Bilingual visual culture in New York: socially-engaged Latina artists and the discourse of hybridity

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BILINGUAL VISUAL CULTURE IN NEW YORK:
SOCIALLY-ENGAGED LATINA ARTISTS AND
THE DISCOURSE OF HYBRIDITY

by
Solmerina Aponte

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

College of Arts and Sciences
Department of Latin American, Caribbean and U.S. Latino Studies

2010
The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the aesthetic visual discourse of hybridity manifested in the works of contemporary socially-engaged Latina artists of the New York diaspora. For Latin America and the Caribbean, regions where sociopolitical history has generally exhibited a tumultuous trajectory, the arts have provided a formidable venue for addressing the social concerns engendered by this turbulent history and for studying the creative ways in which artists interpret them. The symbiotic bond created between art and politics would become a cultural force and tradition in the history of struggle that characterizes the countries that are part of these regions. This bond has provided the basis for the visual discourse developed by socially-committed Latin American and Caribbean women artists residing in the United States. Since the 1960s, the struggle for gender, cultural and ethnic recognition in U.S. society became crucial both on the social and political fronts. The visual and performance women artists of the Latina/o diaspora who came of age in the mid-1980s, and other subaltern groups within the arts, have continued to be at the forefront of these struggles and have merged the aforementioned issues with their subaltern diasporic experiences to create a unique discourse of hybridity.

Through a detailed analysis of works produced by ten visual and performance New York Latina artists from different Latin American and Caribbean national cultures, and through personal interviews with each, this dissertation examines the genesis and trajectory of the Latina aesthetic discourse of hybridity. The study highlights the common discursive elements deployed by the artists to creatively address the social and political issues that affect them as women of color who are part a U.S. Latina/o diaspora. This analysis includes the perspectives provided by the most relevant theories on cultural materialism, border consciousness, Third World feminism, and hybridity that served as basis for the development of the discursive elements that have come to characterize these artists’ distinct aesthetic visual language.
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Introduction

...art...can succeed in articulating not just the imposed or constitutive social or intellectual system, but at once this and an experience of it, its lived consequence..., and being the kind of work it is can be transmitted and communicated beyond its original situation and circumstances--Raymond Williams, 25.

This work is intended to be the beginning of what will hopefully be an ongoing study of the visual and performance art productions created by artists who are part of the Latin American and Caribbean diaspora in the United States. The scope of this study will be on contemporary Latina visual artists in New York, who describe themselves as politically active and/or socially conscious, and employ the aesthetic discourse defined in this work. These are women artists who feel they need to use their art to draw the spectators’ attention toward the issues that matter to them as individuals and as part of a diasporic community; women who dissect the essential elements of their art, and purposely reformulate their visual discourse in order to let the viewer have access to their world within the diaspora. My interest in looking at the visual art production of this latter sector in particular came about for several reasons. First, because I am the epitome of what the executive director of Galería La Raza in San Francisco, Carolina Ponce de León, described as a “born-again U.S. Latina”; in other words, I “belong to diverse physical and emotional worlds.” Born and raised in New York City, I emigrated in 1970 and returned in 1992 from my travels abroad to different countries. I was intrigued by the seemingly major transformations in political attitudes and realities within the U.S. Latina/o population during this time.

One of the most notable transformations was the huge influx of immigrants from other Latin American and Caribbean countries, to a city where, for many decades, Puerto Ricans had constituted over 75% of all Latinas/os, changing the community make-up substantially. This was in part due to the deindustrialization and the consequent decline of the manufacturing jobs in New York during the 1970s, resulting from a world recession that was brewing since the 1960s.
(Lendman 1-12). The latter situation most assuredly forced many Puerto Rican migrants to abandon New York and look to other cities or states for jobs in the manufacturing sector. Meanwhile, immigrants from other countries, such as the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Colombia, and Central America began to increase significantly.

There were several reasons that explain the increase of immigration from other Latin American and Caribbean countries to the United States. President Reagan’s push against the practice of monoculture in Latin America during the 1980s was arguably among the most significant reasons for this migratory trend. During the 1970s, many leaders of the agriculturally-based Latin American nations, such as Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina, began to acquire huge loans from international creditors with the goal of modernizing their economies and infrastructure through industrialization. Reagan convinced these countries that these loan practices would eventually boost their economies. Reagan backed the vast loans issued by the World Bank, by many accounts quadrupling Latin America’s constitutive countries’ external debt (Institute of Latin American Studies 69). The consequent ever-increasing national debt, and Reagan’s support of the dictatorships to fight against what he called the “evil empire” of communist regimes, contributed to the increase of social injustice and poverty in these countries, generated civil wars and political repressions, and most assuredly contributed to the bulk of the Latin American and Caribbean swell of immigrants into the United States.

As a result, from 1970s to the 1980s particularly, the demographics of El Barrio or East Harlem transformed from a predominantly Puerto Rican population to one with a very sizeable Mexican component; the Washington Heights sector on the west side of Manhattan, became the preferred home for the Dominican population; Salvadors and Hondurans settled in Long Island; and the borough of Queens became the home for a heavy population of Colombians, Venezuelans, Salvadors, Ecuadorians, among others. This diverse influx of cultures logically brought along a whole new set of issues and problems into the city that went beyond overcoming
marginalization and poverty, such as immigration regulations and rights, labor issues and even managing different levels of cultural shock.

Another major transformation taking place at about the same time in the city was the surge of female artists of color. Upon my encountering this geographic transformation, the questions that came to mind were: What did the new generation of Latina visual artists think about the aforementioned changes as these related to their relationship with the power structures within the art world? What specifically did socially committed visual cultural creators think of the present political and social reality of Latina/os within the New York City diaspora, and how were these changes reflected in their artwork?

In addition, even with the notable transformations, the surge, and the all-inclusive multiethnic façade that the city and the media now offered, there still seemed to be a void, the lack of recognition regarding the significance of socially committed Latina art as an integral part of U.S. art history. According to Carolina Ponce de León, referring to Latina/o art in general, there continues to be a struggle for Latina/o artists and their art to be recognized within the larger context of Latin America and Caribbean art (141). Consequently, due to all the aforementioned observations, this study wishes to contribute to this aim, no matter how modest this contribution may be.

Because of the contested nature of some of the terms, concepts, and ideas discussed in this study, or the different points of view regarding their meanings and uses, their use in this dissertation needs to be operationalized. Starting from the very title, the use of the term Latina for self-identification has been an issue for some since its significance varies from one nationality to the next and from one generation to another. My interchanging of the terms, mestiza, border consciousness, and hybridity, is based on some of the most recent theoretical literature. Many see the concept of mestizaje as limited and passé, and have substituted it, as art critic Gerardo Mosquera argues, for other terms which are just as contentious, such as, “borders,
decentralization, or re-articulation” (Mosquera, Beyond…14). For the purposes of this study, I did not see the need to get too caught up in these controversies. My lack of precision as it pertains to the meaning and usage of these, therefore, is intentional. The discussion on the specific meanings and uses given to these terms make for an interesting research on their own intrinsic worth. The reality is that because of the focus of this study, at this time, the use of any one of these terms is not intended to be definitive.

Also, regarding the use of the broader Latina label, in the interviews conducted with the artists for this study, they were allowed to identify themselves, as they preferred. Many of the women, mainly those who were born and/or raised in the United States, who identified strongly with their cultural roots, and were very vocal about the social concerns at hand, were adamant about being recognized as Latinas, insisting on giving the term political weight. A few artists felt that the label could be an obstacle because it could go against their goal of having the messages they wish to convey understood more universally. Still, there are others who preferred to identify with their particular nationality, and accept the Latina label as an additional identifier as a way to address their diasporic situation. All did agree, with the possible exception of López Sanfeliú, that they disliked the “Hispanic” label because they did not feel it characterizes them adequately.

As for the use herein of the terms mestiza, hybridity, and border consciousness, although the term hybridity is employed most often, they are interchanged frequently. The reason for this is because the goal was to steer the focus away from the points that differentiate each term, and instead highlight the salient commonalities that the each term shares, and that serves the purposes of this discussion. Each of the visual artists interviewed expressed awareness of being part of more than one world, culturally, biologically, spiritually, and physically; and of being conscious that the duality within these worlds is somehow reflected in her works. This is the point of congruence found in all the writings of all the theorists that provided the framework of analysis for this study, hence it is the one on which we focused. The term least utilized during the interviews with the artists was mestiza, not because of incompatibility, or any objection on the
part of the artists, since Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory on border consciousness is if anything, congruent with this study’s theoretical objectives, but because some of the artists were not as familiar with Anzaldúa’s work and therefore, not too informed with the term’s more inclusive denotation. In regards to the other terms, most of the artists were comfortable with these and there was no need to explain or define them.

During the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, very few Latina/o artists in the United States were recognized by name, whether they were socially committed or not. On a national level, Latina/o visual artists in the 1960s were even less visible in New York than in the west and southwest. Logically, the visibility of the murals produced in the west and southwest, displayed in public places, helped familiarize the general public more with the Chicana/o painters, and consequently, with the concerns of their Latina/o communities.

The limited visibility of the art production was not the only obstacle for New York Latina/o artists. During the mid-1980s, the country as a whole began to lean towards more conservative policies, which affected all the arts in general, but seemed to hit the ethnic and women’s arts even harder. One objective of this study was to find out why, despite the growing conservatism, the number of females of color in the traditionally exclusive Anglo male-dominated art world increased. In addition, with the continuing lack of support for Latina/o artists, it is difficult to imagine how any artist of color could produce art. Consequently, another goal was to find out how the contemporary politically active, and/or socially conscious Latina artists in particular were able to integrate their concerns with their visual discourses, considering the latter obstacles, and their obvious differing approaches to art.

These objectives could not be accomplished without first looking at Latin American and Caribbean art as a whole, from a historical perspective, and understanding the philosophy behind its theoretical evolution. The Latin American art critic, Gerardo Mosquera, argued that due to Latin America’s history of colonialism and struggles for autonomy and self-definition, its art and
literary theories were erected on a foundation of political consciousness. This political consciousness espoused “two fundamental ideas, Marxism and dependency theory,” which in turn proposed “the socialization of art” (Beyond…11). Latin American visual art theory, much like its literary counterpart, purported the idea of an art for the masses, that is, an art that is not entirely focused on aesthetics, but also raises awareness of the social and political issues affecting the people. This tendency was later patent in the art produced by U.S. Latina/o artists in the 1960s and 1970s. Consequently, due to the historical propensity by Latin American/Caribbean cultural producers to favor political views that espouse social commitment, socially engaged U.S. Latina visual artists/activists, whether intentionally or not, tend to construct discourses that use these same principles as points of departure. The Chicana writer and Xicanista, Ana Castillo, seconds this hypothesis stating that the process of concientización (consciousness-raising) is based on Marxist principles even though it did not have success allotting women “the kind of humanitarian restitution predicted by the designers of the Communist doctrine in the past century”(14).

This assertion is not meant to imply that all contemporary socially committed Latina artists that employ this new discourse support Marxism. Nor is this study proposing that they all address cultural affirmation, racism, sexism, and classism via a visual discourse based exclusively on a social (r)evolutionary rhetoric, a more common tendency in the political arts of the 1960s-1970s. What this study does propose is that these artists, as women of color of the Latina diaspora, produce a visceral visual aesthetic discourse that solidifies a specific cultural perspective. Stuart Hall explains this discursive revolution, or “new concept” that involves decentring the subject in favor of a “reconceptualization [of identity] -- thinking it in its new, displaced or decentered position within the paradigm” (2).

Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha also speaks of a discursive revolution in describing this visceral aesthetic. He advocates the discourse as a product that emerges from a distinct internal space, that he calls a “third space of enunciation” (38). This space is an indeterminate location
within the psyche that develops as a result of the dual nature of the identity of an individual who resides between two or more cultures. The dual identity gives these individuals the ability to “translate” from one culture to another. This cultural identity “resid[es] [in] neither one [space] nor the other” (Bhabha 25); rather, it comes from a space of cultural articulation that is neither occupied by the colonizer, or dominant class, nor strictly from the language of the subordinate, or the colonized. The third space of enunciation is based on the “inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity” (Bhabha 28). The discourse that emerges from this space reveals what has been identified by some scholars, such as Coco Fusco and Stuart Hall, as a hybrid experience, and by others such as Anzaldúa, Moraga and Herrera-Sobek as a border or mestiza/o consciousness.

In an interview with his colleague W.J.T. Mitchell, Bhabha stated that in a hybrid space, notions are no longer based on the binary thinking of the empowered, the colonizers, but on the ‘interstitial’ articulation that does not just transmit cultural notions but translates them. The third space allows for the formulation of notions that go beyond the white/black, male/female, us/them notions, to construct a discourse that can “disarticulate the voice of authority.” The “third” space becomes a site of “resistance and negotiation” to address colonialism, sexism, heterosexism, or any cultural discourse of contestation. Hence the Latina artist can develop a discourse with which she can dispell the old myths about gender roles, class, culture, etc., and then present new plausible scenarios upon which different cultural models can be built. Since, as mentioned earlier, Bhabha asserts that the third space is where the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity takes place, we can surmise that as the artists’ social concerns and sense of commitment grow, the hybrid consciousness becomes more discernible in the artwork.

The creativity of a cultural creator of color, therefore, is wrought from his/her cultural hybridity; cultural hybridity encourages the creation of an art that is enriched by merging elements from all the different cultural groups that are interacting, without permitting any particular group to override another (Fusco, English is…33). Through this culturally hybrid space, socially engaged
U.S. Latina visual creators acquire the ability to absorb and merge different cultural elements. “Cultural hybridization creates a new order of complexity in which the experience of the center is atomized, made mobile, and able to locate itself in any venue, being peripheral [allows] the Latin American artist to act in various contexts, to be agile, strategic, to displace the center or subvert it (Ponce de León 10).” From this privileged space the Latina creator can address and denounce issues, recreate scenarios, present new discursive structures, as well as translate and mediate between cultures.

The late Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa contended that the most revealing tendency employed by hybrid cultural creators is the purposeful mediation between different cultural elements. She interpreted this tendency to be a derivative of the border or *mestiza* consciousness. In other words, being exposed to two or more cultures enhances an artist’s ability to understand and relate to opposing cultures, and to be able to communicate with the viewers from this standpoint. She also maintained that Latina artists, as well as other artists of color, produce from a subordinate position, so they are inclined to reveal the relationship they have with the dominant power through the reconstruction of visual discourses. These discourses, reconstructed via mutual appropriation and an exchange of a common ground, can be beneficial to, or understood by, both the particular culture of origin (customs, nationality of origin, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) and the patriarchal order (*Making Face…*383-4).

When referring to a *mestiza* consciousness, or the discourse of hybridity employed by many Latina writers and artists, Anzaldúa pointed to a discursive evolution that goes beyond the concept of simple biological, interracial mixing and that extends beyond the physical conflictive relationship that occurs at the U.S.-Mexico border (2-13). The terms incorporate all persons who simultaneously reside within different cultural realms and because of this, tend to experience similar physical and emotional situations within the diaspora. The situations and the ideas that people outside of the diaspora have about those that integrate it, bring forth unique perspectives on the issues and struggles of those who are part of it. In the case of the socially conscious
Latina artist, part of the shared diasporic experiences is an inherited consciousness that arises from the struggles of the oppositional social movements that developed in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Chicana theorist Chela Sandoval explained that there is an artistic integration in varying degrees of civil rights issues, the ethnic liberation movements, and the feminist movements (42). To these, the artists add what Sandoval refers to as a Third-World feminist ideology; another feminist discourse that became a model of resistance for women of color in the 1980s. This type of feminism, she says, generated the "common speech" (42) found among these cultural creators.

Highlighting all these points of view leads us to conclude that the manner in which a discourse is delivered and mediated is what distinguishes one socially conscious cultural creator of color from another. The viewer will observe this in how it is manifested, be it a difference in style, recurrent themes, or preference for one medium or another. The findings of this investigation resulting from the interviews with the different socially engaged Latina visual artists in New York, revealed that the artists are all conscious of their hybridity and diasporic condition, and that regardless of these differences, they tend to display their discourse through a type of "code-switching" or "bilingual" imaging that translates, interprets, and enables the mediation between their respective cultures of origin and their U.S cultural milieu. This restructured creative discourse specifically facilitates addressing the established categories imposed upon the artist by the dominant structures, as women of color living within the confines of a different national culture. The Latina artist creates this visual discourse based on the roots of a traditional Latin American consciousness-raising/revolutionary tendency that Mosquera documented (11), and then enriches it with images that others, both within, and without the diasporas of New York can relate to, or at least understand.

In this study, the analysis of the artwork by the socially engaged Latina artists of New York will demonstrate that this discourse of hybridity, exhibits a visual bilingualism, or an integration of the linguistic and visual codes that are derived from their respective national cultural
backgrounds. This discourse empowers the artists’ to offer other plausible scenarios that differ—tactically--from what other female artists of color offer. More specifically, as mentioned previously, the discursive restructuring found in socially engaged and/or politically active U.S. Latina visual and performance artists’ creative production is focused on the cultural specificity of their hybrid space of enunciation. We observe varying focuses and degrees of social commitment in the work of other artists of different Latina national origins, but the approach will not necessarily reveal a hybrid or border consciousness. At the very least, the discourse will emerge from a different space of enunciation.

From each personal space of enunciation, other distinct visual discourses emerge. If, for example, one observes the scenarios presented in the works by the African-American female artist, Kara Walker (see Fig. 1), one sees powerful images that denounce racism through a discourse of shock and disgust. If we look at the works by Anglo-American feminist artists such as Cindy Sherman (see Fig. 2), we will see images that question gender roles and the portrayal of women in American popular culture. The tactical approach within the works of these particular artists generates discourses that reflect their particular enunciatory space. Since there is generally a shared history between the artists and the viewers, such as the work produced by the two mentioned artists, the images are readily understood; a translation or a mediating discourse is not always necessary. The general North American public might perceive and understand the black/white-white/black racial dichotomies, sexism, heterosexism and Anglo-American feminist issues, but when it comes to cultural discrimination, exclusionism, marginalization of Latina/os, border issues, or even issues of arguably lesser intensity and conflict such as machismo, marianismo, Santería or spiritualism, the images can be less comprehensible to these viewers without some type of visual vocabulary that could help decipher meaning.

The new discourse in the works of socially engaged Latina artists has not lost its original objective of continually searching for the transformation of the exploitative social order, but the focus has been diversified. The artists have shifted away from addressing only issues dealing
with class conflict. The focus is now broader, highlighting the marginalization of the ethnic sectors within U.S. society, in this case, the Latina/o population, and more specifically, the gender-based cultural norms that contribute to the marginalization of Latinas. Consequently, although traditional Marxist ideology contributed to the shaping of modern Latin American art and literary theory, it proved to be limited in the sense that it could not satisfy all the aspects that must be taken into account, if social change is to be achieved.

Fig. 2. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled, Film Stills* nos. 21 and 35, 1978. Complete

Arguably, Marxism’s greatest flaw was how it regarded society’s spiritual needs as part of a false consciousness that further alienated them from recognizing the economic inequities and exploitation that capitalism engenders. Solely addressing the material aspects of class struggle could never achieve a real change from within. The spiritual and social aspects, or what might be considered irrational (non-empirical) human tendencies (Williams 103) with which individuals fulfill their psychological needs, aspects such as individual emotional and biological needs, the inner mental struggles, their spiritual beliefs, the significance or feelings of self-worth as part and parcel of the human race, satisfaction over one’s individual accomplishments, etc., are just as important as the socioeconomic aspects in the search for a more just and equitable society, which must also obviously include the full recognition and participation of women of color, and of people of dissident sexualities.

The crux of the discursive restructuring that characterizes Latin American and Caribbean women artists, and that was later adopted by U.S. Latinas, sought to include the aforementioned spiritual elements lacking in traditional Marxism, while still adhering to the historic materialistic approach. In other words, they continued to look for ways to address and change the power structures that repress the voices of the “others” through negative images, stereotypes, and cultural appropriation and commodification. Socially engaged Latina artists, as their cultural predecessors did before them, continue to seek a social transformation, but exhibiting a more defined tendency to revolutionize the visual discourse by deconstructing and reconstructing existing prevalent discourses. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams expressed this as revolutionizing without clutching to the historical materialist Marxist aspect of “conquering nature” (103-110), or better said, without negating those human irrational tendencies, this new tactical approach is one of the basic precepts of the theory of what he refers to as Cultural Materialism. He described the approach as the social-structural or material aspects that stimulate the creativity of politically conscious artists, along with spiritual aspects, as well as human particularities (103-110).
The analytical approach followed in this study favours the analysis of the aesthetic discursive shift in the Latina creative process based on this cultural materialist perspective that is supported by Williams, since it proposes that Latina artists, as any other subaltern cultural creator, conduct visual discursive shifts in their works by modifying ideological scripts to construct other plausible structures; the ideological scripts being those social structures imposed by the patriarchal order upon women and other subordinate groups within U.S. society.

