I will be coming back again to this category in Chapter 3, I find it pertinent to quote Fusco as she discusses how the U.S. social order has been conceived in a way that both ideologically and pragmatically creates divide amongst people. “In the North”, Fusco asserts, “a combination of prolonged legal and social segregation and a deeply embedded ideology of essentialist separatism, supported by the pragmatist stronghold on American philosophy, has continuously deferred recognition and affirmation of this country’s and its people’s racial and cultural hybridity” *(English is Broken Here 23)*. In this light, subject to the institutionalized and socially internalized racism, both of these women’s experiences as ethnic and gendered others led them to develop a critical approach to their living “life one the hyphen” *(Pérez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen*)*. Something that, as I previously stated, Pérez Firmat failed to consider in his analysis of the Cuban-American condition. As a consequence, I argue that Fusco and Mendieta’s experience appears more atuned to the gendered vision of Myriam J. A. Chancy’s theorization of what she calls living “in-between” *(xi)*. This is, living between races, cultures, languages and nations knowing that “existing in this way is counter to the norms established for survival in a mainstream society” *(xi)*.

But to provide a more balanced perspective of these artists Cuban-American experience, it is also necessary to take into account the fact that Cubans in general are regularly conceived by scholars as U.S.’s most prominent Latinos. According to Juan González, because there are tremendous disparities primarily in terms of class, education and race among the multiple waves of migration, there is no typical Cuban exile *(109)*. However, he continues, “The refugees from the 1960s and 1970s were largely from the upper and middle classes and brought with them enormous technical skills. Those advantages, together with the massive aid the federal government dispensed to them, turned Cubans into this country’s most prosperous Hispanic immigrants” *(González 109)*. In this line of thought, then, one must recognize some of the more positive aspects of the Cuban diaspora. I am fascinated by Coco’s childhood memories of how her family, being well aware of the existing prejudices against them, managed to work around them through astute techniques. She talks about how she was born in a Catholic Hospital, lived in a not so negatively deemed neighborhood and received an education all the way to a Ph.D. In Mendieta’s case, despite
the hardships she experienced as an ‘orphan’ exile in a foreign and racist country, one must agree that she also benefited from the welfare and scholarly system by achieving a Masters’ degree herself. In fact, one crucial thing that both artists have in common is their having made it through and profiting from the U.S. educational system and artistic platform. So perhaps it is fair to acknowledge that, thanks to the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, the U.S. government provided Cuban refugees—among which Mendieta and Fusco are certainly counted—with programs through which they were eligible for public assistance, Medicaid, food stamps, free English courses, scholarships, and low-interest college loans, programs that other Latinos never received (González 110).

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the first section of this chapter I was able to lay out my theoretical framework pointing to the concepts that allowed me to identify how Mendieta and Fusco fit in as well as enrich the extant literature regarding the diasporic experiences of Cuban women artists living in the U.S. Given the complex character of the relations between Cuba and the U.S., I also provided a brief historical and political context so as to incorporate my analysis in a specific chronotopos.

In section two, I compared and contrasted the theory with the artists’ own lives and work, hence underscoring the way in which their gendered and racialized standpoint brings in a significantly different perspective on the subject matter. By grounding the previously discussed concepts into three performances, Untitled (Creek Piece) and Isla by Mendieta and Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West by Fusco, I analyzed the link of both artists with the notion of island with all the symbolism thereby implied. Positing diaspora as a site and a state that both propelled and informed their creative pieces, in this section I focused more on the similarities. Delving into the different layers of meaning underlying the artistic expressions I was, then, able to delineate Mendieta’s and Fusco’s ability to remember and (re)present a not so easily self-defined territory as is Cuba and as is the female body. Informed by their own life experiences, and using their own selves as sites for knowledge creation, both artists used performative strategies to make their voices heard in public spaces. Mendieta went out to nature to challenge masculinist, racist and imperialist approaches to land and the notions of origin and territoriality. She created her own imaginary spaces, that
is, flowing and floating islands that were also the representation of her self both physically and emotionally speaking. Fusco, however, utilized the validity granted by the bastions of knowledge themselves and reenacted her pieces within the confines of museums or cultural institutions. Along with Gómez-Peña, she managed to create a satiric take on the historical consequences of the conquest of the Americas. And in so doing she, too, created an imaginary space—also an island—and posited as the site to subvert the idea of that first encounter with the Other. These aspects, which I consider to be alternative gynocentric modes of knowledge, then, locate Mendieta and Fusco as subaltern cultural producers.

The third and last section of this chapter was based on the analysis of the same three pieces. However, at this point my approach emphasized the particularities of both artists’ experiences as Cuban-Americans. Bringing in concepts and theories on transculturation and the condition of living between two nations, I pinpointed the difficulties of living in a segregationist society while also acknowledging the possibility of showing agency and responding to oppressing forces such as sexism and racism in a creative way.

That said, the following chapter centers in (re)defining and analyzing performance art, Mendieta’s and Fusco’s preferred artistic means. Considering it as an inherently subversive medium, I first locate the emergence of this practice within art history’s mainstream discourse. Then, however, I introduce the feminist take and explore the reason why, ever since its conception, women have found in performance art the perfect resource for self-ennunciation. Finally, since I am talking about two women with particular ethnic and national identifications, I concentrate on discussing the cultural, historical and ritualistic sources from which performance art draws, hence offering a Cuban and, more generally speaking, a Latin American decolonizing perspective.
CHAPTER 3

OF AESTHETICS AND POLITICS:
DECOLONIZING ART

The politics of transfiguration that diaspora necessitates strives in the pursuit of the sublime, struggling to repeat the unrepeateable; to present the unrepresentable.

--Paul Gilroy

Conventional wisdom agrees that political fiction is not art; that such work is less likely to have aesthetic value because politics—all politics—is agenda and therefore its presence taints aesthetic production… But since my sensibility was highly political and passionately aesthetic, it would unapologetically inform the work I did.

--Toni Morrison

Cuba, given its historic and geographic particularities, as I elaborated throughout the first chapter, has never been a fixed entity. Because of its strategic location, the island became a site of convergences very early on. Circumscribed by the sea, however, the Cuban nation has not been limited by it. On the contrary, propelled by the forces of such mass of water to put it metaphorically, people and their culture, as is the case of Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco, have submerged themselves into the flows of constant movement. Hence Cuba has become a nation on the move, that is, a nation with a common original homeland that nonetheless exists outside its territorial borders. In this light, Cuba’s cultural continuity, as authors like Ortíz and Pérez Firmat have pointed out, “has always depended on a process of absorption, translation, transformation, and synthesis that has occurred in this context of movement” (O’reilly Herrera 3).

Adhering to the notion of diaspora both as a lived experience and as a site for cultural reconfiguration, it is important to point out that, in Mendieta’s and Fusco’s case, they both migrated from Cuba to the U.S., that is, from a peripheic to a central location, and thus it is important to acknowledge the presence of inherent power dynamics implied in such move. For as diaspora scholar Robin Cohen has stated: “What migration and the creation of diasporas have done is to move the margins to the centre. The marginal groups are suddenly nearby, present, attendant, co-existent” (134). Hence, he continues, “Nations are extended or


unconfined from the viewpoint of the sending areas, but they appear as minorities, often quite weak and relatively powerless minorities, in the countries in which they find themselves” (Cohen 137). In this light, even if one might not subscribe to the binary patriarchal vision that conceives the world in terms of First World and Third World, the truth is that such political divide that originated precisely when Fidel Castro aligned the island’s politics with the at the time Soviet Union’s communist regime, was the one that propelled the Cuban diaspora in the first place and hence frames the political context of that period. The tensions between capitalism and communism that sprouted out of this historical period now known as the Cold War Era and the First World-Third World framework that emerged from it, are, however, a seemingly well kept tradition that has marked the world order and the international relations sustained within it ever since. Hence the multiplicity of strategies intended to suppress the possibility of defying the fixed but nonetheless absurd physical and abstract boundaries between those who are deemed to be ‘in’ and those who are ‘out’. In this vein, the psychological tolls of racism, sexism, and nationalism deployed by the U.S. appear as the ferociously applied strategies upon which the status quo is maintained. As a consequence, the hardships underlying the experience of negotiation between a Cuban and a Cuban-American identity, illuminate the complexity of Mendieta’s and Fusco’s diasporic subjectivity. But perhaps, I want to posit here, it is in the will to overcome those obstacles that both artists found the way to actually crack and therefore expose the injustices of a rigid system that, constructed upon fixed foundational categories, trembles whenever fluid and flexible identities reaffirm themselves in their uniqueness, in this case through performance art.

Not surprisingly then, speaking particularly about the artistic realm, O’reilly Herrera argues that “Relatively little attention has been given to Cuban diasporic art in the United States and Europe as compared with the interest in artwork produced by Cubans who chose to remain on the island following the 1959 revolution” (21). A possible answer as to why this happens, particularly regarding the art produced by the Cuban diasporic community in the U.S., can be found in the configuration of the Anglo cultural mainstream where political and economic power determine which art is legitimized and which, from the distance, may be interesting but only as a social expression of a country in crisis. And since the mainstream art world and the economic structure that supports it is largely controlled by white, male Euro-Americans, the art that is actually promoted and privileged is that made by their own
(Touchette 185). As artist, author and activist Charleen Touchette argues, when arts administrators, curators, and critics justify their exclusion of multicultural art from the scene in terms of professional evaluations of a ‘universal art quality’, “the true motive of these judgements is to exclude art that makes them uncomfortable because it reflects experiences that are culturally different from their own” (185, 186).

Another explanation about the lacuna surrounding Cuban diasporic art, specifically in the U.S., has to do with the way the Anglo world typifies and classifies art just as it does people. In *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America*, a book where feminist art critic Lucy Lippard tries to bring justice to diversity in the U.S.’s art world, she asserts it is necessary to recognize “the depth of African, Native American, Asian, and Latino contributions to an increasingly confused, shallow, and homogenized Euro-American society” (5). Such effort of opening up the art spectrum to a multiplicity of voices although highly valuable, raises nonetheless other questions: To what extent is classifying art by the race or ethnicity of the artist rather than by formal, media or contextual categories a way of institutionalized racism? Are not these categories listed by Lippard too broad and one-dimensional? Where, then, from a U.S.-based perspective, is the place for Cuban diasporic art that O’reilly Herrera asks about? Can we even think about a conceptual place for it given that diaspora itself distorts traditional spatiotemporal definitions?