In addition, an approach based on cultural materialism argues that minorities within minorities, such as gays or women of color, need to see themselves within different contexts because hierarchies of gender, age, class and race are structured by the dominant order, so they are not incidental or neutral and are derived not from the individual psyche but from social relations “a milieu, a subculture,” that define our beings (Sinfield, On Sexuality…3). Social relations are constructed by the dominant order; consequently, what defines these minorities is based on myths and stereotypes. The different visual genres and the media teach us to assess our plausibility within the criteria of the colonizer, or to see ourselves through the dominant society’s form of consciousness. Those artists of color that believe their art is a vehicle to correct these myths or faultiness take it upon themselves to reconstruct the ideological scripts.

Chela Sandoval views discursive restructuring, particularly in the Latina writers’ and artists’ creative output, as a mode of resistance that “functions as a medium through which [it] transform[s] into tactical weaponry for intervention of power;” a new form of discourse that went from strictly oppositional to a “differential form of consciousness” (57). The social structures the artists try to change have expanded to include those that they feel are necessary to address the issues that are important to them, and that will help to change society’s form of consciousness, such as the structures that address the artists’ communities’ particular needs and struggles, the ones that convey negative messages about these communities, and about the women within them.
The multi-disciplinary Cuban artist and art theorist Coco Fusco observed that the new structures engage viewers by facilitating the understanding of the social issues that many of these viewers do not relate to or may not even be aware exist (English is…33). According to Fusco, "Latina visual artist[s] look at western history and art history not to excise its racism but to excavate and play with symptomatic absences, stereotypes, creating a counter history by bouncing off negative images and teasing out hidden stories. Rather than reject dominant culture for its exclusionary tendencies...many...who have matured in the last decade are...engaged with it in ways that make it new" (33). Coco Fusco's observation reinforces this study’s thesis on the Latina political/social art production: every theorist researched for this study--Coco Fusco, Homi Bhabha, Chela Sandoval, and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others--propounded that there is a similar tactical restructuring of the visual discourses that highlight the theories of hybridity and cultural mediation.

The British literary scholar Alan Sinfield, during the 1980s analyzed several Shakespearean plays. He concluded that, contrary to the playwright’s intentions his plays were ineffectual social critiques of issues such as racism, classism, and sexism. Sinfield theorized that although the plots of the plays may present and condemn social ailments and injustices, the language used within the works failed to eradicate prevailing ideological faultlines that are constantly being reinforced by the dominant culture. He further theorized that these faultlines could have only been corrected if Shakespeare would have presented alternate criteria of plausibility, scenarios that did not emerge from the dominant social perspective. Basing his findings on Raymond William’s writings, Sinfield proposed a total restructuring of the discourse contained in the literary canons, a discursive revolution via Marxist and feminist precepts. He concluded that a cultural materialist approach could be more effective in correcting the failings of the literary canons in regards to addressing social issues (49-50).

Similarly, the tenets of cultural materialism could be applied to the analysis of the discursive constructs within art, particularly within the artwork created by women of color who are
committed to social and/or political issues. The images present feminist and cultural dialogues with which the artists introduce other criteria of plausibility that keep the dominant order in check, in regards to the ideological scripts or faultlines that are imposed on subaltern groups; the ideological scripts being those that dictate how the members of these groups should behave, react, and adhere to social expectations. Due to the limited understanding of cultural differences, most often these ideological scripts are able to affect a subaltern culture, either by co-opting or commodifying the elements of the subaltern group to the extent that the culture is distorted, or absorbed by the dominant culture (Fusco, English is… 67). The different criteria of plausibility presented by the artists employ a strategy that reveals a “resistance through a colonialist context is rarely direct, overt, or literal; rather it articulates itself through semantic reversals” (Fusco, English is… 35). The artists are then able to keep cultural absorption through appropriation at bay, and keep the manner in which the cultural forms are addressed by dominant discourses, in check.

As stated earlier, the tendency to advocate for a visual art that is both aesthetic and didactic is one that has been manifested in the Latin American and Caribbean visual and literary arts for decades. Socially conscious and/or politically engaged women artists and writers from Latin America and the Caribbean have always challenged the dominant ideological scripts; they have usually led the way in revolutionizing the arts to help save their respective cultures from falling into obscurity. For instance, in Puerto Rico, during the latter half of the 1960s and the 1970s, the arts community was enduring a major crisis. In 1968, the pro-statehood party came into power and decreased financial aid for the national arts. As was to be expected, the art production that contained themes on social or political issues relating to the island’s colonial condition, suffered the most. “Artists whose works portray[ed] identity, ambiguity, memory, displacement and social problems [were] not given support by the government” (Benítez 72-79). The very politically committed La Generación del 50, as a group had lost a lot of its impetus, and Abstract Expressionism became a more favored style. Although several politically motivated artists continued to work in avant-garde techniques (such as Carlos Irizarry, Myrna Báez, and
Lorenzo Omar, among others), there was still a marked decrease in the island’s literary and visual art production during the following two decades (Benítez 72-79).

Despite the bleak situation, a new generation of female writers and artists came of age: writers such as Ana Lydia Vega, Rosario Ferré, Olga Nolla, and painters such as Mari Mater O’Neill and Nora Rodríguez, along with Myrna Báez of the 1950s generation, just to name a few, sparked by the latter arts movement and the Second Wave of the feminist movement in the United States, were at the helm of the struggle to rescue the country’s national arts. There were of course, male artists and writers at the time, but the majority within the new generation of socially and/or politically active cultural creators were women. These women initiated the new wave of literary and visual arts in which the focus was to characterize the Puerto Rican social and political atmosphere of the time. Although their purpose was to create political art and social commentary, the artists departed from the naturalist somber paintings of the 50s generation painters, and focused on more women as subjects and artistic experimentation, with contemporary techniques and use of color. Just when critics were ready to dismiss the island’s culture, these women took the reigns and put the arts back on the map.

Another goal of this study is to analyze how artistic production in the “third space of enunciation” is represented in the works of socially conscious New York Latina visual artists of different national origins who are part of the Latina/o diaspora; to grasp how these artists adopt and adapt the emergent hybrid discourse to address the socio-political issues, such as sexism, heterosexism, classism, cultural discrimination, and others, via the visual culture. With these objectives in mind, ten artists were interviewed from 2007 to 2008 for this study. Five of these artists hail from different Latin American and Caribbean countries, and five were born and/or raised in New York City. Particular attention was given to the styles and elements employed by these visual and performance artists to carry out the revolutionary recreations of plausible scenarios and desired shifts in their visual discourses. During the interviews the artists were questioned about their work and their social and/or political stances, without revealing many
details about the basic propositions of the dissertation. This was done so the artists could speak freely without being influenced by the opinions of the investigator.

Some of the scholars mentioned in this study--Poupeye, Agosín, Richard, Mosquera and Fusco--have documented how common it has been throughout the history of the Latin American and Caribbean creative arts, that women have, time and time again, somehow rescued their national arts when the artistic production was threatened by the established order. Because of this history, it is impressive, but not surprising that in the United States, despite the rift that existed between feminists and artists of color, which hindered the emergence of a unified front among women artists (Brodsky, The Power of…118), that Latinas still came to the forefront in such significant numbers.

If we look back on several significant moments in Latin America and Caribbean history, we will see this same phenomenon repeatedly: During the 1930s, Jamaican sculptor Edna Manley (1900-1987), mother of one of the country’s most socially active, politically speaking, prime ministers Michael Manley, and hailed “mother of Jamaican art” produced works at a time when, due to the social and political unrest among the working class in the country, the arts were signed off as elitist and considered irreconcilable with the people’s struggles (see Fig. 3). She gave the national arts new life through sculptures that were attributed with “giving a voice to the working class.” Her art was paralleled to the works of the Harlem Renaissance movement of New York (Poupeye 71-79), an art movement of the 1930s in the United States that embraced the whole gamut of cultural production (visual arts, literature, music, etc.), and even influenced social thought, such as sociology and philosophy. The movement consisted of African-American artists, writers, and intellectuals who rejected European and white Anglo-American styles and techniques, and instead celebrated black dignity and creativity, explored black identity, and their historical and contemporary experiences in the urban North as black Americans (Norton 931).
During the 1960s, Cuban art was practically dying because it had "lost its revolutionary enthusiasm" thanks to the over-exhausted propaganda in favor of social realist art (Poupeye 129). Painter Antonia Eiriz (1929-1995), had been pushed aside and labeled a bourgeois artist because of her satirical point of view and macabre style (see Fig. 4), as well as for the lack of social realist elements in her paintings, yet she is credited, alongside painter Angel Acosta León, with freeing Cuba's artistic policies in the 1970s and 1980s (Poupeye 159). While doggedly persisting in doing art her way, she was responsible, almost single-handedly, for inspiring the watershed of Cuban artists that broke free of the clichéd soviet inspired art themes that began to appear during this period.

In 1977, the Chilean artist Catalina Parra was one of the first artists to use her art to denounce censorship in her country. Like her troubadour aunt, Violeta Parra, who "led the revival of [the country's] indigenous music [and was one of the foremost exponents] of the Latin American New Song movement," Catalina Parra disregarded the risks, and "developed a consciously rarified aesthetic language…creating metaphors about repression" through images (Fusco, English is…129). Through her works, the artist openly criticized the dictator General Augusto Pinochet’s regime. Parra manipulated the images of the country’s official symbols in her artwork, “as an illustration of the way in which the media’s monopoly of a single imposed truth distorts meaning” (Mosquera 148). She produced her work throughout the capital city, on the streets, on flyers, and on posters, becoming very well known for her brazen, eye-catching images.

The Chilean arpilleras (tapestry weavers) pioneered the use of the traditional craft of tapestry weaving as social message board by sewing socio-political messages within the images of the small tapestries (see Fig. 5), and this practice was soon emulated by other Latin American countries also victimized by dictatorial regimes, Peru, El Salvador, and Nicaragua among them. The women were able to create and sell their work unnoticed by government officials because the latter did not suspect that these very feminine and docile looking women could be involved in
anything subversive (Agosín qtd. in Bacic 2008). The *arpilleras* found a potent denunciatory weapon against the Pinochet regime in the craft of tapestry weaving. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the female artisans defied Chilean dictator Pinochet’s repressive rule via embellished traditional art mediums, such as needlework, photography, and others artisanship forms, in addition to tapestry weaving, “adding certain innovative, and subversive touches” (Agosín 74).

To this day, the *arpillería* craft continues to be of great significance. Marjorie Agosín wrote “The arpilleras are storytellers, for it is through them that these women have recorded and preserved the memory of a period in Chilean history that many others have chosen to forget” (qtd. in Bacic 2008). Following the same concept, Mayan Indian women of Chiapas, Mexico, revived the old custom of feather weaving and revamped the tradition of hand-sewn rag dolls that they then sold at the markets (the dolls now don Zapatista uniforms) to foreign tourists to inform them of the Mexican government’s ill treatment of its country’s indigenous populations, the injustices and discrimination that they suffer, and the infringement upon their civil rights.

Other examples have been patent right here in the United States: the revival of the Chicano mural movement led by Judith Baca and Amelia Mesa-Bains in the West, Ana Castillo’s literary *Xicanisma* philosophy, and Ana Mendieta’s body art in the East. There are many more examples such as these in almost every country in the continent where we can see the burgeoning of a cultural materialist tactical approach in the art by women of Latin American and Caribbean heritage who tend to exhibit the sense of a shared history of struggle against sexism, imperialism, and colonialism.

In the mid-1980s, during Ronald Reagan’s conservative presidency, in an effort to do away with what was perceived as liberal and populist public, and performance art, the art elite across the United States exerted much pressure on the art institutions. The institutions put in a lot of time and money in getting visual art back on the canvas and onto the pedestal. The dominant class’s objective was to get rid of street art for good and put “real” art back into the museums.
Political, socially engaged artists of color, and Anglo-feminist artists, all fought against these efforts by continuing to produce unconventional visual and performance arts with social content around the country. Despite all of these obstacles, very vocal artists and art professionals such as Amalia Mesa-Bains and Judith Baca in California, Ana Mendieta in New York, curators Marian Aguilera of Philadelphia and Carolina Ponce de León in San Francisco, and many more across the country, participated in planning and executing alternative shows and exhibitions, rallied support and collected funds to continue bringing their art to the communities.

According to artist Susan Lacy, the visual discourse of the 1960s and 70s produced a “finished art product [that] provoked dialogue.” With the new aesthetic discourse, the dialogue became part of the art product (The Power of Feminist Art 264). The artistic production was transformed into a medley of performance, painting, poetry, and dance, and the objective was to encourage viewer participation. The new discourse became the perfect venue for artists of color in particular because through this type of art production, the artists, and Latina artists specifically, were able to offer the spectator an understanding of the unresolved social issues that affect subaltern peoples as a whole.
The dialogical aesthetic that subsequently evolved within the Latina visual discourse specifically reveals a “weaving” of images that try to correct identifiable faultlines, or prevailing myths about class, race, gender, and sexual orientation; consequently, it is a true (r)evolutionary discourse because it modifies and transforms what we have been conditioned to recognize and accept as truth. It also exemplifies the function of Bhabha’s “third-space of enunciation,” since it emerges from the cultural specificity of a hybrid consciousness. Furthermore, as the cultural theorist Raymond Williams argued, and the visual discourse manifests, through these transformations, the artists make it possible to close the gap between the empiricist/historical materialist world-view that Marxism proposed, and the human nature/social environment and
action (127). The latter is what proponents of an art theory based on cultural materialism claim that the old Latin American visual discourses lacked.

In addition to highlighting the most likely expected traits that characterize the works of socially conscious artists, such as the use of specific cultural symbols, other elements are emphasized: the employment of the female body “as [an] artistic and sociocultural metaphor” (E. Ramírez 276), the alternatives to the dominant paradigms that the artists offer the spectators; the elements of self-representation; the “articulation of the female agency and power, cultural formations and social negotiations of the collected self” through the reconfiguration of the female body (Nogueras 168); and the changes in the manifestation of binary concepts such as white-black, us-them, and colonizer-colonized. The aforementioned characteristics are not all found in every artwork simultaneously, nor are they all found in the works of every artist, but at least one or more, whether intentional or not, are found in the works of each of the artists considered for this study.

The emergence of the hybrid space described by Homi Bhabha is of course by no means an exclusive trait of the Latina visual artist, nor is the discursive reconstruction, or the application of a cultural materialist approach towards the correction of ideological scripts. The point can be made that each subaltern cultural and/or racial group, such as the U.S. Latinas from other geographic regions, Blacks, other feminists of color, gays, Jews, Native-Americans and Asians, among others, have also created their own spaces and have probably offered alternative plausible scenarios to counter the dominant discourses that may define and limit them as well. But those are topics that go beyond the focus of this study, which is specifically on the discourse developed by socially engaged and/or politically active New York Latina visual artists.

The artists considered in this analysis are divided into two groups. The formation of these two groups was neither premeditated nor intentional. As each artist was interviewed, her work was categorized based on her preferences for specific themes and applications. At the end, two
distinct groups emerged even though many of the artists frequently touched upon most of the same themes: one group focuses primarily on gender identity and women's rights, and the other focuses on cultural reaffirmation, race relations, and women's roles in the struggle.

This dissertation on Latina visual culture in New York hopes to encourage more discussion and study of the contributions of these artists and their impact on the plastic and performing arts, and increase interest in the creative production of U.S. Latinas. Lastly, a more meticulous and serious approach to the study of Latina/o art productions as an integral part of U.S. art history by art scholars and enthusiasts is needed, in order to understand its profound significance in the creation of a visual art culture in New York. Most importantly, it is time that the role of Latina art in the evolution of a discourse of hybridity in the visual culture produced by women of color in the United States is acknowledged.
Organizational Structure of the Dissertation

In order to fully understand the artistic manifestations within the diaspora of any ethnic group one must look at the trajectory of their respective countries’ art history, and at the situations that the groups encounter in their adopted country that may have influenced their art production. To comprehend the artistic response of socially engaged and/or politically committed New York Latina artists vis-à-vis their diasporic experiences, the dissertation needed to begin with the events that spurred the emergence of a Latina/o art and the prevailing attitudes in United States society during the genesis of the art movement. For this reason, the dissertation is divided into two major parts: Part I recaps those main points in the contemporary historical circumstances of the artists’ respective national cultures that led to the evolution of a different aesthetic discourse; it also examines the work, and the artistic goals of, in this view, the key players in the creation of this discourse. Part II analyzes the work of the contemporary Latina visual artists to reveal how in most cases, the discourse continues to be integrated into their artwork.

Chapter one of the dissertation establishes the genesis of Latina art in New York City. It offers a brief discussion of the prevailing social/political atmosphere during the 1960s-1970s in the historical trajectory of the United States, and during President Reagan’s administration, that catapulted a major change in the traditional American art scene. It is followed by an overview of the Latina/o literary and visual art expressions that first became patent in the 1960s and the major influences in the development of the Latina visual discourse that ensued later on. Special attention is paid to the Puerto Rican national art movement of the 1950s and its influence on the New York Puerto Rican art scene of the 1970s in New York City, the influence of the Chicana mural art revival on the west coast of the 1970s, and the ensuing offspring of this movement, the Xicanisma thought of the 1980s.

In chapter two entitled Las Pioneras, the study presents a brief glance at the women responsible for the emergence of a Latina discourse, based on the interviews and research
conducted for the investigator’s master’s thesis at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Among some of the artists interviewed were, Fanny Rabell, and Helen Escobedo in Mexico; Myrna Báez, Mari Mater-O’Neil and Nora Rodríguez in Puerto Rico. The women researched for this study were Judith Baca and Amelia Mesa-Bains of the Chicano movement, Ana Castillo of the Xicanisma movement, Nitza Tufiño, Miriam Hernández and Gloria Rodríguez, co-founders of the Museo del Barrio, and Ana Mendieta. Analyses of other artists mentioned in the study were based on their writings and works, including the Cuban American contemporary performance artist and writer, Alina Troyano-“Carmelita Tropicana,” Cuban performance artist/activist Tania Bruguera, and Cuban performance artist/writer/theorist and current director of the Visual Arts Department of the Parsons School of Design, Coco Fusco.

The Latina artists of New York included in this study were those who we believe can be credited with laying the foundations for the construction of the new visual discourse within the American aesthetic expressions of the 1980s: the artistic elements in the works of Puerto Rican painter Myrna Báez. Báez has had a marked influence in the art of the next generations of New York Latina artists because of her pioneering use of the female body as text in the art of Puerto Rico; the Chicana mural painters Judith Baca and Amalia Mesa-Bains, who strove to maintain the use of art as transmitter of social and political realities among Latino women and families, and revamped the Chicanismo movement; the first generation of socially committed New York Latinas, Puerto Rican/Mexican activist/artist Nitza Tufiño, who introduced elements of hybridity that resulted from her mixed heritage, and the Cuban-born Ana Mendieta who, as creator of earth/body art, marked the turning point in the Latina visual discourse in the 1980s.

Part II consists of chapters three to five. These chapters are an examination of the writings and artwork produced by contemporary socially conscious and/or politically active Latina artists, as it reflects their diasporic experiences and social concerns. This dissertation on one hand brings to light the different stylistic and technical aspects and their beginnings; and on the other, underscores the focus of this study, which is the analysis of the development of a similar
tactical language, and the visual code-switching, or bilingual imaging that stems from each artist's respective space of enunciation, together with the shared desire to find the appropriate voice to address their concerns.

Chapter three highlights three interdisciplinary performance artists, all of Cuban heritage: Tania Bruguera, Alina Troyano, and Coco Fusco. These three particular artists were chosen for this study because of their indelible mark on the artistic output of most of the New York based socially engaged Latina artists. Tania Bruguera has continued with, and expanded on Ana Mendieta's direction, and has set new parameters for creating a performance art that integrates politics, life, and art.

Both Coco Fusco and Alina Troyano have made major contributions to the theory and practice of a discourse of hybridity in the visual arts. While Bruguera focuses on resisting deep-rooted power as a condition for obtaining what she states should be political truth, or revealing the true intentions behind political speech or action, both within and outside of the Castro regime, Troyano and Fusco make their art function in service of their hybrid consciousness, and their particular diasporic experience. More to the point, Bruguera brings political situations and inserts them into a space where the spectators will react naturally, or feel as if they are within a given situation; Troyano makes use of mixed images, words and concepts to create characters that address machismo, heterosexism and lesbianism in Latino/a culture, both in and out of Cuba; Fusco's body of work, within the performance pieces as well as in her scholarly works, addresses issues of hybridity, class discrimination, feminism and racism toward people of color in general, and women of color, in particular. The concepts and tactical approaches that these three women employ in their art were used as points of departure in the analysis of the works of the artists discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter four is divided into parts a, b and c. Part a consists of the analyses of the works by the artists who primarily address gender issues, women's rights and exile: Elia Alba, Blanka
Amézkua, Jessica Lagunas, Esperanza Mayobre, and Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez. Part b looks at the works of artists who primarily address issues of identity and race, cultural reaffirmation, and the role of women within their respective cultures, and within the diaspora: Adriana López-Sanfeliú, Melissa Calderón, Yasmin Hernández, and Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz. Part c offers a look at a totally different take on aesthetic discourses, the work of a member of the newer generation, the youngest of the artists interviewed, Glenda Medina, who subverts the artistic discourse of cultural identification and reaffirmation with a unique visual approach.

Chapter five: Summarizes the study’s conclusions.
PART I: THE EVOLUTION OF A U.S. LATINA VISUAL CULTURE

Chapter 1 Genesis of a Latina Art in New York

...yes, there is a particular U.S. third world feminist criticism...which provides the theoretical and methodological approach...from which a theory and method of oppositional consciousness has been summoned—Chela Sandoval 44.5.