Clearly, “the art world has neat boxes to pigeonhole work created by those it considers ‘other’” so as to serve the best interests of the patriarchal institutions (Touchette 192). However, artists who elude an easy classification given their multiracial or multicultural origins, as do Mendieta and Fusco, question the modernist need to attribute clear-cut, ethnically profiled categories by asserting their complex, multi-layered identities. The self awareness of existing in a sort of limbo, of not being really from here (U.S.) but neither from there (Cuba) anymore, that derives from a diasporic positionality although perhaps troubling, enables them nonetheless to defy and complicate the essentialist categorizations imposed upon them by either side. In a catalogue essay for an exhibition of Third World women in which Mendieta participated in the late 1970s, she herself wrote: “We of the Third World in the United States have the same concerns as the people of the Unaligned Nations. The white population of the United States, diverse, but of basic European stick, exterminated the indigenous civilization and put aside the Black as well as the other non-
white cultures to create a homogenous male-dominated culture above the internal divergency [sic]” (qtd. in Blocker 54). This statement which, according to Blocker, seemingly “predicts Trinh Minh-Ha’s often-quoted claim that there is ‘a Third World in the First World and vice versa’”, also “insists on the diversity and the internal conflicts” masked by the patriarchal and colonial structures that sustain the homogenizing notion of nation (Blocker 54). Along the same line, but complicating Mendieta’s argument even more, in her 1995 book *English is Broken Here* Fusco talks about culture and identity formation in the following terms:

… I reposition myself in a somewhat precarious way within a society that seeks to deny how segregated it is; I go from being a “minority” critic dutifully explaining Otherness to one who addresses whites as agents in an ongoing dynamic of racialization. This shift in terms disrupts the commonly held assumption that desire for the Other is in itself a way of eliminating racial inequality. Furthermore, to speak of whiteness as a way of being in the world still disturbs many of those for whom a racialized discourse is in itself a minority discourse, a mode of marginalization...That sense of entitlement to choose, change, and redefine one’s identity is fundamental to understanding the history of how white America has formed ideas about itself, and how those ideas are linked first to a colonial enterprise, and, in the postwar period, to the operation of industrialized mass culture. (68)

As can be deduced from these personal statements, for Mendieta and Fusco, then, political and aesthetic interventions take on many forms and fronts, including national and ethnic political movements, as well as struggles around issues of racial equality. Hence, because of their subaltern status, their creations tend to be profoundly critical of essentialism even as they sometimes reify it. This is why, despite the differences in terms of their ethnic backgrounds, temporality and cultural axioms, I contend that Mendieta’s and Fusco’s shared experiences of the Cuban diaspora in the U.S. reinforced in them a geopolitical consciousness that went from assuming a Cuban-American identity, to embracing the, perhaps more generic but nonetheless strategically useful, ‘Latina’ category.

Much along the lines of theorists like Gayatri C. Spivak, Paul Gilroy, and Emma Pérez who talk about strategic forms of essentialism, then, I will hereby consider both Mendieta’s and Fusco’s life and creations as Latino, although not in an ontological way.\(^{18}\)

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\(^{18}\) The term "strategic essentialism" is considered to have been coined by Indian literary critic and deconstructive theorist Gayatri Spivak. However, in an interview with Sarah Harasym captured in *The Post-Colonial Critic* Spivak herself notes that Stephen Heath, the British literature scholar has also been credited with first using the concept (“Practical Politics” 109). The notion itself refers to a strategic move for minority
That is, I will point out to the way in which they might subscribe to what the dominant sector has defined as Latino, while considering that Latino actually “emerged as a term for self-identification to protest the U.S. Government-imposed census term Hispanic, just as Latinidad emerges as a term out to agitate the imposed imperialist notion of Hispanic culture (or Hispanidad)” (David Román and Alberto Sandoval qtd. in Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman 15). Through this gaze, however, the Latino term becomes a geopolitical identity, that is, a referent that “has less to do with essence than with conditions of (im)possibility and opposition” (Taylor and Constantino 3). Nonetheless, my approach to Latinidad is more complex and critical in the sense that, just as Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman themselves point out, it problematizes the “basis of Latinidad’s own ideological construction and sustenance” by challenging primarily the ethnocentrism and the sexism present in the dominant Anglo as well as in the traditional Latin American imaginaries of Latinidad (16). In order to do that, I treat each of these artists as individuals who, located in specific contexts, give voice to personal issues that go far beyond a homogenized idea of things Latina/o.\(^\text{19}\)

Analyzing the ethnic but also the gendered aspect of Ana Mendieta’s and Coco Fusco’s identity and the way they utilized performance art to (re)present themselves, then, I also point out to the way in which these artists challenge the mainstream art historic discourse. In this sense, I want to clearly distance my use of the concept Latinidad from that, most widely spread, “Latinophilic” stance that far from positing the inclusion of the other, objectifies and commodifies Latinos, and more specifically Latinas.

Let us remind ourselves that the female, in classical terms, always played a central role in art. Whether it was as a form or as a mere topic, the female in art was nonetheless charged with a passive meaning that confined its subjectivity to a commodified,

\(^\text{19}\) It is important to point out that, unlike English, things in Spanish are gendered and hence the distinction between Latina (female) and Latino (male) is important for it offers a more nuanced perspective of the power relations that operate within the female/male distinction.
contemplative representation that served almost exclusively as a stimulus for the male gaze. But since the 1970s, women assumed a conscious position, both in the artistic production and in the theoretic field. In 1971, the magazine *ArtNews* published Linda Nochlin’s “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, a provocative essay whose title raised the question that would spearhead an entirely new approach to art history and art itself. According to Nochlin, the field of art history has been completely controlled by the white Western male viewpoint. Such a viewpoint, by automatically obliterating the presence of practically half the world’s population, she continues, “may—and does—prove to be inadequate not merely on moral and ethical grounds, or because it is elitist, but on purely intellectual ones” (Nochlin n. pag.). Posing the question with a reproaching tone, Nochlin accutely pointed to the structural and institutional societal components that have, throughout history, left women outside the realm of (art) production, on the one hand, and on the other, ilfully constructed and distorted the process of art making as a matter of (male) geniality and (male) inborn talent.

However, drawing directly from the vindicatory social struggles, related also to activism for civil rights and equity, the so-called ‘second wave’ feminism that sprung in the U.S. at the end of the 1960s fueled the emergence of art exhibitions and publications that began placing women front and center during the 1970s. According to art historian Moira Roth, the 70s were in fact an amazing decade for women in many aspects. Art, though, she argues, was significantly relevant because it “served both to mirror and to comment on these profound social, cultural and psychological changes” (Roth, *The Amazing Decade* 8).

Retrieving knowledge about women artists who had been previously overlooked, or simply working in the marginalities of the canon by introducing the female body as a privileged site from which to make explicit comments on sex, gender and representation, this new generation of artists conformed a different standpoint in the art-making process. In other words:

20 Relevant to this matter is the work of the anonymous female art collective *Guerrilla Girls* who, asked to design a billboard for the Public Art Fund in New York in 1989, decided to ask the question “Do women need to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” Interested in comparing the number of female and male nudes exhibited in the galleries of perhaps one of the world’s most important museum in terms of their vast collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, they discovered that: “less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female” (*Guerrilla Girls*). More interestingly, though, is the fact that after repeating such action in 2005 and 2012, those numbers had barely changed.
Women, who for centuries had been the *objects* of male theorizing, male desires, male fears and male representations, had to discover and reappropriate themselves as *subjects*; the obvious place to begin was the silent place to which they had been assigned again and again, the dark continent which had ever provoked assault and puzzlement. The call went out to invent both a new poetics and a new politics, based on women’s reclaiming what had been theirs but had been usurped from them: control over their bodies and a voice with which to speak about it (Suleiman “(Re) Writing the Body” 7).

Since the 1970s, then, feminism’s proposal focused on the premise of fleshing out women’s experience, of constructing a female body in the face of patriarchal convention. In this light, claims such as Robin Morgan’s “the speculum may well be mightier than the sword” (35), and the publication of texts such as the collectively written *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973) in which the main thesis was to reclaim the female body through reproductive freedom and corporeal self-awareness as a means to prevent violence come as no surprise (Michie 127). However, just as it happened in the feminist movement itself, women artists of color proposed and implemented a wider agenda than did the white artists. Pointing to the importance of considering difference among women artists from diverse backgrounds – if the female body was ‘the dark continent’, as Suleiman puts it (“Introduction” 7), the darkest within the dark is still the corporeality of the women of color – contributed, then, to present more critical assessments about a universalist notion of woman. Centering ethnicity, sexuality and social class in their aesthetic work, these artists opened up a way of portraying their own standpoint through art hence subscribing to one of feminism’s most basic tenets, that is, ‘the personal is political’.

From this perspective and going back into the arts world, it is important to point out, that ever since the 1960s, women artists were attracted by performance art as an arena from which they could raise their voices and present their own perspective on the patriarchally defined concepts of woman and femininity as well as on the racist implications thereby sustained. The visual and semantic potential that this artistic discipline offered, liberated these artists from the traditional supports – canvases, sculptures, etc.– hence enabling them to use the political power of their bodies as “location for discourse, a privileged arena where

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taboos and stereotypes linked with the representation of women within a patriarchal society were put into question” (Lavigne 90). In 1965, Shigeko Kubota presented Vagina Painting. In this performance, Kubota appeared on scene crouching with a brush hanging from her panties and dripped/painted with red fluid. Such action, which broke the taboo on menstruation, as Lavigne affirms, paved the way for other artists who would use blood in their performances such as Valie Export, Judy Chicago, and Ana Mendieta among others. In Non-aestheticized Climbing, presented in 1971, Gina Pane climbed barefoot a ladder covered with razor blades. The use of her body as a place for self-inflicted pain intended to bring real experience of discomfort and empathy into the audience. That said, in this second chapter I explore, through an intersectional approach, the way in which Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco continued this legacy of working with their bodies while countering the effects of both the racist and nationalist implications of U.S.’s mainstream cultural imperialism, and the patriarchy that permeates and structures all social formations, including the art world.