The differential [praxis] occurs when the affinities inside of difference attract, combine, and relate new constituencies into coalitions of resistance—Chela Sandoval 63.

The discussion on a Latina discourse of hybridity can only come about effectively once we become familiar with the most significant historical events and phases applicable to its evolution. In this chapter we discuss these events and the first signs that indicate the emergence of this discourse.

a. Reaganomics and the Arts

There were four major currents and events that sparked the creation of a politically charged Latina/o art in New York in the 1960s and 1970s: The art and literary movement of La Generación del 50 in Puerto Rico, the Chicana/o art movement in the major cities of the western and southwestern regions of the United States, the Cuban Revolution, and the Viet Nam War. During the 1980s, the contemporary New York Latina visual art culture would emerge from the vestiges of this first New York Latina/o art wave, third world feminism, and the revival of Chicanismo discourse, and the subsequent emergence of Xicanisma.

Throughout the 1960s, revolutionary movements from around the world inspired the revival of an international social realist art trend. In Latin America and the Caribbean, fostered by the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro, and the charismatic figure of Che Guevara, the latter trend
enjoyed mass popularity as well. In the United States, besides the emergence of the revolutionary Cuban society, several factors contributed to the birth of the U.S. Latina/o socially engaged arts: leftist guerilla organizations sprung up across Latin American countries inspired by the Cuban Revolution; the unpopular U.S. foreign intervention policy, exemplified by the role it played in the overthrow and assassination of the democratically elected socialist president of Chile, Salvador Allende, and the subsequent installation of the dictator Augusto Pinochet. This dictator would eventually be responsible for over 300,000 disappeared persons during his 17 year regime; U.S. support for Pinochet and other dictators in Latin America; and the disproportionate number of casualties among the soldiers of Puerto Rican and Mexican heritage drafted into the extremely unpopular Vietnamese war (Talbot1).

All these incidents increased Latin American and Caribbean distrust of the American nation on both sides of the border. To make matters worse, all the while U.S. Latina/o communities continued to be practically invisible, living in the most dreadful socioeconomic conditions in the country. The apparent indifference exhibited by the country’s power structures towards those groups, who for the most part could only afford to reside in poor segregated communities, such as Latina/os and African Americans, exacerbated the dissatisfaction with the United States, and intensified the civil rights struggles for equality and their share of the American dream.

Studies on the Chicana/o and Puerto Rican civil rights movement have noted that advocates of Chicana/o and Puerto Rican identity reaffirmation believed that Latina/o communities needed to unite and demand equality and better socio-economic conditions. They believed that in order to do so these groups had to boost their collective pride and self-image in order to counter the negative identity imposed by the dominant society that rejected their ethnic and racial heritage. These ethnic groups attempted to revitalize their identities by viewing

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themselves in a more positive light. Politically leaning artists began to incorporate symbols and elements of cultural significance to their artistic products.

In New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, the Puerto Rican flag became an increasingly common sight. Slogans such as, "Kiss me I’m Puerto Rican," "Black is Beautiful," “Puerto Rican Power,” among others, became common graphic images displayed on t-shirts, buttons, and caps, etc. The visual artists substituted many of the revolutionary figures and images of the social realist trend for images with nativist cultural symbols and icons. Puerto Rican artists, and members of the newly formed art workshops such as Taller Boricua, incorporated Taíno symbols and African motifs into their works. Aztec iconographies, along with numerous representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and revolutionary leaders Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, became common images in the Chicana/o movement art collectives.

While the movements did reinforce or affirm cultural identity, there was, on the other hand, a down side to these: the iconic images and unified chants for equality also facilitated the homogenization of all Latina/os. This unexpected consequence surfaced from the insistence on a collective recognition that both obviated the existing class, racial, and gender differences within the particular individual Latina/o nationalities and cultures, and the individual artist as well. In any case, these negative points were frequently overlooked in favor of fulfilling the political agenda of cultural affirmation and inclusion (M. Ramírez 45).

To denounce artistic elitism, and the discriminatory practices of the established art institutions, Latina/o artists, other artists of color, and artists for gay and lesbian rights, borrowing from the feminist art tactics, set out to democratize the arts by taking it to the streets in the form of performances and happenings. They quickly caught the viewing audience’s attention, but then there was a huge setback. In the 1980s, the art world suffered a profound crisis brought about by President Reagan’s conservative administration that set the social, political, and ethnic arts almost back to square one.
During this decade, the reactionary art world in the United States unleashed a tactical wave of repression to snuff out the dissident artistic manifestations that had proliferated in the previous two decades across many different platforms and venues. Leftist manifestations and activism in the visual arts waned considerably. Some of the factors that contributed to this decline included: the disintegration of the U.S.S.R., followed by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the failure of the Socialist projects in European countries, and the end of the Cold War; the conservatism of Reagan’s administration and his infamous foreign policies; the IMF and the World Bank’s “structural adjustment policies,” and the ravages of the neo-liberal economic policies fomented in Latin America by these institutions. All of these together, engendered a neo-colonialist practice that greatly diminished public political art in both continents.

The intellectuals and the conservative politicians, horrified by what they felt were ‘excesses of democracy’ (Blocker 6) in the new art trend of the previous decades took measures to insure the repression of any artistic manifestation they deemed inappropriate, or of any art that they considered less than the professional quality of what they termed “High Art.” Of course they were singling out anything that did not exhibit traditional art themes and practices produced by white men. This represented a reactionary trend disguised as “political correctness”, as a corrective against what they considered to be extremism, to “selectively eliminate women, non-whites, and homosexuals from official memory” (Blocker 6). Reagan’s economic measure for the visual arts was to do away with a lot of the existing governmental aids for the unconventional arts.

The consequent dwindling of visible public and performance arts on the streets, and the steady increase of faces of color in the media, upheld the view that most civil rights concerns were being resolved satisfactorily. This perhaps also led many to believe that subsequently, the population of politically active Latina/o artists, were content with the new economic policies and U.S. foreign policy in Latin America; that the artists no longer felt the need to visually project their communities’ collective struggles and social concerns, and that they were probably turning

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2 Data obtained from several sources: globalexchange.org, Institute of Latin American Studies, and Latin American Research Review. See “Works Cited” for full citations.
towards the more mainstream traditional and individualistic art practices. Even well known respected art historians such as the chancellor of the School of Fine Arts in Puerto Rico, Marimar Benítez, mistakenly believed that most artists of color in the 1960s and 1970s were being seduced in droves by the mainstream glitter and glamour of the New York art scene. Though it is possible that "artists who made it in New York had the world at their feet" (74-85), as she asserts, very few Latina/os, or any other artist of color for that matter, were permitted to “jump on the never-ending band-wagon of new styles emerging from 'the city’” (M. Benítez 74-85).

It is possible that there may have been a significant number of artists of color who tried to meld into the mainstream and were successful, but upon reviewing many of the art catalogues printed for the exhibitions organized at the time, our investigation suggests that it seems more likely there was a limited number of Latina/o perennial band-wagon-jumpers that actually surfaced. Yet, regardless of the number of artists who were successful in joining the mainstream, artists of color were far from being on equal footing with these. Coco Fusco reminds is that “it is, too easy to conflate cultural hybridity with political parity” (English is...76), so it becomes very easy to misjudge the reality.

b. Chicanas and the Revival of Chicanismo and the Emergence of Xicanisma

[It was a] way for us to make an overt connection to the mural movement of México...It was our way of making our politics known--Consuelo Méndez 74.

The strict economic readjustments of the 1980s took a serious toll on the mural art movement as well. In the 1960s, the Chicano art movement had successfully revived this highly popular and well-known Mexican artistic venue of the early 20th century. During the latter period, there were elevated levels of illiteracy in Mexico so mural painting became a highly effective medium for raising awareness among its citizens, of the country’s political climate and conditions. In the United States, the Mexican-American community years later, seeing how effective the
mural movement had been, decided to revive this tradition. Mexican-American artists sought to bring the art form to the community so it could relate, culturally, and by the same token, offer the people within a renewed sense of cultural pride. Even the name Chican/o/a was forged with the purpose of defining an identity that could provoke pride. One of the muralist painters, Rubén Salazar declared that, “A Chicano is a Mexican-American who does not have an Anglo image of himself” (Cockcroft 85). In other words, the name should appeal to those who resisted assimilation. The Chicano movement, or the philosophy of Chicanismo, banking on the effervescence brought on by Chicano pride, toiled tirelessly to produce as many murals as possible throughout the west and southwest with the goals of exposing the socio-political issues affecting their communities, and to reaffirm the image of they believed was their true cultural identity. Unfortunately, as with all the other art forms and trends produced by artists of color, by the mid-1980s, economic conditions hit the mural movement hard.

Notwithstanding the setback that Reagan’s stringent policies induced upon the Chicana/o visual artists, the women, who for the most part accepted the Chicana identifier as a political gesture, refused to let the mural movement die. Chicana artists continued to produce murals whenever and wherever they could. With a few exceptions,3 male visual artists, for the most part, abandoned the medium and went on to produce within other art venues. It was entirely through the untiring efforts of the muralist Judith Baca, and other concerned artists such as Amalia Mesa-Bains, Patricia Rodríguez, Consuelo Méndez, and Irene Pérez, among others, that Chicanismo, and later Chicanisma persisted all throughout the 1980s and beyond.

What was most impressive was that these women did not only avoid the total demise of the Chicana/o movement, they renewed and modified it, infusing it with new life. There had been ongoing gender conflicts and contradictions brewing since the inception of the movement and throughout the 1960s that had been contributing to its slow but steady decline. Many Chicana

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1 The most notable being “Los Four”—four friends who got together to continue painting murals all through the 1980s. They were: Carlos Almaraz, the most openly political of the four (who died of AIDS complications in 1989), Roberto de la Rocha, Gilbert Luján, and Frank Romero.
artist/activists had expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with their male counterparts’ inattention toward gender issues. When the conflicts threatened to overcome the movement, the women artists were able to prevail despite all of these obstacles, and continued to use their creativity within the context of their political views, and insist on focusing on women’s issues (see Fig. 7).

This new *Chicanismo* then not only addressed the customary cultural identity issues, but women’s issues such as women’s rights in the labor force, poverty, health, reproductive rights, sexism and heterosexism. Gloria Anzaldúa delineates the objectives that these women set forth to form a new *Chicanismo* as an indication of the development of the *mestiza* consciousness that ensued. We can sum up these goals as follows:

- to “get out of conditioned subservience…recognize and identify ‘internalized’ dominance”;
- combat dominant orders’ “denial and erasure of ethnic subjectivity; transform silence into speech…[through a] transversing [of female bodies because they are] stolen”;
- [create] against prevailing modes of being, against a white frame of reference; and
- “that [their] political, literary and artistic movements…discard the patriarchal model for a new order” (*Making Faces*… xix-xxv).

The new Chicanismo went beyond the visual arts; the movement grew and spilled over onto other venues. As the movement swelled so did its desire to highlight its expanding political and social role; it was renamed *Chicanisma*. The female artists founded important art spaces, art collectives and organizations such as *Las Comadres, Mujeres Muralistas, Co-Madres Artistas, La Galería de la Raza*, and the San Francisco Women’s Building, keeping Latina artist/activists on the map, and *Chicanisma* alive (Ochoa 28-29).

The aim of these art organizations was for the “artists to be understood as cultural workers whose practices reckon the inclusion of community interaction as they develop [their]
paintings” (Ochoa 5). The women visual artists strongly supported the community efforts of the social and political factions of the Chicana/o movement, but the establishing of these art organizations they could hone their efforts more directly toward addressing “the racism, sexism, and sexist racism” that maintained them oppressed (Castillo 33) and that the male dominated Chicano movement and the Anglo-Feminist groups failed to address to their satisfaction. In addition, the Chicanisma mural art movement provided the Chicana painters with the public encouragement and support that some of them lacked due to the fact that previously, as writer Ana Castillo’s noted, “some Chicanas [were] unable to overcome the paucity of support and the social pressures they face[d] for their gender role transgressions” (Ochoa 27).

Ana Castillo also understood the failings of the Chicano and Anglo-feminist organizations. She concluded that, “the struggles as women of color have never been—and remain inherently tied to-issues of racism as they are with gender inequalities” (4). For her graduate work Castillo talked with women about their struggles and objectives. These women, who she identified as “mestiza/Mexic Amerindian[s]” (1) such as herself, were active participants in socio/political activities, but as blue-collar laborers they could not identify with the Anglo feminist movement. These women felt they did not share the same battles with the latter. “Feminism, therefore, is perhaps not a term embraced by most women who might be inclined to define themselves as Chicanas and who, in practice have goals and beliefs founded in feminist politics” (10). As a result of the latter realization, and influenced by the Chicana art movement and the writings by scholars such as Anzaldúa and Morraga, Castillo came up with a new term with which blue-collar Chicanas who sympathized with feminist ideals could relate. Castillo coined the terms, Xicanista and Xicanisma to refer to the women and the “concept of Chicana feminism” (11). Thus, what started out as a structural makeover within an art movement, significantly impressed upon the reflections of contemporary Chicana feminist thought, and subsequently the other artistic venues.
c. *Latinismo* Within the New York Scene

*What does it mean to live in between?*

*Ode to the Diasporican (Pa’ mi gente)*—Mariposa 2008.

While the Chicano movement was making an impact on the western and southwestern regions of the United States during the 1960s, another group of young artists of Puerto Rican descent were coming together in New York. This generation would catapult the development of the Latina/o sociopolitical art of New York. The Chicano and Black Liberation movements in the search for their roots inspired the young artists, but the latter already had a strong sense of political commitment inherited from the generations of island artists who expressed social concerns, cultural affirmation, and nationalist sentiments through painting and the graphic arts. The strongest influence came from the most political of the art developments in Puerto Rico’s artistic history, the 1950s generation, who in turn had been heavily influenced by the highly social and political Mexican mural movement spearheaded by Diego Rivera. From said movement, the Puerto Rican painters learned to integrate social realism with didactic messages. Their specific focus was on the social and political implications of the island’s relationship with the United States and the cultural effects of colonialism.

The thematic elements that artists favored the most were those in which they could employ colors that were most reminiscent of those found on the island, bright, tropical colors. The purpose was to center on expressionist landscapes and melancholic human figures to exalt the autochthonous and the humble classes, the genuinely Puerto Rican flavor (Pérez-Lizano 194). Thus the artists of *La Generación del 50* emulated the cultural nostalgia of the naturalist and *costumbrista* painters and writers that flourished at the turn of the XX century.

Artists who were part of Puerto Rico’s *Generación del 50* (The 1950s Generation), such as Epifanio Irizarry, Rafael Tufiño, Carlos Osorio, and Lorenzo Homar during the 1950s and 1960s traveled to and from the island, thus having a great influence on the visual discourse of the
new artistic generation in 1960s New York. La Generación del 50 was a literary and visual art movement in Puerto Rico, which opposed the United States’ colonization of Puerto Rico. It emerged in response to the increasing Americanization of the island. It was also a response to the government’s persecution of the Nationalist movement and to the triumph of the Popular Democratic Party, which did not advance the island’s path to independence, but conversely, once it triumphed, accepted furthering its commitment with the United States, and the latter’s involvement in the island’s issues.

La Generación del 50’s mission was, above all else, to use the creative arts to denounce U.S., and awaken the population to the nefarious political implications of maintaining such a relationship between the island and this country. Using painting, poster art, and literature as vehicles to increase political and social consciousness, the artists’ goal was to convince the population of the need to break ties with the Anglo-American nation because of what they viewed as a detrimental and subordinate relationship. Furthermore the artists agreed with the Nationalist’s view that the increasing Americanization of the island was destroying the island’s cultural traditions and the integrity of the Spanish language.

Ironically, the movement’s ferocious defense of the country’s traditions also contributed to a dogmatic androcentric position that often celebrated machismo. Its members felt that the country would only be able to guarantee the preservation of its cultural values, and avoid its inevitable annihilation, by warning Puerto Ricans against assimilating U.S. culture. From the artists’ standpoint, the only way to avoid assimilation and the country’s subsequent cultural destruction was to insure the women’s faithful adherence to traditional roles, and elevating their domestic roles as wives and mothers to mythical heights. Women were expected to continue maintaining and passing down Puerto Rican values and traditions. Still, it is undeniable that this cultural movement would inspire the future generation of Puerto Rican artists in New York to produce an art that could illustrate “the problem of national identity, ambiguity, memory, displacement, social problems…hybridization and exile” (M. Benitez 74-85). Tufiño and Osorio,
for example, formed the first collective of Puerto Rican artists in New York City with Marcos Dimas, Fernando Salicrup, and Manuel Otero in 1967. Dimas, Salicrup and Otero together with other artists later went on to form El Museo del Barrio in 1969 (Cullen 14), and Taller Boricua, now part of the Julia de Burgos Cultural Center, in 1970, among other art spaces.

Fig. 7. Frade, Ramón, *Our Daily Bread*, c. 1905. Oil on canvas; Epifanio Irizarry, *Untitled*, 1953. Oil on canvas; Rafael Tufiño, *Untitled*, c. 1950. Oil on canvas.
Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña. Permanent Collection. San Juan, Puerto Rico.
The most common images employed by Puerto Rican visual artists throughout its art historical trajectory, and that later influenced the work by the New York artists, were usually nostalgic views of Puerto Rican life, and images reflecting the yearnings for a return to tradition, as well as references to the noxious results produced by the island’s unresolved colonial condition. Paintings were usually realist depictions of poverty, hard-working jíbaros (country folk), folkloric scenes, and autochthonous subjects. As with the stories, plays and poems, the paintings revealed heavy metaphoric images laden with social and political messages (see Fig. 6). All these images were patent influential elements in the works of every generation of island artists, and of course, the generation of artists that followed in the barrios of New York in the late 1960s.

The artwork being produced in New York was almost exclusively done on a much smaller scale than the Chicano murals: mainly paintings on canvas and poster art. Because of the political atmosphere during this era, and the reactionary stances taken by many members of the ruling classes and the upper echelons of the growing conservative ranks in the United States the political art production decreased. The conservative art world pushed the institutions to return to traditional painting and sculpture. For this reason the much less offensive, not so in-your-face themes of the Conceptual art movement became a more favored trend, which, with the possible exception of the very public Yoko Ono, once again became a predominantly white male focused arena.

Meanwhile, to placate the angst of the “concerned” citizens over the art world’s elitism and its exclusionary practices, the artistic elite took on the politically correct, multicultural-awareness vogue that was sweeping the country, particularly in the media. This elite sector of the art world searched for artists who were able to appease, both those within the art-viewing public who were worried about the lack of ethnic inclusion, and the conservatives fretting over the imminent death of “serious art”. These artists found it was much easier to be accepted if they could appease both sides of the viewership by taming rebellious discourses through appropriation
and the integration of ethnic elements into their artwork (Fusco, *English is...*76), such as, “African” images, or Amerindian designs and symbols, etc..

Whether it was directly due to the stated reasons or not, as the 1970s came to a close and the 1980s progressed, works of art increasingly displayed sex-less, color-less, ethnic-less visual discourses. It was hoped that the result would be that all the havoc created by the most uncomfortable issues over “isms” (sexism, heterosexism, colorism, and racism) would decrease. The idea propagated by the many defenders of the new discourses, was that if you did not know what race, color or sexual orientation a person was, you could not discriminate against them. In theory the new trend offered a very attractive premise, for artists who refused to be labelled or boxed into categories such as that of ethnic artists. Perhaps the artists felt that in this way it would be easier to participate in the cultural mainstream. The reality was however that the sex, color, race, and gender eradication did nothing to rectify the accustomed exclusionary practices of the larger art institutions; neither did it increase the presence of artists of color, women artists (particularly women of color), leftist, politically active artists, or anyone who was considered to be part of a “minority” group, in major exhibition events. Logically, any socially engaged Latina/o artist in New York manifesting collective political concerns was of course overlooked as well.

It is at this juncture that we begin to see a change in the socially committed cultural creators of color and feminist visual artists’ perspectives in New York. We can perceive a border, or *mestiza* consciousness crystallizing via a gradual integration of elements of a more personal point of view from within the social collective. In other words, the discourse began to undergo a metamorphosis through which the search for identity goes from an essentialist, collective search to a deeper understanding of self as an individual who is part of a cultural diaspora. The discourse that the artists begin to develop within the visual images goes beyond cultural affirmation by supplanting this concept with a “deconstructed” form of “ethnic, racial and national conceptions of cultural identity and the politics of location” (Hall 1). As this awareness grows, the bulk of the Latina artists’ visual art productions begin to manifest a widening scope of concerns.
that incorporate concepts from their cultural past, but integrating collective and individual social concerns.

As the consciousness congeals, the Latina artist embarks on a discursive restructuring through the creation of plausible scenarios that bring forth the many issues that she felt had not been addressed from a national/cultural point of view; issues such as the relationship between racism and sexism or heterosexism; the sexual discrimination and exploitation she experiences, both within U.S. society and within her own cultural milieu. The Chicana dramatist and performance artist Alicia Arrizón explains that through the art that she, and other Latina artists produce, she must offer a perspective unlike the one offered by the dominant discourse, which “is deficient in the epistemologies of race analysis…Latina women and other women of color ‘act’ upon the racialized subordination and discrimination that has been designed to silence them” (135).