(RE)PRESENTING OTHERNESS: LATIN AMERICAN PERFORMANCE ART AS SUBVERSION

As I stated above, Latin America is in itself both a geographically and culturally debatable concept that has nonetheless been used in the artistic realm to distinguish all works of art either created by artists of Latin American descent or produced in that geographical region. To further explicate the logic of grouping art from such a vast and diverse territory under the same banner some theorists have posited a profound sense of historical consciousness as one of its main characteristics (Fuentes; Lippard; Torruella Leval; Taylor). According to Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, the role of Latin America is “to restore some kind of tragic consciousness… to make the United States understand that memory counts – that there is history, and that it does not renew itself every 24 hours when Don Rather appears on the set” (24). Along this same line, but adding a critical gaze to the Anglo perception of art from this southern region of the world, Lippard argues that “The fusion of myth, history, religion, politics, and popular culture that fuels much Latin American art has been neglected in the North where, after all, we have our own proud and sordid versions of history –rare as it may be to see them expressed in visual art” (6). In her essay “Recapturing History: The (Un)Official Story in Contemporary Latin American Art” Susana Torruella Leval asserts that Latin Americans find a profound sense of themselves by looking at their
historical past (69). Furthermore, according to her, it is in coming to terms with this past that they are able to both explain their present and delineate change for their future (69). This necessity or, perhaps I should say, faculty of reminiscing and projecting while being grounded in the present offers Latin American artists the possibility of reconceptualizing and rewriting their histories hence redeeming them from the distortions perpetrated by the dominant European and Anglosaxon cultures.  

In this light, Mendieta and Fusco’s works are not the exception for they recapture and present, in one way or another, collective and individual memories. And because it is through memory that we bridge the past and the present, remembering in a way that enables us to reimagine and reformulate what happened is hence a crucial healing and creative tool. However, the looking back at the past I am talking about here is not necessarily a matter of paralyzing nostalgia or lamentation but rather an attempt to revisit past events and interpret them from a feminist and decolonizing perspective. In fact, drawing from Emma Pérez’s work on the notion of a “decolonial imaginary”, a project through which the act of writing or, in the case of these two artists, of enacting history, has as main goal that of decolonizing otherness, I contend that the pieces that I analyze in this chapter represent a form of cultural resistance as well as an alternative kind of knowledge since they respond to different forms of domination (The Decolonial Imaginary 3-7). However, to give sufficient voice to this form of cultural resistance while reaching a broader public is not an easy task since these visual artists have to face the sharp distinction between the so-called mainstream art and that of marginalized others. Through this lens, then, when the Latin American classification is applied to the art world as an adjective to define specific characteristics of the art in question, it also reinforces segregation.

Drawing from other Latin American intellectuals such as Gerardo Mosquera, Luis Camnitzer, Mari Carmen Ramírez, and Nelly Richard, Venezuelan scholar Carmen Hernández speaks about the influence of the hegemonic art sphere as an institutional network

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22 This notion of inhabiting three different temporalities at the same time is also widely studied in diasporic literature. In fact, Janus, the Greek deity that gives name to the first month of the year in the Gregorian calendar, and is represented as a three-faced person because of its abilities to look to the past and the future while living in the present, is considered to be the symbol of the state of mind experienced by diasporic subjects.
that acts like the articulating axis of Euro-U.S. hegemonic thinking, and is sustained through a series of academic, museological, editorial and market-related mechanisms located in the most important European and U.S. cities (168). According to her, then, the evaluation of most artistic productions takes place in cultural centers such as Paris or New York where a strong Euro-U.S. centric canon supports the idea of a ‘universal’ artistic language (Hernández 169). This supposed universality, which should be read as intrinsically Euro-U.S. based, consequently occludes the existence of ‘local’ and alternative cultural forms. In this light, then, the representation of the local and, I would argue, the personal, “can be assumed as a sign of resistance in itself against a homogenizing impulse that requires the artist to use codes that are not inscribed in their direct context and do not belong to any particular locality” or personal experience (Gera). And since, as I have previously stated, Mendieta and Fusco’s locale is that of diaspora, their codes and references are anything but fixed. They reflect the hybridity of existing in two different cronotopic dimensions that emerges from the dynamics of feeling at home and not at home in each one of them. They, as Fusco herself puts it: “go back and forth between past and present, between history and fiction, between art and ritual, between high art and popular culture, between Western and non-Western influences” (English is Broken Here 71). To that extent, it is easy to identify how Mendieta and Fusco’s art disrupts political, geographical, ideological and cultural boundaries all at the same time in terms of content and meaning. However, it is also crucial to talk about the formal aspect of their work for I find the fact that they both have mainly resorted to a non-traditional and non-mainstream genre as is performance art, not to be casual at all.

To define the term ‘performance art’ is actually an impossible task for its only inarguable definition acknowledges that performance art defies any definition (Forte 1). In fact, if any parameters exist, it may be only in terms of what performance is not. Performance is not theater, or dance, or poetry, music, video or photography, although a performance event may actually include any of these activities. Furthermore, even if it is framed in terms of a spectacle or representation, performance’s relation to an audience or public may or may not be required. In fact, “One performance may not necessarily be public, may only be ‘reported’ to its audience after the fact, while another may take place before hundreds, and another may happen in public but without the audience even knowing it is happening” (Forte 2). Escaping all clear-cut labels, the history of performance art also eludes a single and
definitive version, especially when it comes to tracking down its origins to a particular time and place.

As Jeanie Forte points out, the notion of finding the beginning for this ‘problematic’ art genre has been of special importance for historians, since “the operative assumption is that the determination of its origins should correctly locate performance art within the appropriate tradition, and assist the critic in formulating some basic answers regarding its existence” (4).

Hence, according to the mainstream art historical version, the emergence of performance art dates back to the Dada movement from the 20s and 30s, which was in itself influenced by other European avant-garde movements such as Cubism, Futurism, Russian Constructivism, German Expressionism and the Bauhaus. Having as main goal that of liberating the arts from the academic canons, and society from the nationalist, rationalist and bourgeois stances, which had led to the horrors of World War I, the Dada events valued improvisation, irreverence, absurdity, and a democratic sense of creating in community as the most important tenets for this new art.23 Supporting this lineage, in Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present critic and art historian RoseLee Goldberg also posits the avant-garde movements as the origins of performance in order to then move to the U.S. to trace the influences of the Black Mountain College Group from the 50s, and the Fluxus’ actions and multimedia experiments from the 60s (7).24 Moira Roth, on the other hand, in her article “Toward a History of California Performance” acknowledges the early 20th-century European art movements as mere precursors while actually identifying the origins of performance art in the late 60s U.S.’s socio-political-cultural context (94).

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23 Dadaism originated in Zurich, Switzerland during World War I. It comprised literature, visual arts, and graphic design, and its main objective was to overthrow any traditional kind of art. Their stance was overtly anti-war, anti-bourgeois and anti-modernity. Russian Constructivism originated shortly after the Russian Revolution. Drawing from a Socialist ideology, this movement conceived art and architecture, not as autonomous spheres, but as activities serving for social purposes.

24 Black Mountain was a school founded in 1933 in Black Mountain, North Carolina. It was a new kind of college in the U.S. in which the study of art was seen to be central to a liberal arts education. Many of the school’s students and faculty were influential in the arts or other fields, or went on to become influential. Although notable even during its short life, the school closed in 1957 after only 24 years. Fluxus was a multidisciplinary community formed in the U.S. during the 1960s. For them, mixing media and presenting short simple acts was a way of bridging performance from reality.
However, there exist other versions that, offering a decolonizing approach, overtly counter such Euro-U.S.-centric stance. In the essay “Performance and the Power of the Popular” Coco Fusco points out to how this chronology obliterates “the importance that direct and indirect contact with non-western performers played in giving shape to early twentieth century avant garde artists’ concepts of aesthetic transgression” (161). Clearly referring to the way in which pictorial movements such as Fauvism and Cubism emerged out of the European appropriation of South-Asian and African aesthetics, Fusco takes her argument even further. Claiming to write “The Other History of Intercultural Performance”, in this text the scholar goes back in time to center her analysis in fifteenth century Europe and its ethnographical ‘curiosity’ spurred after the conquest of ‘undiscovered’ lands. In so doing, Fusco reminds us how, since the early days of the conquest, ‘aboriginal samples’ of people from Africa, Asia, and America were forced to go to Europe to be exhibited in palaces, taverns, salons, theaters and gardens for mere entertainment of the locals (English is Broken Here 41). These shows in which the Western fascination with Otherness had the whites objectifying the non-Europeans as they made them perform moves, dances, rituals and so on from their places of origin are, then, according to Fusco, the actual origins of intercultural performance practices in the West (English is Broken Here 44). In fact, Fusco continues, “Tristan Tzara’s (…) Dadaist belief that Western art tradition could be subverted through the appropriation of the perceived orality and performative nature of the ‘non-Western’” proves how this movement, traditionally conceived as the originator of performance art, was actually based on imitative gestures that ranged from dressing up and dancing as ‘Africans’, to making so-called ‘primitive-looking’ masks and sketches (English is Broken Here 45).

And it is precisely this construction of the notion of Otherness as both essentially performative and located in the body that I wish to stress here for it is at this point in time when the categories that distinguish the ‘civilized’ from the ‘primitive’, the ‘rational’ from the ‘wild’, and the ‘desirable’ from the ‘non-desirable’ became the logic behind the European/non-European divide. Sadly, however, such stereotyping, which both sociologically underpinned the view that colonial expansion was not only desirable for the nation but also beneficial to the colonized peoples, and culturally enabled the process of aesthetic appropriation and fetishization of the Other, continues into today’s reality –as can be seen when analyzing Mendieta and Fusco’s life experiences.
However, trying to reconcile this divide and locating the problem in the contemporary Latin American art context, in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* Diana Taylor also points to how the presumption that performance is an aesthetic practice with roots in the avant-garde movements “hides multiple rich and long traditions of performance practice” across cultures (9). Furthermore, acknowledging the value of Fernando Ortíz’s notion of ‘transculturation’ I discussed in the first chapter, Taylor demands the recognition of “the permanent recycling of cultural materials and processes between the Western and non-Western” that take place in (Latin American) performance art today (10). And in so doing, she blurs the confrontational West/non-West approach and calls for an interpretation that stresses the dialogical relationship between the two, hence offering a decolonizing gaze to the analysis of performance practice. Along this same line, throughout her book Taylor also underscores how performance, as far as being an embodied kind of knowledge that she considers part of the repertoire—as opposed to the written kind of knowledge she identifies as the archive—is also a liberating genre in the sense that it opens up the spectrum of the cultural studies field by challenging “the dominance of the text—as the priviledged or even sole object of analysis—” (Taylor 27).

The fact that performance is the conscious enactment of any particular embodied social identity that happens in public, makes it a great platform through which one can dismantle sexist, racist, nationalist and imperialist stances. Furthermore, in terms of content, performance is a mnemonic tool through which traditions, rituals, practices and beliefs of any (minority) social group can be actualized and valued, hence giving voice to difference. Also, given its interdisciplinary character, performance itself is a practice that moves in all sorts of circuits—national and transnational, artistic and non-artistic, academic and non-academic, economic and non-economic—and thus challenges the notion of fixed categories. From all this, then, it is not difficult to understand that Mendieta and Fusco chose performance for its subversive visual and semantic potentials as their favorite means of expression.

**RETELLING HISTORY: INTEGRATING HYBRID MATERIALS AND REVERSING MEANINGS**

In 1990 Coco Fusco performed *La Chavela Realty* (Figure 13), a site-specific performance held at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in conjunction with Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s Performance Chronicle, in which Fusco as queen Isabel of Spain sold patrons deeds to
the ‘New World’. Queen Isabel, the Catholic, and her husband king Fernando II are known for setting the foundations for Spain’s unification, completing the *reconquista* of the Iberic peninsula by either expelling Muslims and Jewish people from their territories or forcing them to convert to Catholicism, and most importantly, for financing Christopher Columbus’ trip to ‘discover’ new horizons in 1492. Special in this last episode was the participation of the queen who, according to a popular and romanticized legend, is believed to have sold some of her jewelry in order to come up with an important sum to support the expedition.\(^\text{25}\)

Regardless the veracity of this incident, however, that which is of most relevance is the possibility that the queen and not the king was in fact the main supportive agent of the columbian expedition for, colonial implications aside, it visibilizes the role of a powerful female character.

In this piece, then, wearing a colorful and lavish dress accompanied by a head-dress in the form of a ship designed by Puerto Rican artist and friend Pepón Osorio, Fusco personifies the Spanish queen as she sits behind a writing desk signing sheets of paper as guarantees of pieces of land in the New World to whomever approaches her. Reenacting a

\(^{25}\) Traditional historiography has argued that the queen was the main financial supporter of Chistopher Columbus’ enterprise. In fact, it was Hernando Columbus himself who in *La Historia del Almirante* (The Admiral’s Story), a biography of his father, launched the colorful story in which the Catholic queen offered to pawn her jewelry to finance the Columbian journey. This certainly romantic image was then collected by one of the best-known chroniclers of the early colonial period, the Spanish friar Bartolomé de Las Casas, in his *Historia de las Indias* (History of the Indies). However, other accounts have considered the voices of Italian and Catalan contemporary chroniclers whose versions do not mention the queen’s participation. But since there was a clear rivalry between Catilians, Catalonians and Italians at the time, one must necessarily doubt the accuracy of these silences.
possible scene in which the European queen claims the rights to the newly ‘discovered’ land as she benevolently offers it to her citizens, Fusco takes us back in time to a fifteenth century Spain even as she performs to audiences in New York in the late twentieth century. This ambivalence and juxtaposition of times and places, which enables the possibility of recontextualizing the historic episode through Fusco’s personal interpretation, is accompanied by her traditionally playful although crude critique. The name of the performance itself gives us a clue of its subversive intention. *Chavela* in Spanish is a casual and friendly way to call anyone whose name is Isabel and so, by referring to this figure without the traditionally expected deference due a queen, Fusco is depriving her of any royal titles or hierarchical status. Furthermore, since Fusco links the subverted name of the historic character to the term realty (instead of royalty), she adds another layer of transgression to the scene. Actualizing the role of the queen to present day’s terms, Fusco compares her to a ‘real’ estate agent whose piece of paper-land transactions appear to be all but ‘real’. In this sense, she underscores the irreverent logic that appears to have legitimized both European intervention and control over foreign territories. And in so doing, Fusco points out to how the actions performed by the Spanish monarch were the turning point after which America and the Caribbean became, in the maps of Europeans, extensions of their reigns. However, this piece of land that translated into a symbol of richness and opportunity could only be so in actuality once its original inhabitants were either exterminated or colonialized. In this sense, *La Chavela Realty* raises some questions: Is the critique exclusively referring to the colonial past? Can Fusco’s locating the performance in New York be also read as a critique to current forms of U.S. cultural post-coloniality?

By revisiting Western history what Fusco does is “excavate and play with symptomatic absences and stereotypes, creating a counterhistory by bouncing off negative images and teasing out hidden stories” (“Performance and the Power of the Popular” 71). Fusco is not Isabel, Fusco is not a queen, Fusco is not Spanish, Fusco is not from the fifteenth century, and yet she is claiming the right to personify queen Isabel hence subverting both the identity of the historical character, and history itself. Articulating a semantic reversal of the traits that made Isabel a powerful woman of her time, Fusco, a Latin American mulatta living in New York in the twentieth century manages to infuse all icons, objects and symbols contained in this performance with completely different meanings.
The head-dress, a sculpture in and of itself, although evidently referencing the caravels on which Columbus and his troop traveled to America, appears imbued by other subtexts. Given its color, luminosity and grandiosity, the hat designed by Osorio alludes to “parodic and politically charged Caribbean practices such as the *carnaval*” (*English is Broken Here*; 89). However, that same carnivalesque spirit can lead us to perhaps an even a more ‘profane’ reference, that of the cabaret. The tradition of a restaurant/nightclub concept where primarily women dressed in extravagant attires perform to adult audiences also has a long history in the Caribbean countries, but most particularly in Cuba. The world-famous “Tropicana”, located in Havana, became the favorite spot for the affluent locals and internationals in the early twentieth century, at a point in time in which, according to the cabaret’s webpage, Cuba had become “The Island of Gambling”, and Havana, “The Caribbean Las Vegas” in the eyes of the U.S. (Tropicana) (Figure 14). The same site describes the reason of the Tropicana’s success as follows: “The spell of the Cuban nights, with starry skies, warm tropical moon, hot and languid music, dazzling women—reputedly the most beautiful of Cuban dark-skinned girls—and its exuberant gardens created the visitors the feeling of being in an unreal world of exotic splendor” (Tropicana). The imperialist and patriarchic implications contained in the Caribbean cabaret tradition, as it can be deduced from this quote, are nonetheless tackled by Fusco’s performance piece in a rather interesting way.

Inviting Pepón Osorio to design her costume, Fusco immediately gave out her subversive intentions. As a mixed race Puertorican artist living in the U.S., Osorio’s work deals with contradiction in a rather interesting and aesthetically appealing ways. Usually merging elements from different traditions, meaning and material components, his production visually stresses the outcomes of hybridization as he did in his 1988 *El

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*Carnival* derives from the latin *carnelevare* and literally means the removal of meat/flesh. It was originally a pagan festivity in honor of Saturn—the bountiful agricultural deity—, but was then adapted to Catholicism and became an open window for meat/flesh consumption before starting the forty days of fasting and discipline in preparation for Easter—Jesus’ dead and resurrection—.

*Chandelier* (Figure 15). This piece, which was the result of combining the ‘sober’ bourgeois French lighting fixture made of crystal with colorful popular Latin American objects made out of plastic, also resembles the aesthetics of the carnival/cabaret hairdresses I have discussed thus far (Figures 13 and 14).


In *La Chavela Realty* Fusco wears a head-dress that references a European element such as the Spanish caravel in which Columbus set sail to America while presenting it with aesthetic and materic characteristics that locate it in the repertoire of the Latin Caribbean imagery. And in so doing, this performance resignifies the historic episode by ‘tropicalizing’
it both in form and meaning. Furthermore, by presenting a ship that is both reduced in size and transformed in substance, its ineffable and transcendent qualities as a massive conquest vehicle are deflated and hence rendered innocuous. It is no longer a caravel but a ship-like decorative article, a hat. However, as a has it is exaggerated, blown out of proportions, and even made to look ridiculous to some extent. So it is precisely this sense of creative confusion, one that has us ascribing different meanings to both the ship and the hat knowing that, in this case, they are one and the same thing that I contend is subversive.