By the end of the 1980s the art world was totally engulfed in the multicultural currents of the period. However, some socially conscious artists and critics did not look favorably upon this trend because they saw it as just another way for the mainstream to conveniently sweep cultural identity and social issues under the rug. Their objections were founded on what they felt was a liberal integrationist vogue meant to deflect attention from the fact that artists’ of color continued to find themselves in a subordinate position in regards to the dominant order; that those who were politically and socially active continued to be shunned when they persisted in speaking out against issues of race and power. As mentioned previously, the interdisciplinary artist and academic Coco Fusco argued that, “Too often…the post colonial celebration of hybridity has been interpreted as a sign that no further concern about the politics of representation and cultural exchange is needed. With ease we fall back into the integrationist rhetoric of the 1960s” (the bodies… 76). Many of the artists of color perceived that the best counter-tactic against the multicultural trend was to set up their own art spaces and become successful in the art “business.” This way they could insure that non-conformist artists were still seen and heard.
Subsequently, a slew of theatre workshops, stages, bookstores and art gallery spaces sprung up, many of which still exist today. Among these are well known creative spaces: El Barrio’s La Casita de Chema; the Longwood Arts Gallery at Hostos Community college and Teatro Pregones in the Bronx; Julia de Burgos Cultural Arts Center, and the ever-present Miriam Colón’s Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre. The newer generation of Latin/o playwrights and performing artists have had the pleasure of participating in the Nuyorican Poets’ Cafe, and Cemí Underground Bookstore. In addition, spaces such as, PS (Performance Art Space) 122, and Exit Arts Project Gallery, although not founded exclusively by Latina/os, increased their presence about the city, probably motivated by the sudden and almost simultaneous barrage of the Latina/o spaces, and other spaces for artists of color; the proliferation of spaces opened up an unprecedented number of opportunities for many upcoming dancers, musicians, visual and performance artists of all colors and national cultures.

The South Bronx in particular has recently been being rehabilitated. The Bronx Council of the Arts founded in 1962, has aided in the inauguration, or at least supported the founding of several new art spaces of including Longwood Arts in Hostos Community College in 1980, and most recently, Blanka Amézkua’s Blue Bedroom Project, among others. These new spaces have been included in the City endorsed art education programs, such as the South Bronx Trolley Tour. Thanks to the efforts of the generation of contemporary Latina artists that came of age in the 1980s, all these spaces, and many others periodically turning up all over New York City since then, have been able to successfully offer a platform for, and maintain a constant presence of socially conscious visual and performance artists and artists-activists, such as, Esperanza Mayobre, Jessica Lagunas, Melissa Calderón, Yasmín Hernández, and many others.
Chapter 2 Pioneras (1970-1985)

The Latina artist understands ‘contemporary art’ as a space of critical historical practices of spirituality…that become[ ] an ultimate act of resistance against cultural domination

-- Amalia Mesa-Bains, Artist’s Statement 1993.

During the 1960s and 1970s there were several women of color working in all the creative fields. Generally, the priority for most of the socially engaged artists, as per the prevailing atmosphere during this era, was to work in art collectives. Their goal was to propagate the social messages they wished to communicate, and reach as many communities and social spheres as possible. Notwithstanding the risk that anonymity carries for struggling artists who work in collectives, there was still a considerable amount of visual and performance women artists of color who stood out, and who can be credited with leading the way for the generation of Latina visual artists that followed. One sees in the art of these women, as described hereafter, the first indicators of a transitioning discourse; a discourse that goes from the sole concern over cultural affirmation and inclusion, to one that is more inclusive and complex; one which also highlights the role of the artist as women experiencing a different socio-cultural reality within a diaspora. The most noteworthy of these artists are most assuredly Myrna Báez of Puerto Rico, the Chicana mural painter Judith Baca, Puerto Rican/Mexican Nitza Tufiño, and Cuban-born Ana Mendieta.

a. Myrna Báez

I paint with some ideas about art, about politics, about being Puerto Rican...The Puerto Rican artist has the problem that s/he feels Puerto Rican and is making Puerto Rican art...; but there is always the threat that one day you can wake up North American. This causes [the artist] so much anguish that s/he has to get involved in the country’s political and social problems

--Myrna Báez, Interview 1980.
As previously mentioned, from the 1930s to the 1950s, women in Puerto Rico who left the home to join the workforce were often accused by those critical of Americanization, of betraying tradition, and of hindering the struggle for independence. A woman who abandoned “her duties,” reduced her time at home and had less children in favor of entering the world of paid employment, was scorned for becoming Americanized and accused of choosing U.S. values over the autochthonous ones. Women who desired to join the men on the political trail, especially for the cause for independence, were usually discouraged and were definitely not well looked upon. Despite the resistance to accept women as active participants in the struggle, there were two women in particular within the creative arts who dared to go against the grain: the visual artist Myrna Báez and the poet Julia de Burgos. Both these women forced themselves into the art and literary circles of the time, which were primarily a “boys club.” The two women denounced gender exclusionism and prejudice, thus opening the way for the subsequent generations of women writers and artists to follow in their footsteps.

Although the painter and silkscreen artist Myrna Báez has always worked in Puerto Rico, she nonetheless holds a pioneering place in the New York Latina art scene for her notable impact on the art production of the Puerto Rican women artists in NYC during the 1960s-1970s. As the only female artist of the 50s Generation movement, Báez was already a pioneer. But, it is her innovative treatment of the female body that to this day is still visible in the work of many of the young female artists, both in Puerto Rico and in New York. One of the most respected Latin American art critics, the late Argentinean Marta Traba, in her book, *Polemic Proposal of the Art in Puerto Rico*, dedicated a full chapter to Myrna Báez work, heralding the artist as the most qualified person in the visual arts in Puerto Rico at the time (121).

Despite being the only female visual artist (and youngest) member of *La Generación del 50*, Myrna Báez, did not try to fit in by emulating the men in the group. Her images of choice were not the customary vignette paintings of the countryside or depictions of farm or field workers. Báez’s male counterparts were reflecting their social messages through realist depictions of the
landscape, folkloric traditions and the population, and while Báez also produced similar renditions, she was the first artist in Puerto Rico to offer the image of the female body from a different perspective; she indicated the first steps toward the employment of the female body as metaphor in the visual arts of Puerto Rico. The tactical use of the female body as visual text would be her imprint on the art of the next generation of New York Latina artists. This is an element, which we would increasingly see as feminist and hybrid artistic discourses evolved from the mid-1980s on in the United States.

With the emergence of a discourse of cultural hybridity and identity politics, the female body increasingly became a site of denunciation against exclusionist policies against women, constructed parallels between women’s lack of rights and U.S. policies toward specific immigrant groups, and in the case of Puerto Rican artists, as will be shown in the art of Yasmin Hernández, it reads specifically as a rejection of the U.S occupation of the island nation. Báez’s female figures evolved to a point into which they became profound reflections on what she considers the raping of the island resources by the United States, the subjugation of its peoples, and the violation of the country’s right to self determination.

Artistically, Báez introduced an innovative play of visual elements. In the Puerto Rican visual arts, the artist sets herself apart through a constant experimentation with color, techniques, styles, and materials, making her, not only a pioneer as a female artist, but a pioneer in the national arts (Lugo Ferrer 16). Báez’s *Nude in Front of the Mirror* (see Fig. 8), is a clear example of the main artistic and discursive traits that she has developed: her experimentation with art mediums and techniques, such as the building of transparent layers of paint with airbrush.

The artist demonstrates an inventive depiction of the nude female body, in which the features of the figure are undefined, but the subject is clearly a woman. Without definitive features, the subject could represent any and every Puerto Rican woman. She sits contemplatively in front of a landscape. The light emanates from within her body’s figure giving
her a Vermeer-esque quality suggesting perhaps the woman’s process of illumination; becoming aware of the significance of Puerto Rico as political entity, as homeland, towards which she has a moral obligation, or perhaps becoming aware of herself as a significant player in the country’s future, maybe both. Her body’s reflected image, set within the context of the island’s landscape, absorbs the viewer into the scene. We, the viewers are looking at the island through the subject’s eyes. Her body is not meant to be gazed upon as an object of beauty, but as a tool, to be used as a vehicle to facilitate our understanding of what we are looking at. The spectator sees the country through the subject’s gaze; the spectator is illuminated via the subject, and along with the subject.

Báez employs an airbrushing technique with which she applies and superimposes thin layers of acrylic paint. Although Báez applies many layers, the resulting images are not a thick, heavy consistency resulting in a type of impasto technique. Rather, the artist carefully sprays the paint in such a way that each layer sets like a film or veil-like transparent consistency, so that the underlying images come through the overlying layers, almost like a watercolor. The layers seem as if they have been painted on onionskins so as to permit what is underneath to come through. This application makes the subject seem as if she were in a dream or trance-like state-of-mind. In this particular work, in the subject’s dream-state, the viewer is permitted to look through the “Nude’s” gaze; to what she is seeing whether physically or through her mind’s eye.

Báez plays with an outside/inside dichotomy; the separation between the inside and the outside, the real and the dream-state is blurred. As a result, we the viewers become subjects as well as spectators because we are transported into the subject’s world, we share her gaze; we experience the subject’s body as an integral part of this landscape. This perspective shifts the traditional depiction of the woman’s body; it is no longer a passive representation of nature, it is an active participant in nature. We do not see a sexualized representation of the island in the usual manner that the female body is generally deployed to represent nature. In contrast to the traditional “male gaze” with which we the viewers are accustomed to look at representations of
nature, the figure provides us with a vehicle with which we can see and understand nature through the female subject's point-of-view.

Putting the female body in the position of active subject differed greatly from what was being produced in the Puerto Rican visual arts until then, or in the United States for that matter. It marked a turning point in the works being produced in the post-1950s era. This new perspective of the representation of the female body would have a huge impact on the art of the socially engaged Puerto Rican female artists in New York during the 1980s, as it would later become evident in the Latina art of the future New Boricua art movement (Hernández 112-133).
b. Judith Baca

_In the case of the Great Wall the metaphor really is the bridge._

*It’s about the interrelationship between ethnic and racial groups,*

_the development of racial harmony…the interracial harmony*

*between the people who have been involved* —Judith Baca 81.

Although it is difficult to set the achievements of the early Chicana mural painters of the west and southwest apart from the mural movement as a whole, since the movement was intended to operate as a collective, I chose to highlight Judith Baca as a pioneer for Latina social and political art because she distinguished herself as the representative and main spokesperson for what the Chicanism movement stood for. This is not to say other women artists did less, because there were so many Chicana artists that actively participated in this movement who could just as well be called pioneers, foremost being Amalia Mesa-Bains, for example, who not only painted murals, but wrote many thought-provoking essays on “self-identity for both the individual artist and the community” (Cockcroft 17). Among these artists we could mention Irma Lerma Barbosa, the organizer of Co-Madres Artistas, and the members of Mujeres Muralistas, Patricia Rodríguez, Irene Pérez, Graciela Carrillo, and Consuelo Méndez (Ochoa 35-59).

Baca’s unstoppable efforts via the verbal and written word on the significance of mural painting as a political weapon on behalf of the marginalized communities, would be enough to put her in the forefront as a pioneer among the socially engaged U.S. Latina artists, yet for the purposes of this study, it is also the significance of her words that make her stand out. Baca wrote many essays and articles, and submitted petitions and drafted proposals pushing for the continuation of the production of public murals, and enlightening others on the supreme importance of this art form for the marginalized communities. “[Muralism is about] using the entire community…which includes the people in that environment, about changing the people that live in the environment as well. I am also interested in working with all the power structures…because they are part of the reality” (Ochoa 270). This is important because it clearly indicates the initial stages of the strategies developed by the Chicanistas to counter prevalent discursive constructs.
via an aesthetic hybrid approach. The artists “forged [this] hybrid approach to their artistry directly linked to their variegated identities as Chicanas operating at the nexus of the Movement and U.S. Third World Feminism…locat[ing] themselves as agents of social change within a new value system with images that connect us to each other and to the planet” (Ochoa 16).

Through these efforts and commitment, Baca, as leader in the movement’s renaissance, achieved the making of the Great Wall of Los Angeles. Being able to see this project come to fruition (see Fig. 9); this wall, which has become a landmark of the city, is over ½ mile long, and is undoubtedly her crowning achievement. In addition, after all these years, the artist continues her struggle to promote mural art internationally (Cockcroft 76). But perhaps, the greatest accomplishment of all the women mural painters as a whole is what they have done to educate and raise consciousness in the most marginalized communities of the west and southwestern United States. “[A]s women [they brought] gender perspective to the issues of identity and community, and as artists affirm[ed] a public expression that incorporated both a historical and personal narrative” (Cockcroft 70).

![Great Wall of Los Angeles](image)

Fig. 9. Judith Baca, Great Wall of Los Angeles (detail of mural), 1983. Tujunga Wash Drainage Canal, San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles. Reproductions in Eva S. Cockcroft and Holly Barnet-Sánchez’s Signs from the Heart, 1996, 80.
As an active participant of the Chicana/o and Chicanisma movements in the 1960s, and throughout the 1980s, Baca discovered a sense of cultural power through the arts, but it was through her collective work with neighborhood youth gangs that she was able to consolidate her ideals on feminism, self-definition, racism, struggle, and resistance. She created a new definition of the urban artist. Her self-declared responsibility as an urban artist is her need to be responsive to the transformation of the physical urban environment, and to the creation of spaces that reflect the people who live within it. In addition, Baca feels that she is an “instrument that gives voices to the general sentiment” (Cockcroft 82). These are the traits that are Baca’s contribution to the evolution of the new visual discourse. Most specifically distinguishable of the latter elements in the tactical approach employed by the subsequent generation of Latina artists would be the elements of art as a “bridge to memories and heritage [and the] exploration of individual identity as a reflection of a greater cultural identity” (Ochoa 82). As in the case of Báez in Puerto Rico, Baca has provided restructured visual discourses in order to offer possible remedies for societal exclusionism, racism, and limiting gender roles.

c. Nitza Tufiño

As an artist, if I take my brushes and my skills and I invest in the lives of young people, then others can see what is possible ...I want the art work to continue and not to die ...this is highly political to have young people lead ...we need a chain that grows

--Nitza Tufiño, Artist’s Statement 1990.

A prolific artist and educator, Nitza Tufiño is perhaps one of New York’s most recognized socially committed Latina artists since the 1970s. Not only does she carry the surname of one of the most important figures of La Generación del 50, since she is the daughter of the recently deceased renowned Puerto Rican artist Rafael Tufiño, Ms. Tufiño, also occupies a prominent position within the evolution of New York’s visual arts in her own right. In addition to all the exhibits and activities in which she has participated, her works can be spotted throughout the East Side of the city, or what is more popularly known as El Barrio or Spanish Harlem. Her murals
made of glass ceramic mosaics are permanent displays on the walls of most of the subway stations in the area; some her works can also be viewed at El Museo del Barrio and at the Julia de Burgos Cultural Center.

While studying art in Mexico in the 1940s, Rafael Tufiño met and married a Mexican woman. In 1949, while still residing in Mexico, the couple had Nitza. As a product of a mixed racial and cultural heritage, and having lived and studied in Mexico and Puerto Rico, as well as in the United States, the artist experienced first-hand, the best and the worst of each country and of each culture. Tufiño's art reveals a developed sense of hybridity, very much like what Anzaldúa described as a border consciousness, in which there is an internal and external dual cultural interchanging. In other words, there is a bicultural state of being which is absorbed and projected. The Chicana feminist explains that when her people say we are Mexicanos, they “do not mean citizens of Mexico; [they] do not mean a national identity, but a racial one…it is a state of soul--not one of mind…Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean neither animal respects borders” (Anzaldúa, The Latino Reader 454-55).

In her adolescence Tufiño returned to Mexico to study art at the renowned San Carlos Academy of Art in Mexico City, where she learned the art of mural painting from one of the three great masters, David Alfaro Siqueiros. Under Siqueiros’ mentorship, Tufiño learned of the visual arts’ didactic possibilities through mural painting. When the artist came to live at El Barrio in the 1970s, she witnessed, and participated in the civil and human rights struggles within the community. These events, together with the artist’s exposure to her father’s anti-colonial political views from an early age, along with the experience she brought back after reacquainting herself to her rich Mexican cultural and political history, coalesced the proper elements to create a perfect storm towards the development of a unique political art style with which she could speak to the popular masses. But, not only did Tufiño put what she had learned from Master Siqueiros to use, she also became co-founder of the Museo del Barrio in 1967 and Taller Boricua in 1969. Through her involvement in the founding and organizing of these institutions and events, Tufiño
was then able to open many doors for herself and for other young Latina/o artists of New York through educational venues, and continues to do so today.

From the moment she produced her first works in New York City, Tufiño revealed her intention to raise consciousness within, and without, the community regarding the social issues that plagued the people. During the 1960s-70s, Harlem was overwhelmed by many social and economic problems. Buildings owned by slumlords were deteriorating, riddled with cockroaches and rats, lacked heating and hot water, were vandalized with unappealing graffiti and the hallways reeked of urine. The streets were strewn with litter, and drug peddling was rampant.

Tufiño and other Latina/o artists put their talent to use denouncing racial and cultural discrimination, poverty, and social injustice in the inner cities, via their artwork. The artists concluded that appealing to the people’s national pride would be an effective tactic: Artists, writers, and thinkers revived the use of the terms Borinquen and Boricua, referring to Puerto Rico’s pre-Colombian names for the island and its inhabitants as part of the Puerto Rican art movement in New York. Tufiño, along with many of her socially committed fellow artists, initiated the trend of integrating historical images, cultural icons, and nativist symbols as visual elements of their artwork.

Tufiño created the first façade for El Museo del Barrio (1973), a ceramic mural depicting the vegetation of the lush town of Loíza Aldea in Puerto Rico (Ruiz and Sánchez Korrol 767-8). It is a prime example of this trend of rescuing the memory of the island landscape through images. “[T]he artists of El Taller used Taíno culture as a symbol of Puerto Ricanness that preceded the never-ending domination of the Island by foreign political powers, as well as the consequent cultural influence of the metropolis upon the island’s inhabitants. Due to the labor, exploitation, and the racial and cultural segregation they faced in the U.S., Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora identified with the history of oppression lived by the Taínos under Spain” (Caragol- Barreto 12).
Taiño symbols were commonly depicted by the New York Puerto Rican, or the Boricua art movement, as a way of reaffirming cultural identity and rebuilding Puerto Rican pride, during a time when the community was neglected and ignored by U.S. society. “The raison d’être of the Taíno revival was political” (Caragol-Barreto 12). Taíno imagery was adapted as a “gesture of solidarity and union [between artists and the Puerto Rican community]…as a way to symbolically link[ ] [Puerto Ricans] with [their] ancestral root culture…with the elusive aborigine, that spirit of freedom who had vanished from Borínquen but resided in our souls…” (Dimas, Taller Boricua…10). While educators and civil rights organizations such as the Young Lords and the Movimiento Pro Independencia (MPI)(Pro-Independence Movement) were struggling for Puerto Rican and Latino rights via caucuses, meetings, marches, and manifestations, visual artists and writers fought by making the Latina/o community, socially aware, and visibly accessible around the country via literature and the plastic arts.

During this whole process, much was gained inasmuch as civil and human rights were concerned, but women still did not gain the much deserved recognition within these movements on their own merits, and less so within the artistic venues. As was customary at the time, artists such as Tufiño, Jorge Soto, Elaine Soto, Fernando Salicrup, Marcos Dimas, Sandra María Esteves (also a writer and poet), and Gloria Rodríguez, among others, were trying to build a strong art collective that did not engage in the search for an individual artistic voice per se, but employed their art as a unified voice to make political statements and denounce injustices. The discourses were similar, particularly thematically. One of the founders of the New York Puerto Rican visual arts movement in the 1960s, artist Diógenes Ballester explains that the artists used many stylistic expressions but the elements within the themes of their work “though somewhat interchangeable, as a whole, could be de-marked as 1) social political, 2) cultural, and 3) the search for identity” (2). One must emphasize that, as stated before, this search for identity generally speaking was for a confirmation of a collective identity, as a result, there was on the part of the artists, less of a concern towards individual recognition.
One of Tufiño’s most recognizable paintings of this era is *Pareja Taina* (Taíno Couple) (see Fig. 10), in which she offers a re-interpretation of Taínos through these figures. This work is a good example of the aforementioned trend of the time of incorporating nativist symbols into political art. The art historian Taina Caragol-Barreto states that believes this work is most likely a reference to the Viet Nam War (13) and not just a cultural allusion. The Viet Nam conflict was very unpopular and many across the country opposed it. Consequently, there were relentless protests and demonstrations against the government throughout the country.

As might be imagined, there were many works of art denouncing the Viet Nam War subsequently produced, the majority of which displayed crude images of the war. The painting *Pareja Taina*, however is distinguishable because, while it does seem in fact to be a commentary on the Vietnamese war because of the depictions of the gas mask on one of the figures, it referred, in addition to another lesser known cultural threat of cultural destruction, of which many felt the United states was guilty: that of the Puerto Rican culture. Furthermore, the potential destruction of the culture, as the separatist movement claimed, was not only a consequence of 19th century Anglo-American imperialism, but an ongoing consequence of the noxious racial and colonial policies that many within the country accused the U.S. government of practicing. These government policies, denouncers claimed, were responsible for the alleged disproportionate number of soldiers of color killed in the war compared to white soldiers, of which a substantial portion of these casualties were Latinos (mostly Mexican and Puerto Rican).