Another challenging aspect of this performance lies in the fact that Coco Fusco, being a mulatta herself or as Marta I. Cruz-Jansen would put it, a “Latinegra”, personifies the role of a European queen (82). Latinegras are “Latinas of obvious Black ancestry and undeniable ties to Africa, women whose ancestral mothers were abducted from the rich lands that cradled them to become and bear slaves (…) Latinegras represent the mirrors that most Latinos would like to shatter because they reflect the Blackness that Latinos don’t want to see in themselves” (Cruz-Jansen 82). However, as I discussed in chapter one, Fusco was classified as white by the nuns in the New York hospital where she was born because they thought this would ease her passage through life. Since within the U.S. context the racial ideology revolves around the sharp White vs. Black dichotomy, Latinos living in this Anglo country tend to experience a more powerful “need and desire to free themselves of any vestiges of African ancestry” (Cruz-Jansen 286). Aware of the long history of oppression Black women have been subjected to such as racism, sexism, and inhumanity, Fusco soon learned it was better to emphasize her lighter traits, to hide part of herself. But regardless of these messages, Fusco has openly embraced her Blackness. In fact, the daughter of a Cuban mother and Italian father, Coco Fusco has made the culture clash she has known since 27 I am using the term tropical here aware of the risks Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman point to in their co-edited book Tropicalizations. This book, quite along the lines of Edward Said’s Orientalism, theorizes how the image of the tropics that has dominated Euro-U.S. imagination in terms of things Latin American and Caribbean, has propagated the desirability of the tropical lands but not of the tropical people, except perhaps the women. In this light, one of the most well-known examples in Anglo popular media is the Portuguese actress Carmen Miranda who, in the late 40s and early 50s, personified the stereotype of the tropical woman, even if she was in fact European. Wearing fastuous head-dresses, and colorful and revealing outfits that certainly resemble the one worn by Fusco in La Chavela Realty (Figure 13), Miranda portrayed the image of an always joyful and sensually desirable especially to Anglo men_samba dancer. Nonetheless, I find that claiming that term as Fusco and Osorio do in La Chavela as a means to counter Euro-U.S.-centered visions can actually revert the effects of the exoticization of the other.
childhood the matrix of her investigations in the field of art. In this light, by presenting herself, a self-identified heir of the Black legacy, in the role of a queen she deploys (dark) skin color as a signifier but infuses it with positive attributes. Claiming visibility and status within Western history, \textit{La Chavela} also honors the long line legacy of strength and self-reliance that characterizes the history of Black women and thus connects to the African diaspora. Going above and beyond the Cuban diaspora, then, Fusco complicates her positionality by invoking not a desire for the homeland but rather what Avtar Brah would call “homing of desire” (193). That is, a more profound quest of the self through which she manages to recuperate and rearticulate her identity both at an individual and at a communal levels inscribing the notion of home “while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins” (Brah 193).\footnote{Since challenging the notion of fixity, especially in terms of origins, appears to be a leitmotif in Fusco’s works, I find it somewhat ironic that there seems to be an enormous silence surrounding her Italian heritage. The Cuban-American, Latina and Black (mulatta) categories in which she normally moves, either by self-affirmation or because they are imposed on her, obscure her father’s ancestry just as I am doing right here by not including any theorization in that respect. However, given that Fusco’s intention is deeply rooted in postcoloniality, and the subversion thereof of structures of oppression, I chose, not without hesitating, to honor that silence as well so as to focus on the racial traits that locate her as a subaltern subject.}

The ornate costume Fusco wears on this piece, being a hybrid element itself, also juxtaposes the cabaret hat, which would normally go hand in hand with showing bikini-like clothes as can be seen in Figure 14, with a more prude long wide sleeve, long skirt, and closed-off medieval gown made out of modern fabric. This multiplicity of epochal and style references, then, can either take us back in time to the beginnings of the colonial period or situate us in a present day carnival/cabaret. But regardless of the context one chooses to focus on, the truth is that Fusco seems to direct us into a space where one cannot help but think about the history of Black women as sexualized performers. And in this line, the story of Sara Baartman, a story that Fusco herself references in her essay “The Other History of Intercultural Performance” serves as a great example.\footnote{This essay is included in her book \textit{English is Broken Here}.} Sara Baartman, also known as Saartjie (‘little Sara’ in Dutch), was a Khoikhoi woman from the Eastern South African Cape who arrived on England’s shores as part of the traffic of animals, plants and people destined for display as objects representing colonial expansion and economic gain. Serving both as an
imperial success and as a prized specimen of the ‘Hottentot’ because of her large buttocks, Baartman was forced to travel to England to be exhibited in shows throughout the continent. Alexander Dunlop, an exporter of museum specimens from South Africa, was one of the persons in charge of the arrangements that had Baartman sail from the Cape to Liverpool in 1810 (Qureshi 235).

Advertised as possessing the “kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen”, she wore a “dress resembling her complexion” and so tight that her “shapes above and the enormous size of her posterior parts are as visible as if the said female were naked ... the dress is evidently intended to give the appearance of being undressed”. She wore beads and feathers hung around her waist, the accoutrements associated with her African ancestry, and, on occasion, would play a small stringed musical instrument. The show took place upon “a stage two feet high, along which she was led by her keeper, and exhibited like a wild beast; being obliged to walk, stand, or sit as he ordered” (Qureshi 236).

After four years in London exhibited as the “Hottentot Venus”, Baartman was handed to a showman of wild animals in Paris, where she was displayed between 1814 and 1815 in a traveling circus, often handled by an animal trainer (Figure 16). After being sold from one self-proclaimed collector to another to be presented in shows Baartman finally died alone and abandoned from complications caused by a venereal disease in 1815. But the prevalent fascination for Baartman’s figure went on even after her death since George Cuvier, surgeon general to Napoleon Bonaparte, claimed her body and, in the name of science, studied and dissected Baartman’s corpse in the hopes of finding an explanation for her features. As late as 1976 a full cast of her body and skeleton was still on exhibition at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. After that year her remains were removed from the galleries and held in storage at that institution until 2002, when they were finally repatriated and given a proper burial (Qureshi 232).

30 “Hottentot” was the name with which the European colonizers labeled the Khoikhois in imitation of the sounds of their language. The satirical aspect of naming without actually worrying about getting to know the Other along with the power dynamics implied in such action make it a rather derogatory term. However, hand in hand with the word “Venus”, the title under which Baartman was both labeled and advertised provides a deeper notion about the level of exploitation she was subjected to. Exhibited as an exotic racialized and sexualized ‘specimen’, Baartman was deprived of all humanity and hence treated as an object.
In *La Chavela Realty* Coco Fusco distances herself visually from the naked performances of Baartman. She appears wearing a fastuous costume in the midst of a sober altar-like setting decorated with chandeliers and a statuete in which she personifies a woman in control, a woman who is not there to be exhibited for the pleasure and entertainment of others. Much to the contrary, she is woman who is publicly performing her duties. And in so doing, I contend that Fusco recasts the sexualized and exoticized image that has placed dark-skinned women throughout history as the main attraction in (adult) entertainment venues—as was the case of Sara Baartman, and as is the case of today’s Tropicana cabaret dancers. Resisting the stereotypes through semantic reversals, and through the process of infusing icons, objects, and symbols with different meanings, Fusco offers a creative defense through which she brings justice to the pain and hurt endured by her sisters. Or as Fusco herself would put it: “the irreverence and exuberant energy of these aesthetic strategies is evidence of the survival of subaltern practices that have created the conditions for spiritual and cultural renewal, as well critical reinterpretations of the world in which we live” (*English is Broken Here* 36).

All that said, plus Fusco’s technique of enacting a living diorama contribute, too, to blurring the borders between old and new, between real and fictional, between pure and hybrid, between ‘high’ and popular art, between European and Latin American. *La Chavela*
Realty embodies the tensions created by the ambiguity or ambivalence of both the forms and concepts that inform Fusco’s complex identity. Ultimately, this piece proves what Emma Pérez asserts about the faculty diasporic identities have to create “decolonial imaginaries” (*The Decolonial Imaginary* 5). That is, because “the diasporic subject is not only here and there (…), (she/he) is always re-creating the unimagined, the unknown where mobile third space identities thrive, and where the decolonial imaginary gleans the diasporic’s subjection” (79). In this light, rethinking history in a way that makes agency transformative Fusco delivered a round and solid decolonizing performance.

**Liberating Spirituality: Recuperating Afro-Cuban Traditions**

There is no original past to redeem; there is the void, the orphanhood, […] There is above all the search for origin.

--Ana Mendieta

Perhaps manifested in a more subtle but no less powerful way, the analysis of selected works by Ana Mendieta also demonstrates her concern about both giving alternative interpretations of the racialized female body and expressing the intricacies of her personal belief system. In this light, if Coco Fusco ‘tropicalized’ the conquest of the Americas by embodying queen Isabel the Catholic and infusing the scene with hybrid meanings, Mendieta herself adopted the name ‘Tropic-Ana’ in the last years of her life, after she moved from Iowa to New York (Manzor 371). This fun, witty and self-claimed alias Mendieta used only among close friends, appears here as a hint of the artist’s sense of awareness in terms of the constricted niche into which the Anglo world had put both herself, and her art. As Lillian Manzor points out “the name Tropicana is intimately tied to Anglo cultural representations and constructions of Latin(o)ness, especially within popular culture” (371). Some characteristics of this construction, Manzor continues, are the “tropical rhythms, exotic clothing, colorful locales, and an exuberant body language”, which embodied in the Latina subject “result in the conflation of a sexuality that is exaggerated, stereotypical and

31 Rather significant is the fact that Lucy Lippard, who personally knew Ana Mendieta and saw her work develop through time, from her Iowa to her New York years, dedicated her book *Mixed Blessings* to her. Published five years after Mendieta’s death, on a blank page right before the acknowledgements, the critic included two simple words: “To TropicAna”.
mystified” (371). And although it is not my intention to further trace the genealogy of this stereotype, suffice it to say that it is evident that Mendieta and Fusco have been affected by this imperialist discourse just as much as they have worked within and through it in order to resist its effects and reclaim that category. Uruguayan exile, artist and critic Luis Camnitzer, however, affirms that although Mendieta’s use of the ‘Tropic-Ana’ sobriquet is a symbol of her sense of incomplete assimilation, “her political views never entered overtly into her work” (93). Furthermore, attributing her success in the 1970s to a misreading of her works as a “programmatic expression of feminism enhanced by a US perception of mysterious exoticism” rather than as “much more simply and modestly, a self-portrait”, Camnitzer immediately dismisses the political subversive effects of Mendieta’s personal narrative. In this sense, I find Manzor’s approach to Mendieta’s parodic appropriation of the tropicalized stereotype much more illuminating. According to her the artist’s use of the name “undoubtedly echoes the native’s performance for a foreign, that is, ‘civilized’ audience” (Manzor 372). And in so doing she locates Mendieta as a seminal example –given that her work dates back to the 70s and 80s– of performance artist resorting to postcolonial tactics of intervention as a means for self-affirmation.