Tufiño could have employed realistic images, contemporary symbols or photographic collages to refer to the disproportionate amount of Latino deaths at the war zone, a la Jasper Johns (*Moratorium* 1969), Antonio Frasconi (*Vietnam! 1967*), Duane Hanson (*Vietnam Scene* 1969), or Leon Golub (*Napalm 1* 1969) (See Fig. 11). Instead, the artist used Taíno icons (a culture effectively destroyed by an imperialist power-Spain) to allude to both the detrimental effect of the U.S. colonization on Puerto Rican culture, while denouncing the war off shore, and at the same time reaffirm cultural identity among the Puerto Rican diaspora.
In the painting Tufiño presents us with, as the title reveals, a Taíno couple. The couple symbolizes the Puerto Rican man and woman. The female figure is donning a mask that resembles a soldier’s gas mask. This mask is protecting her from the noxious environment, but this mask has an added feature, which not so coincidentally resembles a phallus penetrating the mask. We understand that “[t]he phallic form acquires a polysemic value referring to a multiple violation that takes place at a political, cultural, and sexual levels” (Caragol-Barreto 13). In other words, this added feature informs the viewer that the mask is not protecting the figure, but in reality harming the wearer. The Taíno culture was being “screwed” from all sides, inside and outside of its borders.

The male figure dons the image of a *coquí* on his chest. The *coquí* is the minute tree frog endemic to Puerto Rico. Its population has been waning steadily as the island undergoes a gradual process of deforestation and ever-expanding urbanization. Likewise, the image of the *coquí* alludes to the diminishing of the Boricua race as the uncontrolled Americanization of the island takes place. Furthermore, the man lacks a penis; he has been stripped of his manhood so the island-nation’s future is doomed, because without the penis there can be no reproduction and the population is therefore bound to become extinct.

As the viewer observes the two figures standing side by side, Tufiño’s desire to convey the message that, on one hand, the Boricua population is being screwed, while on the other, it is being castrated, becomes apparent. The artist makes an analogy between the extinguishing of the Vietnamese population through war, and the danger of the disappearance of the Puerto Rican culture through the thorough assimilation into the American culture (Caragol-Barreto 13). The two figures stare directly at the viewer, in a seemingly accusatory gaze, perhaps as a way to remind us that we as bystanders are willing to permit the aggressors, the colonizers to commit this genocide against the Puerto Rican people in the same way that we were allowing the United States to invade and attack the people of Vietnam. It is a warning to the people of Puerto Rico to beware of its population’s imminent eradication.

In 1990, in a MTA Arts for Transit Program activity, Tufiño stated that her objective as an artist was to try to inspire other artists to share their art with the community so that the younger generation could continue with the community arts tradition. She expressed that she had always harbored a desire to teach and enlighten younger artists, and from an early age discovered that her artistic talent could make her goals a reality. Her goals are clearly inspired by her mural training and influenced by the works of *La Generación del 50*.

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4 Eleutherodactylus genus of the Leptodactylidae family is a tiny tree frog with 27 known species. The species *Eleutherodactylus portoricensis* specifically cannot survive outside of the island.

Nitza Tufiño’s style is an example of how the product of a third space of enunciation emerges in order to attain her aforementioned goals. She blends naïve style figures elaborated in bright colors, reminiscent of the color schemes in traditional and folkloric Mexican paintings, with the poster art style of the 1950s Generation island painters. These two styles coalesce with influences of the American protest art of the 1960s. In her more recent works on the subway tile paintings and mosaics, the emergence of a more defined discourse of hybridity is visible. Tufiño demonstrates the progression of her social messages. In the series Neo-Borikén (see Fig. 12), the artist again depicts a Taíno couple, but on this occasion, the couple is symbolic, as the title suggests, of the new Puerto Rican population. Now the couple stares purposely without accusing. Over the head of each figure there are symbols that resemble reproductive organs (vagina and penis), demonstrating that they are a fertile couple. The two figures on the left could be alluding to zygotes and female breasts, nourishing the ground with milk. The ground is covered with flora that resembles the abundant poppy flowers of Puerto Rico. There is a different feel in this depiction of the Taíno couple. It does not exhibit a sense of condemnation or accusation. Perhaps the artist is telling us that far from being extinct, the Puerto Rican population persists; they are reproducing in numbers; their presence is becoming stronger, they are new Puerto Ricans determined to survive.

Fig. 12. Nitza Tufiño, Neo-Borikén, 1990. Personal Photo. MTA Subway Art. Permanent Works. #6 Train 103rd St. Station, New York.
Although all the female artists that started out within the movement in the 1960s and 1970s were committed, talented, and thus praiseworthy, we singled out Nitza Tufiño as pioneer for two main reasons. The simplest reason being that, as we mentioned previously, in addition to continually engaging in artistic endeavors as all these artists do, Tufiño decided to dedicate her struggle to the creation of new and different opportunities for new Latina/o artists, and other New York artists of color, through the educational system. However and most importantly, there is in Tufiño’s work a visible transformation of the aesthetic discourse that is not as evident in the works of others from her generation; Tufiño’s pioneering proclivity towards initiating the dialog or discursive negotiation as a mestiza artist in the New York Latino/a diaspora (that begins to take shape from the 1980s on), as Homi Bhabha sees this tendency, is a strategy created within the third space of enunciation (Hall 58), as we see in the Neo-Borikén series. Her discourse adapts and changes as she becomes increasingly enmeshed in the New York diaspora throughout the years. Her discursive transformation reflects her internal dialog, revealing her condition as a bicultural woman, as Anzaldúa explained it, conscious of existing within the duality of two worlds. As a result, thanks to these efforts, Tufiño has been able to keep the Puerto Rican/Latina/o culture alive and as significant in the East as Chicana/o culture is in the West.

Tufiño’s training as a mural painter in Mexico, together with the cultural history of political struggles that she inherited from both of her national cultures, enticed her to modify the discourse that she and her cronies had developed in the 1960s. She modified the discourses inherited from her two motherlands (confrontation, denouncement of social injustices, anti-colonial struggles, and these against racism, imperialism, etc.) into a unique enunciation that reflected her hybridity and diasporic experiences. Tufiño developed a mestiza or hybrid consciousness through which she was able to combine the visual arts with politics, and a didactic role. Her mural artwork was in a way very reminiscent of the Chicanisma murals in purpose; raising awareness, a calling to arms, metaphorically speaking, but with very specific issues relating to the barrios of New York, and thus creating, through her own third space of enunciation, a unique style.
Throughout her distinguished artistic career, Tufiño has continued to address community concerns with her artwork. She also teaches inner city school dropouts about culture, pride, and finding identity through art. Tufiño’s presence was so significant in the political and artistic struggles during the 1960-1970s that today she is still recognized as being one of the pioneers of the New York Boricua political art movement.

d. Ana Mendieta

Art must have begun as nature itself, in a dialectical relationship between humans and the natural world from which we cannot be separated --Ana Mendieta, Book of Works, 1981 11.

We can attribute Cuban-born Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) with spearheading the progressive transition of the Latina/o sociopolitical visual art discourse, from a collective confrontational language of cultural affirmation to one of individual cultural hybridity and of resistance, through mediation. Ana Mendieta is presently one of the better-known Latina artists of New York. Unfortunately, very much like the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, it was not until after her death that Mendieta began to be truly appreciated for her artistic genius; her art work would gain due recognition for its merits, rather than for the tragedy of her untimely death in 1985, and the unusual circumstances surrounding her demise. Mendieta became a symbol for the two most significant issues drawn from the 1960s-1970s identity reaffirmation art and feminist movements: the exclusion of women artists from traditional art venues, and the marginalization of women of color in U.S. society.

In 1985, at the age of 37, Mendieta was killed in a tragic event. Mendieta fell from the 34th floor window of a New York City high-rise building, and Mendieta’s husband, Carl Andre, a successful well-known American sculptor, was indicted for her murder. His highly publicized trial and eventual absolution for her death provoked widespread anger among ethnic, feminist, and artists. Many were of the opinion that her death occurred under suspicious circumstances and
that it was never fully explained to their satisfaction. Andre was absolved because he was not proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, yet those who were following the procedures believed that he was exonerated only because he was a Anglo-American white male, and in addition, a fairly well known artist who had participated in some significant exhibitions (Blocker 2). Ana Mendieta on the other hand, had been lauded as a talented artist, but was also a female immigrant of color, so unlike Andre she was rarely ever given the opportunities or the exposure that he enjoyed.

Mendieta’s followers felt that not only had her life been cut short, but that her contribution to the arts and feminism had been ignored. The public believed Andre’s absolution contributed to the marginality of women’s endeavors and accomplishments by the dominant powers in favor of those of men. Yet her contribution to the development of a new Latina discourse could not easily be swept aside because, although she became a symbol for “the seeming institutional sanction of a judicial verdict” (Blocker 2), Mendieta was perhaps among the first to capture the visual representation of what Chela Sandoval identified as a “feminist structure of oppositional consciousness” (Sandoval 150). In other words, she created images that challenged traditional aesthetic forms, different paradigms, such as the female subjects, or the female body parts integrated into her earth/body works, which present women under a totally different light than those captured by the masters of the traditional visual arts, such as Picasso or Gauguin. She was able to present structures of oppositional consciousness through body images that exhibited slight alterations to destroy the language that is essential for cultural imperialism, the basis for “[the] superstructure” of the dominant discourses (Williams 40).

Like the other artists surveyed in this study, Mendieta’s contribution to American art went beyond what is simply referred to as “ethnic art.” Mendieta consciously intercalated a discourse into her artwork that until then had not reflected the essence of the Latina diaspora. In other words, she did not just simply apply the tactic employed by the mass media of simply adding elements “of color” into art, or as Fusco describes it, applying a “uniform brown airbrushing to
convince Latina/os, Native-Americans and Asians of equal representation of ethnicities and races in U.S. society other than black and white" (English is... 68). Instead Mendieta created an art style that meshed the visual and tactical elements that suffused expressions of her hybridity; elements such as soil, plants and her own body to represent Cuba and Cuban ness, Afro-Caribbean culture, and experiences of the diaspora. It was at the time, perhaps in the truest sense, that a hybrid discourse born from within a distinct space of enunciation becomes so clearly palpable in the contemporary American art scene.

Mendieta’s artwork impresses upon the viewer the notion that “simply adding the marginalized sectors to the discourses of power does nothing to change those discourses, in fact she felt that so doing often works to reinforce them” (Blocker 43); if not done carefully, it can by contrast, essentialize subaltem groups. Her solution was to create a different type of performance language. Mendieta achieved the inversion of the discourses of power through the creation of earth-body artwork, merging elements of contemporary feminist discourses, such as the depiction of the female body as subject, and images presenting visual alternatives to stereotypical female roles, with elements referencing cultural identity and experiences of exile. As a result, she transformed traditional feminist performance art to an art of performativity; one that translates the experiences of exile, gender, and cultural and racial discrimination. The discourse became a bridge, a link between the New York aesthetic discourses of the 1960s and 70s, and the contemporary socially engaged Latina art that emerged from the mid-1980s on.

Performativity is a new method of demonstrating the artist’s view of herself and how she presents her surroundings. Unlike other performances, it is not meant to be entertainment, but enlightenment. Performance artists perform, in other words they combine elements of visual art with theatrical performance. It is creative art in motion using props, make-up, and costumes; the artists play a role, and participate in an act. Feminist performances were developed as a way of reclaiming the female body, to relate a history where women are included as significant characters in its making; they were though, still acting, performing. In performance and drama,
artists hide their identity and take on the role of a female character, such as a goddess where the goddess represents “the personification of feminine power … [a performance can thus] contribute to rather than subvert dominant ideologies…Performativity is a powerful lens through which to see the Other [my emphasis] (Blocker 59).” In other words, while performance can highlight a negative image or stereotype, thus reinforcing the dominant view, performativity permits the viewer to perceive the real.

In Woman Rising/ Spirit (see Fig. 13), for example, the feminist artist Mary Beth Edelson photographed herself and drew a series of markings on the print. The markings simulate the sun or some type of luminous astral body that surrounds the artist’s head and torso. The artist seems to emerge from this body of light. Rays emanate from her head giving the impression that she is transitioning into divinity, depicting the moment of her elevation from mortal woman to goddess. As a feminist, the artist’s intention was to bestow women with the station and power that historically they had been denied. Edelson sought to give women a vision of empowerment by countering the image of the female body as personification of nature and beauty that had until then always been presented through the gaze of male artists. Many, if not most feminist artists at the time, like Edelson in this photo, frequently employed this tactical approach in which they constructed female images as powerful and supernatural beings.
In this photograph Edelson presents the female body from a point-of-view that is diametrically opposite to the traditional male gaze that we had been so accustomed to seeing. One such depiction, for example, is Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (see Fig. 14). Botticelli depicted an image representing the prevailing standards of beauty of the time. Venus is pictured as the perfect female, as delicate and fragile as a newborn, exuding virginal innocence and modesty. In Mendieta’s earth/body works, the artist distances her work from this traditional male standpoint, but she also distances her female subjects from the traditional feminist view of the female body-as-nature as well; she neither offers an image of the prototypical white virginal woman, nor the limited image of the female as symbol or representation of a divine power to express strength and a validation of women. Mendieta made her female subjects be the elements.

In Mendita’s, *Arbol de la Vida* (Tree of Life), the artist is photographed propped against a tree covered in clay and leaves (see Fig. 15). The intention was to make her body seem as if it had been carved out of the tree bark, or better yet, as if it were part of the core of the tree trunk. Like Edelson, Mendieta used her body to evoke divinity, but in this piece Mendieta’s figure is not acquiring divine power or receiving the goddess’s grace for empowerment; the figure is the earth goddess, she is power, and she is of color. Mendieta’s body is covered with black mud. The spectator is obliged to notice that is she not just an esoteric female entity, but an essential part of the earth, of a Caribbean country, and of a culture. The artist shows the viewer that a woman is empowered because of her gender, but at the same time, because of her color, and her culture. Mendieta is not playing the part of nature, nor does she have anyone else play a part. She is not intending to perform, she is not acting. The artist uses her body as an exercise in performity because she shows that she is nature, the earth, the tree, and the sand; she is also Cuba, and the Caribbean. According to Jane Blocker, Mendieta becomes the eternal; the transcendental ever present female force that predates patriarchal history. She does not take on the role of a character because “[p]erformative identities are not false” (59-61), they are the nature of the subject.
In feminist art, the works speak of gender of course; women are depicted to symbolize what they are able to do or accomplish, and what they can aspire to become in American society. Mendieta denounced sexism with her works, but she also highlighted her distaste for the “race-less, colorless art within the visual trends that continued to proliferate in the media and the art world at the time. In order to assuage exclusion and adopt inclusion into the art world, the artist produced work that went beyond questioning gender roles and surpassing the glass ceiling, integrating ethnicity and national culture in it. Mendieta’s approach gave Latina artists the first step toward the forging of a new visual language for politically motivated Latina artists in New York that was to go in a different direction.

In the visual structures created by Mendieta, the key element aiding in the development of the new discourse patent in the works of the subsequent generation of socially engaged contemporary artists of color is the manner in which she restructured the female body image. Her distinct treatment of her body in particular as subject, with which she introduced color, race, and culture within gender reaffirmed the idea of a structuring of oppositional consciousness that theorists such as Sandoval, Bhabha, and Hall touted as the basis for a visual language of cultural mediation exhibited in the works of this newer generation of Latina artists. For the contemporary artist of color, Mendieta became a catalyst for the concretion of a discourse of hybridity in the Latina/o socially engaged arts by offering a way to structure resistance with the Latina female body. Homi Bhabha elicits this latter point in an interview conducted by W.J.T. Mitchell in 1995, in which Bhabha explains that the element that most socially concerned artists, and writers of color as well, subsequently bring to light in their visual and literary works consists of a “splitting of the language of authority, [and a returning of] that language in an…altered state which…often destroys the calculations of the empowered, and allows the disempowered to calculate the strategies by which they are oppressed and to use that knowledge in structuring resistance”.

Mendieta’s artistic strategy was to communicate cultural identity, exile, and history, as well as womanhood. She presented the woman’s body not just as a representative of female
power, but as subject. In their analyses of the works by Latin American artists, Amador and Mireya Pérez Bustillo found that like Amelia Mesa-Bains and later Marta María Pérez Bravo, Mendieta “visually bring[s] to public attention issues of the new view of the body, the slices of the self beyond the surface of the body, pushing boundaries of identity historically, aesthetically, and politically...[she is the] author of [her] own perception, deciding how [her] bod[y] [is] to be seen by opening the eye of the viewer to a new embodiment” (101-2).

Mendieta decided to conceive the *Rupestrian Sculptures* (see Fig. 16) in Cuba because she wished to show a woman’s body as representation of nature, and as symbol of nation or motherland as well. The artist’s intention with these figures was to criticize deculturation and displacement, and reclaim her past. The bodies were sculpted with Cuban soil, to forge a “dialectical relationship with the natural world” (Clearwater 17), from which, as she explained, we humans could not be separated. As an exiled Cuban, the figures represented the soil and roots for which she yearned, and from which she was deprived. The artist’s desire was to recover her history as woman and Cuban. This, was the reason the sculptures also represented Taino myths of creation. Each figure that the artist constructed on the cave walls was named after a Taino goddess. As opposed to Edelman’s goddess, her figures did not ascend into divinity to become empowered; they are organically divine and all powerful. When the viewer enters the caves and encounters these goddesses she is drawn into the moment of divine creation; the birth of the island and its people.

Mendieta visually presented one of the first depictions of Third World feminist art in the United States. It was the first time a Latina artist allowed the Anglo-American public to participate in an exploration of Caribbean cultural roots. Thus, this specific artistic strategy was perhaps one of the most defining points in the evolution of the new U.S. Latina visual discourse.

Ana Mendieta forged the initial steps in the progression of the latter setting the stage with the development of the hybrid consciousness. Mendieta took on the battle against the repressive artistic and political authorities of the 1980s following the directives of the subversive 1970s art trends (Blocker 10) and merged these with her personal diasporic experiences. It was a preview of the path that Latina art was to follow.

Mendieta offered New York socially committed artists the tools for translating and mediating between the Anglo and Latina/o cultures; she gave these artists a different strategy for restructuring self-representation. One of her major contributions was to use her body as art subject in order to examine the relationship between the self and the internalization of the foreign, or how a person, being in exile, relates to home, and the adopted home. To Mendieta exile meant discovering the capacity of the self to survive, acclimate to a new environment and to transcend the condition of exile, and art became the vehicle through which she could create this link between her adopted culture and her own (Merewether 144).

We see identity expressed for the first time in Mendieta, not just as the product of a natural or a biological formation, but as a meeting point or “point of suture” (Hall 4-6) between discourses and practices, between the inherited social discourses and the processes through which we consciously construct our identity. In other words, it is where the tendency to understand and to project identity meet. Once Mendieta begins to use her art as a link between cultures, she acknowledges her adopted New York as an integral part of her identity, while at the same time “stressing [her] Cuban heritage as fundamental in the make-up of her cultural roots (Merewether 144).” She used creativity based on the consciousness of hybridity to develop a Latina visual discourse in motion.
PART II: CONTEMPORARY LATINA ARTISTS OF NEW YORK (1985-PRESENT)

In a time of changing valuations of identity, both sexual and ethnic, the shifting focus of these contemporary Latin American artists represents a complex and sensitive response to a world of change and uncertainty—Oriana Baddeley, 1998 590.

Chapter 3 Kunsthaffen (Weapons of Art): Performity, Politics, and Hybridity

During Ana Mendieta’s lifetime, despite the obstacles created by the dominant mainstream art world, a few other noteworthy Latina performance artists tackling identity and ethnic issues attracted some attention in New York. Among these were Puerto Rican choreographer/performance artist Merián Soto, who together with her husband artist Pepón Osorio, later founded Grupo Pepiatán (1983), and Brazilian choreographer Patricia Hoffbauer who has collaborated extensively since the eighties with drama and performance arts director George Emilio Sánchez. But it was Ana Mendieta who, as discussed previously, upon achieving, a link between cultures via the visual arts: the New York diaspora, and her Cuban heritage, sowed the seeds for a genuine Latina discourse of hybridity. After Ana Mendieta, three Cuban interdisciplinary artists of note have made significant contributions to this discourse, and are creating an ongoing dialog through their art. These artists are Tania Bruguera (b.1968), Coco Fusco (b. 1960) and Alina Troyano (b. 1957).

Throughout the investigative stage of this study, Cuban interdisciplinary, political artist Tania Bruguera’s name came up consistently. Bruguera is known for being the first mainland Cuban artist to introduce performance art to the island. She converted her Havana apartment into a performance art space, and, in addition, founded the first performance studies program in Latin America in 2002. As has been the case with Myrna Báez, Bruguera is not a New York-based Latina artist, but her inclusion in this study was deemed necessary because, first of all, she has made sure Ana Mendieta’s artistic vision was carried on by expanding on her work, and also,
because her own influence has been paramount in the development of the aesthetic discourse in the art of the socio-politically inspired contemporary New York Latinas that have emerged since the mid-1980s. The other two artists discussed in this section are Alina Troyano and Coco Fusco, who not only have made major contributions to this new visual culture, but in their own very unique styles have taken on the difficult task of conveying the significance of a discourse of hybridity and a cultural identity within the political arts in prose as well as in the performative arts.

**a. Tania Bruguera: Doing Not Talking Politics**

> My work is ephemeral not only because of the use of live actions or fragile materials but because of the ephemeral nature of any political truth --Tania Bruguera, Artist's Statement, 2008.

Following the death of her close friend and mentor, Ana Mendieta, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera (b. 1968) expanded on Mendieta’s work. Drawing on her friendship with Mendieta and the latter’s aesthetic discourse as point of departure, her own life, the political climate she experienced in and outside of Cuba, and the ephemeral nature of life, Bruguera, is motivated by the use of the human body as a locus of power warfare; the capacity of the female body, in particular to take back the power that dominant discourses have appropriated or misrepresented, such as true political autonomy, or Latina/o stereotyping. Bruguera employs the human body, mostly her own, to weave stories with a didactic purpose. During her part-time residency in Chicago, Bruguera was able to insure that Mendieta’s discursive strategy of conscious identity and body image restructuring continued to inform the Latina creative output.

In Bruguera’s work, the human response becomes an integral part of her presentations. Although the return of theatricality to the art of performance permeates her work, the artist does retain performativity by way of the viewers’ reaction, and as she explains in her video statement for her performances at the Tate Modern Museum in London in 2007, “spontaneity seen as a space to renegotiate a future that [is] not accept[ed] as predetermined.” In other words, the
element of the spontaneous reactions derived from the actions Bruguera stages retains the freshness of the performative approach created by Mendieta. Bruguera reveals in an interview with the curator, Roberta Tenconi, that her intention is to produce these performances in such a way that she can insert her body, and those of others, into political scenarios, as opposed to just making or representing political situations. The consequence of the reactions before a performance is what will make the piece political art or not; what is significant, Bruguera continues in the Tate Museum video interview, is the “operational capacity [of the works] in their function.” The symbolic significance will eventually come out with the effectiveness of its function, if the work is to be political art.

What is important in the work to the artist is the “moment of awareness of what is being experienced as art” (Tate Interview, 2008) The artist’s emphasis on the process is basic to a cultural material approach. As Raymond Williams explains, a cultural materialist must emphasize “culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices of ‘arts’, as social uses of production” (243), not in any preconceived notion because Bruguera states, “the idea is not to make references, but to create them; to go from being a proposal to be a working temporary reality”. In Marxism actions are superstructural, or as Bruguera sees it, “a product of a collective super ego,” thus, historical moments are usually fabricated; people believe what they have been conditioned to believe. So the artist wishes to present work in “an emotional realm,” where there is a “negotiation between ethics and desire” (what one must do versus what one wants to do). Because we do not all speak the same language, stories differ according to historical events, which are presented from a point of view tainted by conditioning, usually by the dominant order. Emotion, on the other hand is genuine, spontaneous. Bruguera then does not show her interpretation, nor does she present a picture as events are described or interpreted by anyone, regardless of whose interpretation it is—left, right, dominant or subordinate. Instead, the viewer comes to his/her own interpretation based on the emotion elicited by the action taking place.
We can highlight within several of Bruguera’s recent performances some examples of this point. In the Tate Modern Museum in London, Bruguera presented Crowd Control in Force (2008) (see Fig. 17). In this performance, Bruguera had two uniformed horse-mounted police officers within the gallery performing crowd control procedures as they do during riots. The idea is for the spectators to experience the feeling of being commanded and arrayed with horses; to engage the public and extract a response much in the way that they would normally react in real situations. The public experiences what it is to have their movements controlled by the dominant power structures; they are forced to move about. The artist explains, “The people do not have to know that it’s art…so they can really enjoy it as a lived event and not as a representation of a live event…each piece is like a little vignette where the audience can have a little piece of experience with power. In this case it is with the police.”

The Mairie de Paris cultural center’s online communiqué, in a short biopic, explains that Bruguera takes strategies employed by the dominant powers and features these into her performances with the purpose of “induc[ing] a visceral response that breaks down the rationalizing distance of the viewer” (Bloomberg Tateshots). Bruguera applies this approach to all her performance scenarios. One of her main goals is to capture the dynamics of power universally, not just within Cuba, because she understands that the effects of unmitigated power, and its relationship with society, are “just as flawed whether it comes from the Left or the Right.” The artist is well known for this exposé of power dynamics both inside and outside Cuba. Bruguera explains her performances stating, “I’ve been working with the body as a social landscape and a political blackboard through performance, installation, drawings and video…I work with fear, vulnerability, empowerment, self-determination, and freedom as well as submission and obedience as social survival strategies. These tools and evidences are part of the process of resistance to entrenched power.” The latter utterances by the artist pinpoints much of what thinkers and writers, such as Chela Sandoval, Alan Sinfield, or Stuart Hall, have discussed regarding the tendency of subaltern artists and writers to use their creativity in an effort
to recover history with the goal of making it coherent, and subsequently producing an oppositional discourse.

Art reviewer Jonathan Griffin saw several of Bruguera’s performances in Havana in 2000. What he observed was that the artist tended to submit her body to actions of prolonged self-defilement in order to bring abstract concepts such as freedom, autonomy, and self-determination into a tangible, concrete form. These techniques in particular are most tangible in the art of contemporary New York Latina artists. The tendency to produce a visual discourse by way of the women’s body as symbol and text is certainly patent in the art produced by the women included in this study. Most notable among them are performance artists such as Coco Fusco, Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, and Melissa Calderón. While other women artists may have previously addressed similar issues, arguably very few like Bruguera have been able to use the female body so tactfully and effectively as a site of resistance to the degree that it reverberates so strongly in the works of others.
A good example of this latter tendency is evident in another performance, *El peso de la culpa (The Burden of Guilt)*, 1997-99 (see Fig. 18). Bruguera stands naked before a huge Cuban flag woven with human hair; the carcass of a lamb is strung around her neck. Every so often the artist leans over, grabs fistfuls of dirt, mixes each with water and eats the mixture. The act is an allusion to the numerous suicides committed by many of the inhabitants of African descent in the Cuban island during the Spanish conquest; people who chose to kill themselves slowly rather than accept a life of slavery. Again the artist's purpose is to capture the moment of reaching awareness during the course of the experience, and the visceral responses provoked by the visible performative action, yet perhaps the most discernable element here is the oppositional use of the female body; the female body seen as an oppositional perspective to create a cultural form of resistance and empowerment.

Griffin explains that the idea behind Bruguera’s technique usually involves employing naked bodies, mostly her own, to convey and confront intolerance, “inflexibility of thought,
dogmatism and bigotry” (2000). The use of this technique is reminiscent of Ana Mendieta’s earth/body art inasmuch as the focus is on a specific cultural recuperative strategy, say saving Cuban culture. Thus, it is also an effective way to convey to the spectator the nature of the relationship between U.S. Latina/os and the United States. In an essay titled “U.S. Latino Expressive Cultures,” Frances Aparicio explains that through cultural expressions, members of displaced Latina/o communities exhibit a tendency through which they “strengthen the connections between their own selves and their 'expropriated' histories, silenced and taken away from them by dominant institutions” (357). This process begins to take shape in the body art produced by Ana Mendieta. Tania Bruguera, then adopts the process, and expands upon the concept; she takes it further by addressing expropriated histories and cultural empowerment at a universal level. Bruguera’s objective is similar to the goals set forth by Mendieta, in that the artist examine[s] human’s relationship with power, how it is manifested in a cultural expression that is what Bruguera terms “useful art”. Also like Mendieta, the process is an art gesture that is not meant to simply criticize the relationships, but to push the boundaries of power with the purpose of questioning what the dominant class sees as legal and acceptable (Bishop 2).

This element of cultural empowerment, via the female body will continue to become patent in the work by the U.S. Latina artists who tend to focus particularly on the female perspective regarding the experiences within the diaspora. As this study shows, the female body, whether the artists employ their own bodies or that of other women, is consistently manifested in many of the creative expressions of the Latina artists of New York who share the social and/or political concerns brought about by the experience of exile and diaspora. Prime examples of this approach are the performances by Coco Fusco, Alina Troyano, and Marga Gómez, as well as the figures in Yasmín Hernández’s paintings, Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz’s characters; Blanka Amézkua’s embroidered pieces, and Jessica Lagunas’ video installations.
b. Coco Fusco and the Discourse of Hybridity

_The artists reflect the hybrid experiences that shape so much of contemporary life. They emerge from the dynamics of moving between worlds and feeling at home and not at home in more than one. They use different languages and cross-aesthetic genres as they follow ideas through multiple media_


In 1992 another socially concerned artist of Cuban heritage finds within her body a vehicle, a metaphor, and a construction site for a hybrid discourse. Author, critic, curator, and interdisciplinary artist Juliana “Coco” Fusco was born in New York to Cuban immigrants in 1960. As an Afro-Caribbean woman and a committed feminist, Fusco has used her creativity to conduct a thorough exploration of exploitive female and racialized images in contemporary visual culture via performances, video, plastic arts, and writings. As with her written discourse, Fusco’s visual discourse has a political context directed at underscoring issues that Cuban artists face as part of the Latina/o diaspora, such as cultural priorities when dealing with identity, national allegiance, gender issues, Aids, lesbian and gay rights, or less complicated issues such as whether to support the Cuban mainland arts or not.

In her journal-style essay “Miranda’s Diary,” Fusco writes in a June 1992 entry that she wonders if there is any difference between the fights Cubans and Cuban Americans have and the ones “Chicanos and Puerto Ricans have with their homeland-based populations.” The disagreements among the former she observes, occur as a result of the differences in class and ideology with the latter, yet “the problem...is fundamentally the same [which is] real identity versus fake identity, original versus copy, upper class versus working class, good Spanish versus bad Spanish” (*English is...*15). Despite these two major discrepancies, Fusco found that the issue of cultural identity seems to continue to be of prime importance for both exiled and mainland
Cubans, whether they view the issues that affect them from either side of the political spectrum, left or right.

Following along Fusco’s query and line of thought, this investigation found that, there is some “in-house” bickering among native Latin Americans and Caribbean peoples and their U.S. counterparts over the aforementioned issues, but as with socially non-conforming Cuban Americans, when Latina/o artists within the New York diaspora feel the obligation to express social and/or political concerns, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Chicano/as, and others, may consider cultural identity of prime importance, but in addition they also tend to adopt a similar approach in the creation of a tactical aesthetic discourse with which they can address their concerns effectively.

Much of Fusco’s work examines the specific role of cultural language in the unification of the geographically and ideologically divided Cuban population. In tone with Anzaldúa’s theory of mestiza border consciousness, Fusco argues that the Latina cultural creative discourse has evolved from the strictly confrontational rhetoric of the 1960s, in which the writers and creators shouted at each other, looking at each other defiantly from opposite sides of the border. This discourse has evolved into one in which two cultures can speak to each other by seeking to be on both sides of the border at once (Anzaldúa, Making Face… 378). Fusco found that the newer Cuban generations in both the United States and abroad appear to be in favor of engaging each other in a post-revolutionary discourse, dismissing the aforementioned divide (English is…13). In other words, the two sides are trying to create a discourse of cultural identity, which includes the denouncement of the exclusionary practices and the reductive nationalism of both left and right. The aesthetic discourse created by the “voices of those marginalized by the official discourse of both sides [have been instrumental] in keeping the doors open” (Fusco, English is…19). Although the subjects that Fusco puts under examination in these works focus specifically on the two Cuban populations, the concerns with these ideological and social dilemmas that they share
regardless, have aided in expanding the discourse so that the artists within other diasporas can address similar issues affecting their cultures.

Another of Coco Fusco’s major contributions to the New York socially engaged or politically charged contemporary arts has been to fuse the latter discursive aestheticism with a mediatory discourse within the visual and performance arts. In this discourse it is as if Fusco has added an underlying layer to the already multifaceted hybridity. There is, as mentioned, within the aesthetic discourse of hybridity, the voices of those on two borders of cultural identity, and those that address gender, race, and color. Fusco adds the voices of those marginalized because of linguistic aspects, and social constructs that divide and segregate groups of Latinas/os among themselves. She describes the dialogue within this discourse as one that require[s] getting around accents and differences between the internal and external migrations [which] also means breaking down the jingoistic English-only barriers that essentialize language as if it were some kind of impenetrable, irreducible difference... [The jingoistic barriers] have enabled the U.S. government and the American media…to systematically promote the misinterpretation of [Hispanic or Latino] as a racial term...[and have] engendered different social constructions of race, despite shared legacies of slavery, sexual exploitation of black and indigenous woman by white men, and segregationist legislation ---*English is Broken Here*, 23.

Fusco presents a visual art discourse that constantly invites and, at times, forces the viewing public to experience the tribulations that accompany the struggle for cultural, racial, and gender equity as experienced by Latina women on both sides of the cultural border. With the latter objective in mind, Fusco has favored performance art as her artistic venue of choice because through gestural forms, as she has said, artists can “address social imagery [via]
political representation [in order to] effectively subvert the dominance of conventional approaches... (English is...14)." Thus, performance art does not only permit Fusco to express her own creativity, but has been paramount in offering an effective mediatory vehicle for public understanding of the social in Latina/o contexts, as well as in the context of gender issues and issues of sexuality. Fusco explains that aside from the political, Latin American performance focuses on other dimensions such as the internal social conflicts within the culture. While it is true that performance in Latin American art does not necessarily always serve specific social agendas, Fusco’s performances, as well as those of other “minority” artists’, allows her to fulfill her objective of allotting a “performative dimension to political action (the bodies...3-4),” which elucidates the preference for performance art among these artists.

*Couple in the Cage: A Guatinaui Odyssey* (1993), also referred to as *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit*.... is one of Fusco’s most recognized performance pieces. It is a traveling performance piece that she presented in several major cities in the United States and in Europe in collaboration with the well known and often-times controversial figure, performance artist, Guillermo Gómez-Peña (see Fig. 19). The artists exhibited themselves in a cage, emulating a practice that was customary during the 19th and early 20th centuries when circus shows, explorers, and other merchants exhibited aboriginal, or people of color that they found or ‘discovered” during their trips to foreign lands to white audiences of the Western world. These anthropological finds were presented to white audiences for the enjoyment of the latter and for the profit of the former.
The artists dressed themselves as an "indigenous" couple that hailed from a mythological undiscovered island off the Gulf of Mexico so that the spectators could observe these "native inhabitants" carrying on in their "day-to-day" activities, such as cooking, eating, smoking, and watching TV. Of course these activities were nonsensical actions with no grounding on reality whatsoever. The artists wore feathers, war paint, and plastic beads made anywhere from China to the United States. They even had a map in which they drew a non-existent, very inauthentic looking island in the Atlantic Ocean. They had no intention of representing a real place or any authentic cultural group.

What the artists found most intriguing and alarming was that some audience members had so much faith in museums as institutions of authority, that the presentation was viewed as a serious anthropological exhibit, which only confirmed the extent to which equivocal notions about
other cultures overpower society in general. Many spectators believed that the artists were real tribes-people, so there were those who were dismayed and offended that the artists were exhibited in such a fashion. There were some who made outlandish requests, such as asking the couple to permit them to observe them engage in sexual activity, and others were bothered over the exhibit’s lack of authenticity, complaining that the couple could not represent “Indians” because they were not “dark enough to be ‘real’ primitives.” Then there were the left-wing critics who accused the artists of “being too passive” to make a real effective statement (the bodies 234-5). Needless to say, they all missed the point of the performance.

The main objective of this performance piece was to respond to the people and institutions that in the early 1990s defended the dominant discourse’s position against performance art conducted by gay and lesbian artists, and artists of color. The mainstream art world carried out direct attacks against performance artists, accusing the creators of postcolonial socially engaged art of destroying the democratizing tendencies of multicultural art practices by interfering with the making of serious, beautiful art (see Preface). In this performance piece Fusco and Gómez-Peña were alluding to the colonial historical trend of presenting the bodies of people of color as sideshows and circus spectacles (The Bodies…234); the racist proclivity practiced by domineering groups of dehumanizing and objectifying people of color to entertain white audiences. Their purpose was to argue that the “construction and the consumption of the bodies of the ‘Other’ is necessary in order to legitimize the supremacy of the colonizer, its containment and display imperative to the maintenance of ‘his’ control (the bodies 235).”

An oppositional strategy is also observed within this performance. This performance does not exactly present an alternative plausible scenario to eliminate stereotypes and deconstruct faultlines, as we see in other performances, but what Fusco employs instead is more of an act of disidentification. In other words, the performers highlight a toxic identity that has been imposed by the dominant order (Muñoz 185). Instead of avoiding the stereotypical image, the artist literally forces the viewer to look at the toxic images; shoving the images “in your face,” as the popular
saying goes. The images are reverted with the purpose of presenting the viewer with an exaggerated view of the negative stereotypes so that, through ridicule the viewers themselves will see the falsehood of these and destroy them. We will discuss this act of disidentification further on.

In another performance piece, Fusco teamed up with Chicana Nao Bustamante. In their first collaboration, Stuff (1997) (see Fig. 20), Fusco shows us the body as a product molded and manufactured by the dominating power once again. Here Fusco and Bustamante presented a series of skits in which they embodied different characters, such as, for example, the *jineteras*, or Cuban prostitutes and/or hustlers that target foreign tourists. In a review of the performance, critic Rosemary Weatherston commented that “Stuff turns the stereotype of the hypersexualized, readily available ‘dark woman’ against itself...simultaneously arousing and incriminating... [It is] a volatile combination of sex, consumerism, and imperialism and its exploration of the ways economic globalization has created markets in which young women of color are seen as goods rather than consumers” (516-18). Furthermore, Fusco tells us that the intention is to make a commentary on globalization and cultural consumption, the female bodies, the food and eating are metaphors for sex and consumption “in its crudest form” (*The Bodies...*111).
Stuart Hall’s analysis of cultural identity, drawn from his comparisons of Michael Foucault’s and Judith Butler’s perspectives, remarks on how the body and identity are materialized through the discourse of sex, and the “materialization of the bodies [that the dominant power] controls…is strongly grounded in a performative theory of language and the subject…” (14). In other words, the body performs as if it has been trained to carry out its functions; its actions are regulated and constructed by the powers that be. Sex, and sexual identification are perhaps the most effective elements of control that the dominant order has in regards to how men and women view their bodies and their functions (Hall 15). To demonstrate how the bodies of the ethnic other have been “materialized”, Fusco presents her body to demonstrate the use of sexuality as an instrument of power, which can be either beneficial or detrimental, depending on who is wielding the power. She interprets for the viewer the political
significance of this construction of the body "other," and the need for a re-appropriation of Latina identity.

As Mendieta before her, Fusco ventures deeper into an exercise of corporeal extrication, or removing her body as the art object in order to project someone or something else. Also like Mendieta, Fusco employs an approach in which the visual language may focus on her as an individual, but develops as a conceptual gesture, for example, the woman as homeland, as exile, or as a religion. One very fitting example is Fusco's Better Yet Dead (1997) (see Fig. 21). But for her body, the artist had removed her-self, the artist's persona, from the act. She lies in a coffin embodying other significant defunct women, some of whom suffered greatly in life, such as Frida Kahlo, Eva Perón, Tex-Mex singer Selena, and Ana Mendieta. The artist also wanted to embody faceless women, highlighting the lack of control women in Latino cultures have of their own bodies, whether due to society's obsession with a woman's virginity, the controversy over the legality and morality of abortion, the husband's and brother's rights to punish women for adultery, or women's lack of support when raped or sexually assaulted. The artist's purpose with this performance was to "...feign[ ] death-as other women" (Fusco, the bodies... 22).

As we saw previously with Mendieta and Bruguera, Coco Fusco presents us with performance pieces that question the perceptions of those in power. In addition, as a U.S. Latina artist she enhances the process by integrating the experience of the diaspora and its effects on identity. Another very clear example of this is Fusco's participation in the Pochonovela, a fusion of a Spanish language soap opera and an American sitcom that she produced with Nao Bustamante and other Chicana/o performers in Los Angeles from 1993-1995. The idea behind this program was to “inject some reflexivity and humor into parochial debates about cultural identity…” (Fusco, The Bodies...89). Fusco absorbs Mendieta's concept of employing her own body as a mediatory instrument in the politics of color and gender identity, pulls from Bruguera's focus on the dynamics of power and cultural self-empowerment, and adds intercultural interaction.
Although the artist establishes that this intercultural interaction has been a constant in 20th century Latin American performance “rather than a product of the 1980s' multiculturalism or a program mandated by a foundation or a trade agreement” 5), the manner in which Fusco infuses this interaction references the role of women of color in America. Furthermore, she congeals the intercultural interaction to create a discourse of hybridity that is specifically based on the experiences of a U.S. Latina artist. What Fusco brings to the table is the integration of the abovementioned elements of employing her own body as a instrument of mediation in the politics of color and gender identity, the focus on the dynamics of power and cultural self-empowerment, and adds the element of intercultural interaction with the racialized subjectivity of the U.S. Latina/o diaspora. The resulting discourse is a translation into a visual language that is readily understood by people on both sides of the border.

c. Alina Troyano: A Weapon For Latina/Os And Queers Called “Carmelita Tropicana”

I found my tribe—the feminists; I found my calling: Kunst is my

Waffen-art is my weapon—Troyano, Artist’s Statement, 1994.