For Manzor the most important aspect of her using the word ‘Tropic-Ana’ relies on its hyphenated nature (372). Underscoring the presence of a pause and division that, just as it happens with the compound term Cuban-American, deforms the name to evoke a sense of bilingual and bicultural reality, Mendieta creates the possibility of a hybrid existence. “Half-English, half-Spanish”, Manzor affirms, “the name (Tropic-Ana) captures the very relational nature of postcolonial hybrid identity” (372). Taking this claim further Camnitzer utilizes the concept of ‘Spanglish’ to define Mendieta’s whole body of works. Used in relationship to art, the critic argues, “Spanglish represents the merging of a deteriorating memory with the acquisition of a new reality distanced by foreignness” (Camnitzer 91). However, again, claiming that Spanglish art is “an individualistic and immediate solution that allows a release of the tension caused by the clash of two cultures” he completely dismisses its group supporting or community forging characteristics and hence depoliticizes Mendieta’s diasporic identity. But as I contend, the self-naming ability shown by Mendieta as well as her faculty to network and bridge things Cuban with feminist principles are proof of her agency in terms of articulating her own spiritual/cultural/iconographic discourse.
Although not directly linked to a Black heritage herself, Mendieta’s exposure to the Afro-Cuban religious practices during her childhood in Cuba was influential. Santería, also known as La Regla de Ocha (The Rule of Ocha), is one of the “three main branches of Afro-Cuban religions actively practiced in Cuba” and throughout the Cuban diaspora (Viso 63). Reglas Congo (Palo Monte) and Abakuá (Ñañiguismo) are the other two subgroups. Santería, or the way of the saints, is in fact a syncretic religious system born from the incorporation of Catholic elements in the religious cult of the West African ethnic group, the Yoruba, which “has conserved, to this day, the animistic and polytheistic character of the African religion” (Brandon 8). Mendieta’s sister, Raquelín, remembers hearing maids “talking about their religious practices, about magic, about sex, about who was cheating on whom, about who needed a love potion. We were fascinated. Ana loved listening to this forbidden talk” (qtd. in Schultz 13). Their parents, however, would not approve of that for they thought of Santería as a “superstitious outgrowth of Catholicism”, a low-class hybrid that did not reflect the religious tradition that connected the Mendieta’s to their Spanish ancestry. However, regardless of this ancestry that in terms of ethnicity and class distanced her from Santería, Mendieta chose some of its elements and practices and incorporated them into her pieces as she came of age in the U.S. And in so doing she also takes us back in time to the matrix out of which early Santería grew: the colonial period where queen Isabel played yet another crucial role. When ‘discovering’ Cuba, the great physical and cultural diversity of the population within the Iberic peninsula posed intricate problems for the integration of the Spanish nation. The central government, complying to the Counterreformation movement that was spreading throughout Europe, “chose to deal with this by imposing Roman Catholicism as state religion, as in ideology which would unify the population and consolidate the cultural and political dominance” (Brandon 37). Queen Isabel, in charge of putting this policy into effect, issued two edicts, one in 1492 and the other in 1502, through which all non-Catholics in Spanish territory—particularly Moors and Jews—would be either forced to convert or forced into exile (Brandon 38). This policy, which granted the Monarch the surname ‘the Catholic’, was then applied to the ‘New World’. And hence the slaves transported to the Caribbean, South America, and parts of the U.S. as well as the indigenous people of these territories were forced to embrace the saints as representations of spiritual and social powers, and accept both the Catholic terms and the Catholic imagery. However,
this imposition sprouted a series of resisting strategies that enabled the oppressed groups to maintain their traditions by readapting them. The Yoruba people, for instance, managed to fuse “the Catholic reverence for the saints with their beliefs in multiple manifestations, or orishas, of Olodumare or Olofi, the Supreme Being” hence giving birth to Santería (Schultz 14).

A strikingly hybrid and adaptable belief system with unparalleled acceptance of and incorporation of beliefs from diverse faiths, it comes as no surprise that Mendieta felt attracted to Santería. In 1981 the artist created Untitled (Ochún) (Figure 17), an incredibly poetic and syncretic piece given the many layers of signification it contains. Realized just off the beach in Key Biscane (the southernmost point in Miami), this piece was part of a group exhibition called “Latin American Art: A Woman’s View”.

Packing sand with her hands to form two contoured ridges, Mendieta created a schematic figure scaled to her body at the shore’s edge that also functioned as a through, or channel, for the sea water. However, the silhouette’s resemblance to a roughly designed sand timer also adds a temporal aspect to the piece. Hence, flowing back and forth in a continuous movement, the water symbolically depicts Cuban exiles’ existence in between different spatio-temporal pulling sources. Floating from Cuba to the U.S., from Communism to Capitalism, from an island to a continent, from a pro-Castro to an anti-Castro stance, and
from the past to the present, the water in this piece is an invitation for Cubans separated by geography, politics and ideals to keep the doors open for communication to occur. As with *Isla* (Figure 10), the silhouette made out of soil/sand in the midst of a body of water alludes to Cuba (Viso 93). In this light, the artist’s choice of location—in the Miami shores, the most important enclave of Cuban diaspora in the U.S., but pointing to the Caribbean island— is as significant as it is the fact that Mendieta uses the representation of her self—the abstraction of her female body—as the continent through which the water flows. Thus stressing the importance of networking across time and space boundaries as well as pointing to the areas that can keep Cubans bound despite their difference, that is, family and culture—areas where, according to Fusco, traditionally women have taken the lead—, Mendieta became a foregrounding example in reestablishing links between communities through art (*English is Broken Here* 19).32

In the late 1970s and early 1980s Cuba was a hot topic among U.S. liberals for the Revolution had restored, to the eyes of the International Left, the possibility of a Socialist utopia (Torres 16). At that time, Mendieta’s friendships with artists Nancy Spero and Leon Golub, critics Lucy Lippard and Ruby Rich, and her relationship with minimalist sculptor Carl André, all of whom were vocal social and political activists, had contributed to her growing political awareness (Viso 78). Illuminating in this respect are the words Mendieta herself put together for an introduction of a 1980 exhibition she organized called “Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States” held in the Artists In Residence (A.I.R) Gallery—a female collective space in New York she was part of since 1977—. “There is a certain time in history when people take consciousness of themselves and ask questions about who they are (…) Do we exist?… To question our cultures is to question our own existence, our human reality. To confront this fact means to acquire an awareness of ourselves. This in turn becomes a search, a questioning of who we

32 Women have been excluded from the political sphere before, during and after the Revolution both inside and outside the island and hence it is not surprising that they tend to cast a skeptical eye on officialist discourses, including (patriarchal) diasporic ones. But nonetheless, as Fusco contends, “exchanges that have gone on across borders take forms usually associated with feminine discursive practices: home gatherings, letters, gossip, and other intimate forms of conversation such as *Radio Bemba*”, which is a Cuban way of referring to gossip (*English is Broken Here* 20). In this respect I find quite interesting that, as Fusco asserts, it has been “the voices of those marginalized by the official discourse of both sides (Cuba and the U.S.) that have been (instrumental) in keeping doors open all along” (*English is Broken Here* 19).
are and how we will realize ourselves” (Mendieta qtd. in Griefen 176). More politically involved but also aware of the spaces that were opening for Cuban exiles wanting to return to the island, in 1980 Mendieta took the first of seven recorded trips to Havana through the Círculo de Cultura Cubana, a cultural organization based in New York that was authorized to commission trips between the two countries. That first approach to her lost homeland, according to Víso, was strictly for personal reasons (79). She got to reconnect with family, and visit her childhood homes. However, for her second trip she decided to make use of her artistic credentials and take down with her a group of artists and art critics among which were both U.S. citizens and Cuban exiles so as to ignite a dialogue with artists in the island. Such visit, which coincided with the opening of “Volumen Uno” (Volume One), an exhibition that presented the works of a generation of young Cuban artists, later labeled as la generación de los ochenta (the eighties’ generation), spurred an interesting conversation among artistic communities. And more interestingly for Mendieta, this contact with peers in the island “provided her an entrée into contemporary Cuban life unmediated by official Cuban government channels, as well as exposure to varied aspects of Cuban culture and history” (Víso 79).

Exposed to a wider array of Cubans both on and off the island, both in and out of Miami, as well as to the different political inclinations each of these communités defended, Mendieta grasped the complex range of exile politics and expanded her understanding about her own bicultural existence. The incorporation of Santería elements on Mendieta’s part hence tells us a lot about her positionality as a diasporic subject. As Blocker states, “Despite her decidedly white European heritage, as an artist in the United States Mendieta was not white; she was consigned to that amorphous realm of the non-white” (47). Informed by this non-white categorization as well as by her first hand experience of racism in her host country, the artist also became aware of her homeland’s own history of ethnic oppression and hence decided to turn to a very particular Cuba, that of both the Afro-Cubans, and the Taínos, native inhabitants of the pre-hispanic Antilles, in order to recuperate their cultures. And in

33 It is important to acknowledge that Mendieta’s identification with the African religious legacy was not exclusive. As Bonnie Clearwater has explored, by 1981 Mendieta was also working on a series of etchings she performed in the mountains of the Escaleras de Jaruco, near Havana. These etchings, which were performed directly on Cuban soil, were inspired by Taínano myths and goddess she had learned about through her contact
so doing, I contend, not only did Mendieta affirm herself as a Cuban but also as a channel of ennunciation for the voices of the oppressed through what is perhaps their most guarded bastion of identity: their belief system. As a Cuban-American, then, Mendieta considered herself a heiress of the ancient cultures original to the island where she was born.

*Untitled (Ochún)* (Figure 17) is not the first piece in which Mendieta infused Santería references. In 1975 on a creek close to Iowa City she created *Silueta de Yemayá*. This recorded installation consists of a constructed wooden raft that is covered with dark red velvet outlined with the artist’s own silhouette lined up with white flowers. The horizontal sculpture, which Mendieta then sets afloat, is dragged down by the currents while moving up and down until it finally disappears from the sight of the camara. *Incantation to Olokún-Yemayá* (1977) (Figure 18), another important piece from Mendieta’s silhouette series, documents the trace of a feminine body excavated from sand and surrounded by large handmade heaped sand.


with Yale University Professor José Juan Arrom. In fact, Mendieta repeatedly quoted Arrom’s book *Mitología y artes prehispánicas de las Antillas* (Mythology and Pre-Hispanic Arts of the Antilles) in some notes she was planning to use for a book project on her Jaruco rupestrian sculptures (Clearwater 12). However, although I recognize the breadth of Mendieta’s cultural references, I focus on Santería for the purpose of analyzing *Untitled (Ochún)*, a piece that clearly draws from the Yoruba-Catholic cosmogony.
The reference to Santería in these three pieces is apparent in their titles, which refer to different orishas, or deities, in the pantheon of Santería. According to Brandon, in the Cuban Santería, Yemayá is mother of the saints/orishas, goddess of the sea and mother of the world, and her Catholic representation corresponds to the Virgin of Regla (77). Furthermore, Yemayá is usually invoked when one either wants a child or needs of a place to call home (Cabañas 14). Hence, through this light both Silueta de Yemayá and Incantation to Olokún-Yemayá (Figure 18) suggest the expression of Mendieta’s desire for a return to the home and the need of the individual to reconnect itself with its lost origins. Ochún, on the other hand, the orisha to which Mendieta dedicated her ‘earth-body sculpture’, as she herself liked to call them, in the coasts of Miami (Figure 17), is the patroness of love, and rules sex and marriage (Brandon 77). Ochún is the river goddess as well as the patron saint of Cuba and in its synchretized iconography it is the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre. Moreover, related to the principles of water and harmony, “Ochún posseses the power (…) to create unity where unity is not possible” (Viso 93).

This installation that faces Cuba even as it is located in the U.S., is, accordingly, Mendieta’s metaphoric way of enacting a rite of reconciliation among the two different and perhaps opposing traditions in which she lived. However, it was not only the contents of Santería spirituality that Mendieta infused into her pieces but also the formal procedures of their ritualistic practices. Abiding by one aspect of outdoor Santería ritual practice known as going "monte adentro" (looking for an uncultivated piece of land and then going inside of it), Mendieta, throughout her artistic career, searched for land on which to perform her artistic ceremonies (Cabañas 14). As Ana Mendieta herself described it:"There are many places I have gone to time and time again just because I feel connected to them...when I find a site I have things to do there, work rituals" (qtd. in Cabañas 14). And in so doing, her work performs the most profound spiritual meditations of them all, that is, that of going back to the roots, of reenactig the primal moment where creation/birth takes place.

Art must have begun as nature itself, in a dialectical relationship between humans and the natural world from which we cannot be separated.

It was during my childhood in Cuba that I first became fascinated by primitive art and cultures. It seems as if these cultures are provided with an inner knowledge, a closeness to natural resources. And it is this knowledge which gives reality to the images they have created. This sense of magic, knowledge and power found in primitive art has influenced my personal attitude toward art-making. For the past
twelve years I have been working out in nature, exploring the relationship between myself, the earth and art. I have thrown myself into the very elements that produced me, using the earth as my canvas and my soul as my tools (Mendieta qtd. in Clearwater 41).

“Through my earth-body sculptures”, says Mendieta, “I become one with the earth. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs” (qtd. in Manzor 378). And in this line, Santeria simply formally reinforced in Mendieta an idea that she had already intuited: that “the Earth is an organism from which one can borrow energy and power. (And that) Nature, a manifestation of the orishas, serves as a medium, or vehicle, to contact the orishas and, through them, our ancestors” (Manzor 378). Hence, by creating works in unison with the natural elements (earth, water, air, and fire) Mendieta believed she was able to share some of the orishas’ vital energy or ashé, which can also be a transforming power (Schultz 14). Managing to bring together ancient and contemporary references, Western and non-Western forms and principles, in what I consider to be a rather healing move, Mendieta’s work and life achieved a double-consciousness that enabled her to exist on both sides of powerful lines of demarcations. Furthermore, as Schultz puts it, emphasizing the power of the crossroads as the point of intersection of two planes, “Mendieta revealed her belief in the potential for renewal and transcendence despite negative circumstances” (14).

Once when reflecting on her feeling of difference as an adolescent in the United States Mendieta said: “When I finally learned the language and talked to other people, I found that we would look at the same event, talk about it and would see it totally differently” (qtd. in Cabañas 16). In this light, her search of both identity and connection parallels her sense of meaning. A meaning that she found after she was able not only to grapple with but actually to embrace her difference. A Cuban-American, her experience of exile is embodied in a space of in-betweenness. This space between, where Mendieta's body is located, is a space for the renegotiation of concepts, social relations, and the production of meaning. It is a critical space, a fluid space, and a multiple space. It is a space of possibilities, a space of education and learning. "The interesting thing," said Mendieta, "is that education is about uneducating yourself" (qtd. in Cabañas 16). Hence, by critiquing the historical and religious legacy of patriarchal ideology that controls women and ethnic Others through its binary
CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the first section of this chapter I was able to strategically locate Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco within the Latina category both in terms of their lived experience in the U.S., and in terms of how their work is perceived in the mainstream arts world. In so doing, I pointed to the way in which they both, aware of the constraining implications of such categorization, were able to move around the limits and restrictions while reclaiming and asserting their individual particularities through their art. In this portion of the chapter, I also offered a decolonizing approach to performance art, the preferred medium of the two artists, and analyzed the way in which it serves as an inherently subversive tool. Tracing its origins back to slave practices, freak shows and parades, as well as to the most commonly recognized avant-guard movements, I opened a space to talk about racial and sexist historical practices that sprouted out of the colonial era, and that would otherwise go unnoticed in the official Art History annals. Furthermore, I also touched on how women artists ever since the late 1960s found in performance a great resource that offered them the possibility of utilizing their own bodies as the site for self-ennunciation.

In section two, I focused on analyzing Coco Fusco’s La Chavela Realty pointing to the different strategies through which this performance managed to offer a decolonial approach to the past. Embodying queen Isabel of Spain, Fusco aimed to reenact history by shifting codes and infusing different meanings into the scene. Using herself as the center piece to this performance, Fusco deliberately ‘tropicalized’ the episode and hence subverted its inherently racist, sexist and colonist implications. Tracing the iconographic references, the materials used, the ontological characteristics of Fusco’s body, and the site specificity of the piece, I complicated the artist’s identity by identifying her not only as a Latina/Cuban diasporic subject, but also as heiress of the black diaspora experience.

Finally, in section three, I explored the way in which Ana Mendieta also connected herself to the Afro-Cuban and indigenous caribbean traditions. Focusing on Untitled (Ochún), a piece she realized after being able to go back to Cuba, I pointed to her inclusion of Santería beliefs as part of her iconographic quest for identity/home. And again, since Santería takes us
back in time to the colonial period, I connected Mendieta’s work to Fusco’s since they both engage with a past they didn’t actually live, but that affects their present nonetheless. In this line, Mendieta’s use of organic materials such as sand and water in different natural settings and her knowledge of alternative ritualistic practices also challenges racist, sexist and colonialist stances although in a different and perhaps more subtle manner than that of Fusco.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION: EMBODYING TRANSFORMATION/ PERFORMING FEMINIST SUBALTERN DIASPORIC IDENTITIES

Embodiment allows a world that is always already there to come into being again. The body therefore *renews* the world through a sort of ‘eternal return’. (…) although the world is always already constituted, it has no value or significance of itself until it is incorporated into the body of the present. It is at this point that the ‘subject’ of tradition may become an ‘agent’ of change, both personally and in terms of the tradition itself.

--Bibi Bakare-Yusuf

The life of Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco as well as the works addressed in this thesis call the attention to the lack of literature focused on analyzing diaspora through the gaze of female visual artists and their artistic productions. Given that the field is mainly dominated by male perspectives on the subject matter as well as by research that centers in the works of writers, this study proves that diaspora—generally conceived as a site of tension, loss and nostalgia—can also be read as a place where women exiles, despite the hurdles they experience, can find the space to enunciate their innermost voice. Reading diaspora as a condition that promotes a particularly critical vision, this category was then crucial to locate Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco as subaltern creators of knowledge.

Not a hundred percent Cuban, but not a hundred percent American either, Mendieta and Fusco exist in an in-between locale, both in theory and in actuality, where there are social, historical and political forces constantly pulling them back and forth. Dealing with an incessant tidal movement that flows from past to present, from Cuba to the U.S., from Communism to Capitalism, from the Global South to the Global North, from Spanish to English, from an island to the continent, and from an ajiaco to a hot-dog, these artists found in art an avenue where their complex identities would make sense. Performance art, the artistic genre that allows no specific definitions while it embraces them all, offered them the possibility of using their own selves as canvases for self-affirmation. Embodying, then, categories that would often times be considered opposites, both Mendieta and Fusco
(re)present themselves, their beliefs and their cultures in each and every performance piece.
And in so doing, not only do they defy masculinist notions of nationality and origin, but they also challenge sexist takes on the female role in society as well imperialist ideas regarding the superiority of certain races and geographic territories.

My analysis of the first set of works by Mendieta – *Untitled (Creek Piece)* and *Isla* (Figures 9 and 10)– demonstrated the way in which she conceptualized herself in direct relationship to the land. And in so doing, she underscores her/its role as a fundamental agent of all planetary life and thus defies the western approach that views the earth itself as a mere background that is dealt with exclusively as a source of food, metals, water, and profit. Furthermore, creating spatialized or geographic figures of her body, I pointed to how Mendieta posited the island as a key element to convey her sense of displacement from her Cuban origins. This feeling of isolation she repeatedly enacted in her works, however, goes far beyond the sentiment experienced as an effect of being physically distanced from a specific geographic enclave. It is, in fact, the representation of a deep-rooted feeling of despair, void and uncertainty. Mendieta’s body or else the sculpture of her silhouette, functions as a poetic metaphor for a lonesome mass of land circumscribed by an endless and amorphous ocean. Her self/body, Mendieta is forced to admit, is limited as long as she stays grounded to one single place. The flowing although sometimes tempestuous water that surrounds her constantly reminds her of that possibility of letting go and setting sail to other horizons. Nonetheless, her forced exile, and the adverse conditions she experienced in those new territories made her realize who she was and how she was perceived by the outside world. Having left her roots behind without actually cutting them off completely, Mendieta experienced the pain of being cast as a racialized and sexualized Latina but managed to grow comfortable into that mold. Since she managed to reclaim her own fluid and complex identity, and create a special place for herself in the world, Mendieta, in the end, was able to explicate herself while making a strong statement both as a woman and as an artist.