Alina Troyano (b. 1957) came to the United States with her family from Cuba during the early 1960s. She is part of what is aptly termed the “1.5 generation,” so named because it is the generation of Cuban immigrants that live the exile and diasporic experiences that is the product of the blend of family memories and U.S. mass culture (Troyano x). By way of this blending of memories and experiences, Troyano learned from an early age that her bilingualism and her biculturalism offered her a way of controlling the situations that the dual cultural realities engendered; she could take control of her own identity reconstruction. She acquired and perfected a hybrid tongue that she forged into a weapon in the struggle to assert an identity as a Latina, an artist, and a lesbian.

Through her creative ability Alina Troyano employs the discursive weapon to weaken the language of the dominant order. Her main strategy is to change the viewer’s perception
regarding, among other things, Latina/o stereotypes, lesbian/gay typecasts, and what the Latina diaspora is. What perhaps makes Alina Troyano’s artistic endeavors more noteworthy than that of other ethnic or culturally hybrid artists is, as she explains, that she is able to “split the language of authority, and return [it in] an…altered state”(x). Through the creation of comedic characters, via a constant stream of code switching and word play, Troyano ridicules and tears dominant discourses apart, highlighting the faultlines that these discourses have maintained. By dismantling the language of the patriarchal order she seeks to “allow the disempowered to calculate the strategies by which they are oppressed and to use that knowledge in structuring resistance”(x). By putting the words of the dominant discourse into the mouths of her characters, Troyano derides the former, robbing it of its power. Performance art is her battleground of choice because this medium permits her to create characters that can serve as weapons against the faultlines and stereotypes with which Latinas/os, gays, and lesbians are usually associated. The negative traits that her characters display are so ridiculous and are exaggerated to such a degree that they are hardly believable, and hopefully, eventually destroyed.

One of the most notable demonstrations of Troyano’s strategy is her kitschy, alter-ego Carmelita Tropicana, a Cuban burlesque-type character, clad in an over-the-top sequined satin dress and a large corsage of brightly colored plastic fruit, the artist speaks with a heavy Spanish accent and delivers monologues with plenty of code-switching between Spanish, English, and even German. She explains to her audience what she is about as an artist, a lesbian, and a Cuban, and what the rationale behind her work is (see Fig. 22). In her essay, Crossings: Carmelita Tropicana, Melanie Dorson concludes, that Alina Troyano’s alter ego’s performance presents “oppositional strategies” through which she makes her own cultural revolution since “one crucial element …in her manifesto on the field is her ability to change audiences’ perceptions of the world” (1). Carmelita’s character revolutionizes set notions of Cubanness and femininity by way of ridicule.
In the performance piece, *Memorias de la Revolución*, the Virgen Mary appears before Carmelita Tropicana and two other Cubans as they drift in a rowboat in the waters of the Caribbean Sea. The Virgen tells her that she, Carmelita, will not perish because her destiny is to use her art “to give dignity to Latin and Third World Women.” The Virgin Mary explains to Troyano that through this artistic venue of performance, she will be able to amalgamate her creative and feminist identities, along with her New York, Cuban, and lesbian identities (Dorson 2005).

Troyano explains that with Carmelita Tropicana she offers an alternative worldview, alternative paradigms on cultures set by the dominant discourse (37-8). This is an act of creating a negative or toxic character such as Carmelita Tropicana as oppositional strategy is what the cultural critic and writer Esteban Muñoz defined as *disidentification*. Disidentification is “[an action through which, the artist] indicates a mode of performance whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label. ...Disidentification is therefore about the management of an identity that has been spoiled in the majoritarian public sphere (185).” This is particularly significant since during the course of this study it was found that this same action of disidentification was employed repeatedly by subsequent performance artists included herein. The same strategy elicited in Troyano’s performances of introducing a parade of “toxic” characters with which the she continuously deconstructs and reconstructs faultlines regarding Latina/os and Latino/a culture is visible, for example, in the performances of Coco Fusco in her guise of the caged Amerindian, and of Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, with her characters of *La Chuleta*, and some of the women in *Los Machos de Mi Vida*. As with Troyano’s characters, the characters that the latter artists embody are infused with toxic traits that emphasize the damage inflicted upon women of color inside and outside of the Latina/o culture.

In *Milk of Amnesia*, as in *Memorias*..., Troyano discusses other political issues that are very significant to her, U.S.-Cuba relations, assimilation, and life within the Latina/o diaspora. Her character returns to Cuba to recuperate her Cubanidad, which she has lost on account of her
Americanization, by revisiting her childhood. Once more the artist uses her body and her characteristic code-switching word play as essential elements in challenging the dominant discourses of both the United States and Cuba. In the latter two performance pieces, Troyano delivers a message of displacement, as well as the search for identity as a subaltern woman within a diaspora. Yet Troyano’s search is not for her own sake, for she is quite sure of her identity. The 1970s generation of socially engaged artists produced art primarily with the intention of finding a cultural identity as a group within U.S. society, or better said, demanding cultural recognition. Ultimately, the primary goal was to encourage members of their cultural groups to find a way to belong, to be accepted. Troyano’s message is intended for those individuals within the rest of society on both sides of the Florida Strait who believe in the prevailing dominant discourses regarding the elements that have been accepted as those that should determine what it is to be a part of the so-called “1.5 Generation”, or to be brought up in-between countries, in between cultures, and in between gender and generational expectations.

In both performance pieces Troyano presents opposing characters and uses irony and double entendre as linguistic weaponry. The characters--Pingalito (Spanish slang for “Little Penis”) the Cuban über-Macho, Machito, Carmelita’s incompetent brother, and Carmelita Tropicana-- all exhibit toxic identities. The characters blend old Cuban stereotypes, such as how men, women, and their roles, within Cuban society are defined, with those originating from the exiled Cuban chusmería (people of color trash), such as the myths that both the former and the latter create about each other due to the geographical and political distance between them. Together these toxic beings present social concerns and denounce issues, such as, the U.S. trade embargo, the oppression of homosexuals and lesbians, and cultural discrimination.

In every performance piece Troyano’s weaponry consists of merging bodies and verbal languages to create a hybrid aesthetic discourse. The discourse comes through the character of Carmelita Tropicana whose arsenal consists of her identification as Latina, woman, and lesbian, with which she offers alternative views of the world that are “oppositional ideologies that function
as critique of, or supplements to the oppressive social script” (Dorson 2005). It therefore details a perfect hybrid discourse because it contains all the elements that make for a Latina hybrid visual culture: an oppositional strategy that uses the body as metaphor, visual and auditory bilingualism, or code-switching as a mediatory tool, and a social conscience while engaging in the politics of identity. Troyano's Waffen (weapons) are definitely her Kunst (art).
Chapter 4 Contemporary Latina Visual Culture of New York

So-called Ethnic artists in North America are forced to acquire a profound knowledge of both the dominant culture and of their own often perplexing mixed cultures...They are culturally disturbing in a time of simplistic patriotism, alienated from the Western history taught in ours schools, but exposing the truly Western history of Nuestra America buried beneath the rubble of colonialism—Lucy Lippard 1989, 20.

In the following chapter I will discuss how contemporary Latina artists interpret their diasporic experiences through the aesthetic discourse of hybridity, and how this particular interpretation leads these artists to most often hone their sociopolitical concerns specifically towards issues of gender identity, women’s rights, and exile. The works of five of the artists interviewed for this study stand out as prime examples of the discourse of hybridity functioning as a vehicle for manifesting these particular concerns. Among the artists interviewed are: Elia Alba, Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, Jessica Lagunas, and Esperanza Mayobre, of Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, and Venezuelan heritages respectively.

The three performance artists discussed in the previous chapter, along with Ana Mendieta’s influence, and ultimately the gelling of an identifiable discourse of hybridity in these artistic expressions, enlightens us as to what contemporary socially concerned New York Latinas are expressing in their overall art production, most particularly during the 1990s. These performance artists, as well as their male counterparts, such as, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Roberto Sifuentes, John Leguizamo, and Ernesto Pujol, created “a contestatory language about Latino invisibility” (Aparicio 374), cultural discrimination, immigration, and race politics, with the women in particular setting the stage for a discourse that would question gender roles and sexuality. As discussed previously, Troyano has had a pioneering role in creating a visual language that intersects neatly with a hybrid consciousness. The contestatory nature of her aesthetic language
can, and does translate into a discourse of hybridity because as the artist demonstrates with her characters, it has viewers “questioning dominant notions about Latina lesbianism [and] oppositional views that foreground both the convergences and ruptures between sexuality and cultural identities (Aparicio 374).” All of Troyano’s characters confront the latter concepts imposed, and diffused via the language produced by dominant structures throughout society, both visually and linguistically. Every one of these artists discussed thus far has contributed in some way to forging a path for the subsequent surge of socially aware Latina/o visual artists who have developed a hybrid language of resistance.

The sum of all these pioneering artistic efforts led to the myriad of excellent Latina artists who have emerged within all art venues during this period. Of course, there are too many artists to discuss all of them at length in this study, but I have nevertheless tried to provide a sampling of artists from different regions of Latin America and the Caribbean who have come to live and create art in New York. The artists included in this study were equally committed to similar social concerns, and unexpectedly, most fell into one of two broad topical categories: the relationship between identity, women’s rights and exile on one hand, and cultural reaffirmation, race relations, and women’s roles within the Latina/o diaspora of New York on the other. The division is by no means rigid, but in general terms, the former category was most prevalent among the émigrés who settled here nearing, or during adulthood. The latter category fell upon those artists who either belonged to a subsequent generation of immigrants, or were brought to this country at a very young age, having little or no contact with the homeland, and learning most of their cultural idiosyncrasies through word of mouth, or their lived experiences within their families and communities.
4.1 Gender Identity, Women’s Rights, And Exile

a. Elia Alba

*I am a Latina because I am. It is something you just are. It’s something you don’t think about, but that you don’t deny either; like being a woman, it’s not a label, it’s a fact, I’m a woman and that’s it* –Elia Alba, Interview 2008.

Elia Alba was born in New York to Dominican parents. She identifies as a Latina inasmuch as it is an element that comprises her personality. To Alba, a cultural identifier is as random and natural as gender. She disapproves of the constant use of identifiers as labels because, as she explains, she believes them to be limiting. In her own words labels are, “mostly used to neatly compartmentalize people, and consequently exclude women and ethnic minorities from society” (Alba 2008). To Alba, being a Latina is just another element that comprises an individual’s being, part of his/her multiplicity; it does not define unity or a unit. This opinion has led the artist to perfect an art form through which she can pose questions on identification and cultural identity to her viewers.

Alba’s take on identity and labeling harks back to two arguments that Stuart Hall highlights in his discussion on cultural identity. One argument explains how “identities operate through exclusion, through the discursive construction of a constitutive outside and the production of abjected and marginalized subjects,” and the second declares that the unity within identity is “fictive” (Hall 15). Although as Hall explains, these arguments do not discount all existent concepts regarding identity, but they defend the point of view of identity as a construct of personal identification resulting from a political imposition of power, as opposed to the more common notion that presents identity as a cultural product of natural evolution. Alba’s works support the idea that identities are not genuine because they are not innate but constructed. Her art work reveals the notion of identity as a response to questions of power. In other words, her sculptural constructions highlight and confront the idea of identity defined through its relationship to others. Alba explained this stating that she believes that unity is attained primarily “when there is a desire
for power...be it through a biunivocal relationship (x must be equal to x), or a binary differentiation (black vs. white)” (Alba 2008). Without power struggles, or the need for empowerment within the dominant structures, there is really not much need to belong, or to be put into a category.

To elicit this point on the relationship between power and the construction of identity, Alba devised an artistic strategy in which she creates images comprised of images of body parts from different individuals of many colors and races. The images are meshed randomly so the subject is unidentifiable, as an individual or otherwise, neither based upon a single definition nor ascribed to one single identifier. Alba’s proposal is to stress that the search for a Latina/o unity, or any other subaltern unity for that matter, is mostly due to a specific group’s desire to acquire power within the dominant order.

Alba’s intention of subverting the prevalent discourse by deconstructing and reconstructing it, fits in with the approach advocated by cultural materialists Raymond Williams, and Allan Sinfield, who both contended that this approach explains how cultural creators of color and other dissident groups, such as women, gays, and lesbians, create discourses that subvert dominant ones and challenge their traditional biases and distortions. The destruction of dominant myths, or faultlines, as Sinfield refers to them, opens up the space for the construction of new discourses through which these groups can be empowered and validated, rather than remaining silent at the margins.

Alba does not totally oppose the use of a unifying Latina label. She acknowledges that its use is necessary for her as a point of departure in order to make her views on the multiplicity of identity understood. She argues that as far as her art is concerned, the use of the Latina label is necessary as a strategy to pursue her quest to decipher the how and why relationships between gender, ethnicity, and society have evolved as they have. For Alba, identifying herself as a Latina in this case does not necessarily mean that she is trying to reaffirm a collective pan-ethnic Latina/o identity, per se, nor is she suggesting that there is a need for others to do so, but that it
does facilitate the purpose of questioning what is real versus what is not real within the individual who identifies herself/himself by a specific nationality or cultural group (Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican, etc.).

Stuart Hall tells us that cultural identity is not the ‘collective self’ hidden amongst the other “more superficial or artificially imposed selves” that will guarantee ‘oneness’ with others of a shared history and ancestry. There is, he believes, no unity in identity because the body is a construction based on “history, genealogy, and discursive formations” (4). Since the body is subjected to all these elements of discursive formations, it is logical to assume that identities could be a misrepresented, or misconstrued. Nevertheless, the body still serves as the “signifier of the condensation of subjectivities in the individual” (Hall 11). Simply stated, although an identity is not a static self, it is still the best reference for understanding oneself and others based on the sum of all these subjective bits and pieces. It should follow that if this identity is taken apart, deconstructed, the misrepresentations dissolve, and its truest sense should be revealed.

Elia Alba may or may not believe that identity’s truest form will be revealed, but her work is intended to make the viewer ponder upon the issue of identity construction and cultural/racial/gender identification. Her remedy for misrecognition of identities is to offer other subjectivities in order to correct existent signifiers, and in this way make it possible to present other possible scenarios. This may make Alba’s aesthetics to seem more philosophical than sociopolitical, yet while she does want people to analyze and ponder questions of gender, racial and cultural identity, her ultimate intention is to confront and destroy stereotypes, and cultural chauvinism and biases as well. Alba’s technique of cutting, pasting and superimposing an amalgamation of photographic images of body parts, results in new signifying visions of the Self and the Other; she wants to provide possible answers to the diasporic identities’ conundrum. In other words, the artist proposes other visual possibilities regarding notions about gender, cultural and racial identities.
With her body suit confections, *If I Were a…*, (2003) (see fig. 23), Alba constructed her version of “the new woman that emerges from the Latina diaspora” (Alba 2008). The “suits” were confected by digitally manipulating photographs of herself and other women: close-ups of body parts, and varied hues of skin colors and complexions. The images were cut into pieces and transferred onto fabric, pieced together artistically, but randomly. Alba’s desire was to create the illusion of a female “super human” by collapsing and merging body parts from different sources. The spectator is to visualize the evolution of the Latina women via her own body. The body depicts the sum of her experiences within the diaspora. Alba explains that this new woman is super because “the collapsing, this multiplicity, gives her the power to reinvent herself, form a new identity, and in this way, form new societies” (Alba 2008).

The collapsed images are also a reference to the merging of languages within a diaspora. The idea Alba has is to use her constructions to demonstrate that language is reinvented through the sum of different diasporic experiences much in the same way that the body is. Language is reinvented through the summing of the exchanges between and the borrowing from the different linguistic codes that exist within the particular diaspora. To Alba these exchanges and linguistic loans enhance the languages. The collapsing of these languages in her view bears a new language, a more powerful language because it is enhanced and enriched by the diasporic experiences. Similarly, Stuart Hall speaks of a “suturing” at the emotional stage of signifying identities. Hall explains that in a diaspora, language is “put together...as a way to ‘resolve’ or appear to resolve the unspecified relationship between the subject, the individual and the body” (11). This suturing occurs at the moment the artist is forging a discourse based on his or her diasporic experiences within the third space of enunciation, hence the suturing is a consequence of personal experience. This, as product of the third space of enunciation is therefore, situated at the emotional level.
Employing the same technique of collapsing and fusing, Alba also addresses the issue of prejudice against immigrants. In a subsequent work titled, *Multiplicities* the suturing or fusing focuses the scope of her image manipulation. In the body suits the artist collapsed full bodies; in *Multiplicities* the artist only collapses images of faces of different colors, races, and genders. The countless faces are crowded into a tall Plexiglas case; the strange looking spectrum of colored faces and eyes give the piece an other-worldly aspect. The viewer is invited to reflect upon the use of the word “alien” as identifier. The intention here is to make a play on the term and the concept of “alien”—alien as defined by U.S. society—the unwelcome stranger; one who does not belong, and is not wanted in this country. Is it coincidental that the word alien also evokes the image of extraterrestrial beings? Alba utilizes the strangeness of her images to question this moniker and address the xenophobia that often comes with the rejection of immigrants who more
often than not, contribute and benefit this society. The images bring to mind a recurring theme presented in science fiction novels and movies: the aliens may look strange and different, but they are oftentimes enlightened beings who come in peace to help this society evolve into a better one through mutual understanding. The new women body suits, as well as those in Multiplicities are bodies and faces that come from individuals who hail from within and from outside the U.S. borders: “Many may look different but their purpose is not to hurt U.S. society or invade the country, for they are neither strangers nor aliens” (Alba 2008). Furthermore, if these images are all meshed together, how do you know who the alien really is?

In her subsequent work, Alba continues to bring to the forefront the question of perception and identity, of real versus unreal. In Masks and Girls (see Fig. 24), Alba plays with the implications of the term “face-value”. The artist explains that “the face is the master signifier because everything is projected on it” (Alba 2008). People look to the face to define, and at times make hasty judgments about others. Yet the face is not independent of the body. If body and face were to be disconnected, people could easily be catalogued under broad categories, such as hirsute white man, short black woman, thin brown girl, or heavy Asian man, etc. The complexities, the multiplicities of an individual would be eliminated.

To elicit the point that society has a habit of pigeonholing individuals at face value, Elia Alba purposely separates bodies from faces, and places the faces over disparate body images. For example, she may put a white facemask over a black body, or vice-versa. She wanted to focus primarily on the perception of women’s bodies, and particularly on women of color. The artist forces the spectator to look twice before making assumptions, and to question prefabricated notions of what a woman of color is.
The artist is able to elicit this response from the spectators—doing a double take when they see the images—over and over. What they experience is almost a knee-jerk reaction. Alba takes photos of the faces of random male and female subjects, transposes the faces onto vinyl masks that she manufactures with casts made over other people’s faces. She then places the masks other random female subjects and takes another photo. Since the masks can obviously never fit perfectly over the other subject’s face, the images on the masks become distorted. The result is somewhat jarring because the images are not what the spectator expects to see: white faces over black bodies, wide masculine features over thin, small-framed female bodies, and so on. “Lo que se vela se revela” (What is veiled is unveiled). Alba puts this popular refrain to the test. She removes layers and adds others; she challenges what she considers the human mind’s paradoxical tendency of trying to separate and compartmentalize human beings. The objective is to make the viewer try to perform the almost impossible task of uncovering the real subject, to guess her ethnicity or cultural background, and decipher her identity. The viewer’s challenge it to see through the multiplicity and the complexity of the women subjects.

Elia Alba structures a very convincing hybrid visual discourse; she creates a visual lexicon that translates the experience of the diaspora to deliver a total visual manifestation of a hybrid consciousness. She effectively constructs new paradigms by destroying cultural taxonomies as the viewer questions set notions of identity. In a true cultural materialist approach, Alba’s discourse offers women of the Latina/o diaspora the possibility of constructing other plausible scenarios, immersing Latinas/os into new contexts, chipping away at what Sinfield described as the concepts set forth by the dominant ideology (Faultlines 32), and lets others outside of the diaspora gaze different realities as she challenges those prevailing notions.
b. Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez

*I aim to capture the daily schism and emotions of living in between languages and cultures. My art is an expression of cultural syncretism and transculturation*—Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, Artist's Statement 2003.

Colombian born Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez’s work is all about breaking down stereotypes and traditional concepts. Born in Bogotá, Colombia, to a father of German-Russian roots who hailed from Pittsburgh, and a Colombian mother, Friedemann-Sánchez, much like Nitza Tufíño, has been living between borders since childhood. The artist describes herself as being first and foremost Colombian, second a woman, and third, a hybrid or a mestiza (part Latin American-part Caucasian). Her whole life experience has been a dance between her Colombian and “American” heritages, swaying back and forth, feeling predominantly part of one side at times, feeling both at other times, and still other times, feeling neither. She states that she always had a hybrid consciousness that permeated her language, habits and customs. Hybridity and emotional border issues, she explains, did not start for her when she came to New York; they were there in Colombia “they were just of a different sort” (Friedemann-Sánchez 2008).