Coco Fusco, on the other hand, has flown across the waters of diaspora in a somewhat different way. Not being torn from her family at a young age but rather born in the U.S. – although in unconventional circumstances– into a Cuban migrant home, I stressed how her path in an Anglosaxon culture was significantly smoother than Mendieta’s. This, however, does not necessarily mean that Fusco escaped neither being subjected by the racist politics of
the U.S. nor experiencing the sentiment of being both Cuban and American, all at the same time. Nonetheless, having entered the art scene more than a decade later than Mendieta, Fusco had, at least, a point of reference. As I pointed out when analyzing *Two Undiscovered*... (Figure 11), Fusco, hand in hand with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, also resorted to the idea of an island as the site of enunciation. The imaginary floating piece of land the artists called “Guatinau” became, then, the geographic origin of the ‘exotic’ Amerindians they both embodied for that performance. Although not physically palpable as in Mendieta’s pieces, this conceptual island nonetheless activates a sense of transborder *cubanía* all the while it alludes to the power relationships underlying the current world order and its patriarchal, imperialist and geopolitical conception of the lands and seas. Through this gaze, islands are peripheric and less important territories than continents; and following that same logic, Fusco and Gómez-Peña as far as being indigenous to that small piece of land, are then the outsiders in respect to the continentals. The artists, disguised as Amerindians, are there to be seen and studied. Satirically, however, the ones conducting the research were always Fusco and Gómez-Peña. And in so doing, they shifted the power balance by actively participating as knowledge creators, that is, as the subjects studying rather than as the objects being studied.

The contrast of Mendieta’s nostalgia and Fusco’s defying humour took them nonetheless to the route of creativity. It is in this instance that we see that paradigms of lament and pain are not necessary condition of diasporicity but rather that humour, creativity and joy also have an open space in this experience. One such form of situatedness that can be activated lies in the body’s relation to a particular tradition. And through it, Mendieta and Fusco exert their agency by making themselves and their critiques to the oppressive system both visible and audible. Reclaiming a liberating rather than a constraining Latina identity both as women and as artists, and choosing performance art their medium, I illustrated the way in which Mendieta and Fusco use their bodies as well as their particular understanding of historic events and spiritual practices to challenge imperialist, sexist, racist and monolithic stances. The second set of pieces I analyzed illustrated this sense of empowerment while pointing to the nuances between them.

In *La Chavela Realty* (Figure 13) Coco Fusco offers a gynocentric decolonizing version of history. Retelling the story of queen Isabel the Catholic in her own terms, Fusco
subverts the conservative notion that asserts both that history cannot be changed and that origin refers to a once only inaugural moment. In so doing, Fusco liberates the constraining western perception of time whereby past, present and future are conceived as a linear and evolutionary teleology. Instead, in this performance Fusco recreates a scene in which she yuxtaposes temporalities thus offering an achronological approach to history. The artist, just as diasporic subjects tend to do, goes back to a past event in order to reconfigure some oppressive traits that affect the present and thus opens the possibility for a better future. Furthermore, by embodying the role of a powerful female figure, Fusco, a black latina herself, not only traces her origins back to the black diaspora but also transforms what is given as the norm in a masculinist, sexist, imperialist world, hence uncovering a transformative kind of historicity: a black, female-centered, ‘tropicalized’ version of it.

On the other hand, Ana Mendieta, despite her Spanish descent, also linked herself to the black heritage that conforms Cuban culture. And yet the discursive line she chose to tackle was not so much historical as it was spiritual in nature. In Untitled (Ochún) (Figure 17), a piece she did after she returned to Cuba the first time, includes clear references to Santería beliefs both at an iconographic and at a conceptual level. However, since Santería emerged in a specific time and place, that is, the colonial period in Cuba, I connected this work to Fusco’s since they both engage with temporality and the alteration of negative aspects of the past as a means to create a homey present. In this light, each time Mendieta reenacted alternative ritualistic practices and beliefs, something that clearly connects to her personal quest for origins through nature, she communicated with the history or tradition of that ritual and at the same time gave rise to the potential in that act to reconstitute and reenergize that tradition. And in so doing, she offers an alternative kind of knowledge, that is, one that challenges racist, sexist and colonialist stances, too.

Ana Mendieta and Coco Fusco have, above all, produced a body of work that is aesthetically and politically compelling. Not so much speaking, as Gayatri Spivak would question in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, but rather performing discourse as subaltern beings, both artists not only cope with their sense of displacement, but also redefine their location by challenging the oppressive structures that deem them as outcasts. Embodying and affirming themselves and their culture at the fullest extent, they both
reinvent and reclaim their identity and hence make a place for themselves out of displacement.

As far as limitations, I consider my method and methodology to be both the primary strength as well as the primary limitation of my research. The act of applying a three-pronged approach—feminist, postcolonial and diasporic theories—to analyze both the life and work of Fusco and Mendieta was not an easy thing to do. I had to juggle with many different issues at once: Cuba’s historical context both as an independent country and in relationship to the U.S., the women’s biographies, their positionality as diasporic subjects within an Anglo country, the geopolitical context of their negotiating identities (Cuban-Americans, Latinas, women of color), the aesthetic and political characteristics of their artistic production, and the location of such production within the cultural realm. Thus I am aware that, to some extent, pulling threads from so many different sources could have been detrimental to my project in terms of clarity and profoundness. However, I still believe that, when well knit, the more threads the better. Fabrics with higher threadcount and elaborate weaves are always more resistant and beautiful. In this sense, I find that I was able to render a rather complete, complex and finely knitted narrative analysis.

Nonetheless, there were some concepts I came across with while in the process that I would have certainly liked to further explore had I had the time to do so. The first one is the notion of island both as a rather interesting geopolitical site that defies traditional approaches to the idea of borders, and as a poetic metaphor that exemplifies the sense of solitude and autonomy experienced in exile. Furthermore, when analyzing Mendieta’s pieces, I couldn’t help noticing a contrast between the works where she is physically present and those where she uses only her trace or silhouette. In this sense, I would say that the idea of presence-versus-absence in terms of feminine corporeality would require further research. Another point that I just mentioned when talking about the Cuban generation that fled the revolution but that actually demands much more attention is the experience of exile through the lens of a Communist/Capitalist analysis. Conducting research on that topic could clearly enrich the literature on diaspora.

Another finding of mine was the fact that although there have been several publications in which Mendieta’s work has been revisited in an encyclopedic manner, there are none that cover Fusco’s vast body of productions. And since that is always something
necessary in terms of offering a general idea of an artist’s style and quest, I would certainly encourage someone to undertake such task. More generally, in terms of bibliography, I was surprised to see how limited the extant literature focusing particularly on analyzing the works of female visual artists in exile through a diasporic lens is. Aware of the conflicts the world endures nowadays and its effects in the massive flows of people across national borders, as well as of the emergence of artists with such characteristics around the globe, I consider this a huge and dangerous gap in the knowledge realm. Research on this subject matter should be further addressed for it would certainly enhance the perspective on the contemporary (art) world. In this line, I would suggest that the spectrum be opened beyond the Cuban context so as to explore different latitudes. There are many prominent contemporary female artists whose backgrounds differ considerably – Yoko Ono (Japan), Marina Abramovic (Serbia), Shirin Neshat (Iran), just to name a few – but who nonetheless could be studied through a diasporic approach.

Going back to Mendieta and Fusco, as far as their biographic references and identity traits are concerned, I by no means consider this project provided an exhaustive explanation (if such thing were possible). Identity is a process and as such it is never complete. Hence, to pretend that by locating both Mendieta and Fusco in certain categories – Cuban-Americans, Latinas, mulatta, artists, burgeoise, lower-middle class, etc. – I depicted perfect portraits of themselves would be ludicrous. In this light, I am perfectly aware of my limitations since I never discussed the artists personal lives or sexuality, nor did I tackle Mendieta’s tragic death. My reason for not do so had to do with the fact that, as I stated in my introduction, I was more interested in analyzing the gender, ethnic, racial, and class aspects of the artists’ identities since they are clearly reflected in their work. And although I focused primarily in the first three, I need to admit that perhaps my class analysis was perhaps the weakest. Hence, considering this category for future research could also help further illuminate the analysis on both Mendieta and Fusco.

Although Ana Mendieta is no longer with us, she left behind an incredibly vast body of work that would have been practically impossible to cover in these pages. As for Coco Fusco, she is still actively producing pieces that, interestingly enough, are more openly related to Cuba and should hence be considered for future analysis. In fact, during the process of this research, that is in 2012, Fusco realized La Plaza Vacía (The Empty Plaza) and Y
entonces el mar te habla (And the Sea Will Talk to You). The Empty Plaza is a video inspired by the organized public protests in the Middle East beginning in 2011, in which the artist took note of the communal spaces around the world being utilized and, in contrast, those left empty. The focus of this piece is the empty Plaza de la Revolución in Havana for it becomes the protagonist in Fusco’s meditation on public space, revolutionary promise, and memory. In the video/performance And the Sea Will Talk to You, Fusco invites the audience into the physical and emotional experience of journeying from Cuba by sea. Through it the participants relinquish their worldly possessions (handbags, money, phones, watches, etc.) before entering a darkened theater where the traditional seating is replaced by the inner tubes that serve as sea crafts for Cuban rafters. The video that is projected into the screen combines images of the Caribbean Sea and skies with poetic and testimonial commentary on the sea. In terms of their artistic production, then, it is important to point that I have come nowhere close to discussing all of Mendieta and Fusco’s work. To me what was more important was to focus simply on a couple of pieces and to put them in conversation with one another in order to grant them the attention they deserve. Each and every performance is so full of meanings that offering a glazed sort of approach seemed disrespectful to me. However, since the richness of art and life lies on the fact that they will always stay open for future interpretations, I need to say that this is ultimately my personal take.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