In Colombia, Friedemann’s culture shock came about as a result of living in a culture steeped in machismo that glorified men versus a home life where the women worked and struggled. She lived in a world where women such as her grandmother, worked long hours with her husband in the family business, and her mother, who was an anthropologist and an academic, also labored side by side with her husband and father. There were no divisions of labor in her household; everyone pulled the same weight. Yet, outside of the home these women were socially constricted by the dominant order. Men ran the country, yet in her family’s home both men and women had equal say. These two women were the artist’s role models and because of them, Friedemann-Sánchez became aware of the contradictions between the prevalent discourses in Colombian society and the reality of women’s roles. This is when she first
came to the realization, and she would later confirm once in the United States, that as Allan Sinfield pointed out in his writings that “groups with the material power dominate the institutions that deal with ideas” (Sinfield, *Faultlines*... 35). The recognition that this a large rift between those in power and women, particularly women of subaltern groups exists, drove the artist to further explore the possibilities of an aesthetic discourse that can better address her concerns over the imbalance of power.

Friedemann-Sánchez’s space of enunciation construed a discourse based on these sex role contradictions. She found that she could create a vehicle through her art to unravel the confusion, to understand the contradictions as a way of self-discovery. Like Anzaldúa and Sinfield professed, Friedemann-Sánchez searched for the best way to correct the contradictions was to “create a new mythos—that changes the way we perceive…” women (Anzaldúa *Making Face*... 379). The most pressing faultline that needed correction was the myth of the fragile feminine woman. She felt that she “needed to make the public aware that women, much like her grandmother and mother are warriors in all their femininity” (Friedemann-Sánchez 2008).

Little by little, the artist sought to distance herself from the mainstream art mediums as she began to experiment with mediums and techniques that present visual paradoxes. The artist exposed the concept of hybridity through elaborate needlework and woven patchwork. Friedemann-Sánchez’s first experiments began with confronting the idea of the feminine, such as the art of crochet or lace making against masculine elements of modern, minimalist art of the United States. She produced art in which she would painstakingly weave thin strands of thread embroidered into lace patterns on huge, heavy materials, monumentalizing the pieces like “high macho modern art.”

Friedemann-Sánchez’s purpose in coming to the United States differed from many other immigrants from Latin America who had come to this country in search of the American dream. Some of these immigrants came in search of opportunities, to escape poverty. Friedemann-
Sánchez came from a middle-class home. She was already educated, an established artist and, although not rich, she was financially secure enough to have a self-sufficient life in Colombia. Her purpose for coming to the United States was personal, to search for her roots on her father’s side. Once here, she encountered a cultural shock she did not expect. Although she found more freedom as a woman, there was still a glass ceiling. The ceiling was just a bit higher. She realized that there is an endemic misogyny that was not exclusive of Colombia, but a phenomenon found everywhere. Furthermore, she found that though half Caucasian she was still different. She now was also referred to as a Latina, and had to deal with issues of the diaspora; struggling, as she calls it, “at a threshold in motion, which is living between two cultures and two tongues” (Friedemann-Sánchez 2008). She had become what Carolina Ponce de León defines as “a cultural transient” (Ponce de León 138).

To avoid drowning or losing perspective in these unexpected and very distinct realities, and in order to deal with the even greater culture shock and the additional set of gender roles she encountered, the artist began to look deeper for a way to lift the miasma in her search to define herself. Friedemann-Sánchez immersed herself into further experimentation with art forms and mediums. If there was one thing that could be singled out as a defining point in Friedemann-Sánchez’s work, from the moment of her realization on, it would be an even deeper commitment with the women’s struggle, and that of non-Anglo women in particular, than she already had before.

She set out to break patriarchal standards with ambiguous subtleties, compatible with her newly discovered Latinidad, neither fully white nor fully Latin American per se, “but never denying the undeniable, either” (Friedemann-Sánchez 2008), to inscribe the feminine into the masculine--paint the delicate with the strongest mediums available. Friedemann-Sánchez also began to allude to hybridity, visual bilingualism, and loss in translation, by forming the delicate woven patterns with words in Spanish and English taken from poetic texts (see Fig. 25), merging and blurring, eventually becoming indistinguishable. Although not immediately obvious, the texts are
not exactly replications of the types of abstractions that the artist produced in Colombia. These abstractions are “translations” of her previous life transformed into the new. In this case, the artist manipulates the paints to resemble the lace making process, as opposed to the use of the lace or fabric itself. To deal with the conflicts that emerge from her experiences of the diaspora she retains parts of the past—her memories—and adapts them to her new reality (Amore 2001). The materials used are those that clash referring to her emotional clashes. Her idea according to the one curator’s statement, is to “capture the daily schism and emotions of living in between languages and cultures,” through the use of markers, thick layers of paint, vellum, which exhibit the permanence of the medium and techniques versus the “elusiveness and nostalgia of memory” (Gaffney 2000).

In other works Friedemann-Sánchez invites the viewer to question constructions of femininity. Crocheting, fine needlepoint and weaving have traditionally evoked the idea of femininity, but they can also useful in representing resistance to patriarchal orders. Reminiscent of mythological heroines such as Arachne and Penelope, Nancy employs the concept of needlework to challenge gender bias. The artist’s idea is to contradict the image of submission that these chores evoke. Instead she wants us to know that there is also strength within them. Thus, the thread is made of translucent velum, mylar (strong polyester film). Oftentimes, the artist substitutes the use of bright colors for gray hues to remind us that violence against women can be subtle, passed down through messages ingrained in our beings by dominant structures.
Friedemann-Sánchez’s most recent work involves employing images of native Colombian botanical species, tracing the history of this flora since the Spaniards set foot there and named it the Viceroyalty of New Granada. The artist employs an innovative approach in which she connects the historically feminine to feminism, to depict the progression of women’s struggles. In addition, Friedemann-Sánchez’s explains that the intention is to allude to the colonization of Latin America and its history of “power relations between North and South” via this pictorial historical journey, contrasting then and now (2008). As was also highlighted in the discussion of Elia Alba’s works, the artist stresses her desire that spectators question their identifiers as the artist herself does. She asks, “What does it mean to notions of femininity in art history and in the systems of power relations to paint flowers and doilies in the arts environment?” (Friedemann-Sánchez 2008).

The artist tells us that these images “have not only become emblematic of the neo-colonial processes and the power relations between North and South, where part of the Colombian flora continues to be in historical process, and it has been questioned if it can possibly be patented or commercialized by transnationalism via Bush’s free trade agreements: in other words, the native *Pasiflora Mutis* could reincarnate as *Pasiflora Dole or Pfizer*” (2008) (see Fig. 26). What is most fascinating about the thought process behind these most recent works is that Friedemann-Sánchez has transcended simply questioning personal identifiers. Her concern has expanded and gone beyond a personal identity conflict. The concern has moved on to a broader political topic where the artist equates the concern over gender roles versus power structures within borders, with the subaltern condition of the colonized versus the major powers of transnational corporations.
c. Jessica Lagunas

Although few women will reach society’s beauty ideals, they will sculpt their bodies as needed. I play along with women’s beauty routines…questioning our attraction to make-up and its power of seduction—Jessica Lagunas, Interview 2005.

The Guatemalan artist Jessica Lagunas produces a dissident perspective by relating the historical conditions that have rendered the environment of violence against women and issues of gender inequality in her country and abroad, and bringing them to the present. Lagunas’ art production gives validity to the argument that institutions and formations organize and are organized by specific historical conditions and must be addressed (Williams 49). Many injustices and crimes against humanity in general, and against women in particular, are a consequence of years of dictatorial regimes, military coups, and civil strife. This is true in Guatemala, as well as in other Latin American and Caribbean countries, and Lagunas wanted to address these issues by way of her visual discourse.

The artist arrived in New York already armed with a social consciousness. In her newly adopted city of New York, as any newcomer will do, Lagunas observed women living in and outside of the Latina/o diaspora with a critical, yet non-judgmental, eye. One of the first things that Lagunas says struck her when she arrived in New York was women’s constant obsession with physical appearance, and this was true of women within all social classes and ethnic backgrounds. If there is one thing the artist found that transcends racial, cultural, and economic divisions, it is women’s obsessive quest to attain physical beauty, sometimes at the expense of living a more comfortable, or a healthier lifestyle (Lagunas 2008).

The problem is that the quest for the standard of beauty is not always compatible with every woman or ethnicity. There is but one standardized measure of beauty leaving no room for different physical nuances and hues. There seems to be intolerance toward other types of beauty
and to attain the standards set by the dominant system, women will often endure discomfort and pain voluntarily, regardless of cost or time sacrificed. This realization drove Lagunas to want to investigate how far women are willing to go to meet these almost impossible standards of beauty; how much effort they exert to meet the patriarchal order's expectations of what a woman's appearance should be. The artist's quest became the crux of her work--to highlight the ways in which women yield to the pressures that society imposes upon them to meet the standards of beauty. Lagunas' objective is to understand why, and at the same time, let the viewers ask themselves why women in this society become so eager to expend so much time, money, thoughts, and efforts in worrying over fashion, hair, make-up, and nails.

Lagunas does not find it surprising that women do participate in these beauty rituals, since many women all over the world, belonging to different cultures including herself, enjoy make-up and other types of cosmetic enhancing. What is shocking to Lagunas is the degree of significance that these beauty rituals hold for many women, who seemingly are even willing to sacrifice their finances, invest too much emotional currency, and confound their priorities. The artist also questioned if immigrant women changed their beauty expectations and standards as they adjusted to this country. Did some women immigrants change their perspectives and priorities the longer they remained in the United States? If they did, was this indicative of an attempt to fully assimilate and gain acceptance into U.S. society? Is it a way to demonstrate that they have “made it” in the U.S.A? Have they, as Barthes argues, been buying into the “rhetoric of supremacy” to the degree that they have fallen into the grips of Western consumption (qtd. in Sandoval 116-120), and has it then distanced them too much from their cultural past, literally evaporating their history from their minds?

The artist indicates that she does not wish to criticize or point the finger of blame at the United States, per se, since, she says, the U.S. has been very good to her. Nor does she blame the U.S. women specifically for having, and passing along, this obsession. For, she is convinced that it is because of “the system of beliefs” that has been imposed upon women (Lagunas 2008).
Lagunas believes that women in the United States are just as exposed as are the women in any other given society, to a psychological violence that attacks their self-esteem, that makes them fall prey to the almost impossible societal demands of beauty, and furthermore, that maintains their alienation from what goes on outside of their bodies, and more so, outside of the United States. Therefore, Lagunas says, “the problem goes beyond borders, it just manifests itself differently” (Lagunas 2008). Accordingly, we can surmise that the men and women in U.S. society who buy into this rhetoric of alienation, are also enslaved by it, and are consequently kept oblivious to what goes on beyond their national borders.

Lagunas contends though, that her intention is not to force the spectator to see or believe as she does. “This,” she says, “is just [her] interpretation of what [she] has observed in this country. As a result, her objective is only to present what she observes through her work, and let people come to their own conclusions. Her goal is not to lecture viewers with her work but to highlight issues, and share these. Lagunas wants to show the viewers the issues she has observed by manifesting intimate moments or personal objects that women can share and with which they can relate. Laguna’s most invaluable contribution to this study, however, is what she does not intentionally highlight, which is the unique experience the viewer has of observing the evolution of a hybrid visual language, induced by an ever-growing social consciousness taking place.

The works In Memoriam (2007) and The Better to See You... are prime examples of discursive transition. Jessica Lagunas’ creativity evolves as it is spurred on by the historical events and conditions that surround her. With In Memoriam (see Fig. 27), the artist wanted to honor 572 women who were murdered in Guatemala in 2006. That year Guatemala experienced a significant increase in violence, and as usually happens during wars, the women in particular were most often targeted and victimized. The piece is a wooden Guatemalan crafted jewelry box that contains 572 bullet shells-one for each woman murdered. Lagunas wants to share this sad event, and inform people outside of Guatemala. The theme of the work alludes to the specific
incident that occurred in Guatemala, presented in a way that the theme can transcend borders. The piece becomes an allusion to the universal issue of violence against women everywhere in the world. It is indeed a powerful image. It is an image intended to enlighten people to the fact that women have historically been, and continue to be, brutally victimized and exploited in every society.

With the video installations, *The Better To See You...* (see Fig. 28) viewers can extrapolate the message of violence against women through degradation and exploitation with a language that is visually more comprehensible because there is no need for the artist to inform the viewer of an historical event for the scenes can be understood.

By way of these two very different installations, the viewers are able to gain insight into the dialogical transformations within the works of a Latin American/Caribbean female artist such as Jessica Lagunas as a result of her diaporic experiences in the United States. The evolution becomes apparent as the elements in her previous work, such as the bullets used in the former piece to denounce the physical violence against women, are merged with her later observations of the psychological violence women encounter in the U.S. as they battle with the impossible demands of beauty. While the message is similar, the work is translated for the benefit of a wider audience; it is “bilingual” effectively put through a process of mestizaje or hybridization, because while many women have had the luck of eluding victimization through warfare, almost none have avoided the attacks of commodification and commercialization.
To insure that her message is truly understood, her video installation series “Para verte mejor…” (The Better to See You…) is translated. Lagunas borrowed the phrase from the fairy tale of “Little Red Riding Hood.” The artist captures the most violent scene, and the culmination of the story, in which Red Riding Hood notices that her Grandmother’s features have undergone drastic physical changes and is unrecognizable. The grandmother is so physically transformed she is no longer herself. The wolf has devoured the grandmother and proceeds to devour Red Riding Hood once she realizes the truth, that he is not her grandmother. Women’s obsession with trying to fulfill male expectations of female physical perfection, can literally rob women of their identity, of the self, and this pursuit for perfection can render women powerless, victimized and devoured by their own obsession. The transformation devoured the grandmother and could have devoured Red Riding Hood as well had she not become aware of the truth.

Lagunas highlights this message exposing her own body to rigorous beauty rituals. The viewer enters the artist's private world; s/he becomes a voyer, watching the artist as she engages in hours of the most exhausting and painful make over exercises. She primps herself to the point of exhaustion, putting on make-up and nail polish for hours, and plucking her pubic hair. Under the gaze of the camera, Lagunas, focuses on a specific part of her body, performing the tedious routine beauty rituals. In one video clip, she applies layers upon layers of mascara. In another, innumerable coatings of smeared lipstick, and in a third, globs and globs of nail polish. All performed up to the point of grotesqueness. In another clip, in solidarity with both the women who suffer physical torture at the hands of repressive regimes, and the women who self-inflict violence upon their bodies, who sacrifice themselves in order to reach unrealistic physical goals, the artist depilates her pubic hair until her pubis is irritated and bleeding (see Fig. 29).

These tedious repetitive actions are a way of making us aware of how we have come to accept the "normalcy" of having women willing to cut into their bodies, to sculpt "a better one." In the name of beauty women will fret incessantly over flawless manicures, depilate, diet constantly, pay ridiculous amounts of money to plump their lips and augment their breasts. Women may not usually be destroyed by bullets in every country, but are constantly "devoured" by societal pressures that force them to slavishly adhere to the unrealistic standards of beauty imposed upon them, even at the risk of harming themselves, or at times causing their own death.

Lagunas speaks to the Latina woman, yet her discourse is universal. Her objective, without being condescending, is to let the viewer see the internal and the external violence to which women are subjected in this country and abroad. With these installations, the artist informs us of the physical violence women suffer in Latin America and in other Third World countries, and, at the same time, we are reminded of the mindless, insipid practices that we are sometimes convinced to participate in.
Many of the scenes Lagunas captures in her works are translations in which there is an underlying visual "code switching," much like the use of Spanglish in the colloquial speech of U.S. Latinas/os. The linguistic construction used to accommodate English and Spanish into one discourse facilitates communication between dominant and subordinate cultures. Lagunas visually translates between the two cultural realms that the viewers inhabit. Perhaps the most literal case of this visual bilingualism or code switching is the series Ái Spik Ínglish (see Fig. 30), in which she composed seven short fictional dialogues in English, emulating the accent of Spanish speakers that have little or no command of the English language. Lagunas uses these imaginary dialogues, rubber-stamped on 8"x 6" white paper, to illustrate how recently arrived immigrants, lacking English communication skills need to acquire specific expressions to adjust to their new life as quickly as possible and find work. The linguistic play between English and the Spanish reading of its pronunciation is an ingenious way of demonstrating how immigrants hear the other language, the difficulties that immigrants have communicating when they enter this
country, and experience the sense of urgency to learn when survival is on the line. The artist highlights that the immigrant does not need to learn to speak “real” English; at least not the one spoken by the dominant class. The immigrant worker needs only to learn sufficient terms to master the language of the subservient class, the amount needed to work in the most menial employment. With this series, Lagunas conveys to both Spanish and Anglo speakers how a language can reproduce hierarchical systems.

Because of the language barriers, the low economic status that many immigrants may belong to, and because of the color of their skin, the people of Latin America and the Caribbean are all lumped together as “Hispanics” and their individual needs are not met. When living and working in her country, Lagunas never thought of herself as anything other than a Guatemalan woman; she never questioned her identity. The terms “Hispanic” or “Latina” were foreign to her, and initially she would even get annoyed when she was identified as a “Latina” artist, feeling it limited her exposure. But after a few years as resident of New York City, she realized that there are similarities in the struggles and the obstacles that Latin American and Caribbean immigrants must overcome. Lagunas understood that there is a need to merge two visual discourses, to create a visual bilingual discourse for all to understand. Her work conveys the desire to transfer the “cultural and spiritual values from one group to another” that, according to Anzaldúa, is almost a constant in the work of U.S. Latina artists and their “new mestiza consciousness” (Making Face...377).

Coco Fusco notes that since the 1970s in an effort to celebrate visual diversity, there has been a type of “sadomasochistic eroticism” involving the relationship between the dominant structures and sexual violence (Fusco Only Skin Deep... 44), in the works of several feminists and defenders of a democratic racial imagery. She warns that one must be careful that because of our desire to include race and ethnicity in visual culture, and the artists’ desires to “belong,” that violence against women is not endorsed by “recycl[ing] racial paradigms.” Lagunas’ work reveals a tactical strategy within her visual discourse that reminds the viewer of Fusco’s
warning—that the obsession with beauty rituals may be reinforcing violence against women in the desire to attain what is perceived as beautiful. It is a word of caution to not fall into the trap of separating the idea of “ritualized domination and submission from real violence [based on] the informed consent of the participants” (Fusco Only Skin Deep… 44).

Fig. 30. Jessica Lagunas, Ai Spik Inglish, 2008. Rubber stamped ink on paper. 

5 This investigator believes that it is possible that the small print in this work is intentional; referring perhaps to the feelings of inadequacies and lack of confidence the immigrant may feel due to the lack of English dominance. Some of the words read: Ai em uiling tu uork in éni yob; Aí du not jay medical inshúrans; Jaú moch is it?
e. Esperanza Mayobre

I create fictive laboratory spaces, I insert the role of a hero, writing a role for myself in the work, use light as a metaphor for birth, drawings to create lines of infinity, candles to create lines of light, give money away to talk about the third world countries debt, dust to convert illegals to legal aliens, sugar cubes to talk about death—Esperanza Mayobre, Interview 2009.

Venezuelan born Esperanza Mayobre studied linguistics in college. Her plans were to become a writer and not a visual artist, yet she could not ignore her talent, and has won numerous awards for her contemporary conceptual art work with light and architectural structures. Ironically, it is her love of words and language that makes her art visually distinctive, appealing, and memorable. Mayobre’s work is possibly the most linguistically inclusive of the socially engaged visual arts. Mayobre states that she is constantly thinking of language, and text is the essential element of her work. The artist’s methodology does not begin, as it probably does with most artists, as a visual idea, with a sketch or an image, but with a working title as point of departure. The artist begins every art project constructing or interpreting a verbal expression or saying as a theme. It is not until she decides on an expression or term that she chooses the medium with which to work and can best convey the message. For Mayobre, language is of utmost importance in her work because “the challenge is being able to find a way to get the message across without losing meaning, because 90% of the meaning is always lost in translation” (Mayobre 2009).

In the interview for this study Mayobre recounts that her cultural shock was very unexpected. The artist was surprised when she realized that U.S. society does not seem to see, or does not wish to see the social ills that plague the country and the rest of the world; the population in general is usually in the dark regarding international and domestic economic and political issues. She believes that this may be the main reason why many members of U.S.
society are so hostile toward immigrants and reject any type of immigration reform. Mayobre believes that perhaps because of the fact that the United States has been a leading economic and military power in the world for so long it has become too easy for many Anglo-Americans to ignore or to be oblivious to the existence of illness, poverty, racism, and sexism in the U.S and other parts of the world. It became of prime importance for the artist to make sure that the American public at least sees what she feels are urgent social/political concerns through her art. This point of view is in agreement with Chicana theorist Cherrie Moraga’s stance that Latina writers and artists have to be visionaries and revolutionaries through art and should not produce art if they do not accept this role (in Taylor and Villegas 32). It is, in Mayobre’s opinion, the responsibility of artists and writers to use their creativity to connect with the public, and make their artistic endeavors understood. The artist wants us “to see what we do not wish to look at” (Mayobre 2009).

Mayobre’s opinion concurs with the point that Bhabha makes that “there is a difference in the process of language that is crucial to the production of meaning” (Bhabha 36). In effect, one is reminded of Bhabha’s point when the artist explained that the obstacles that she had encountered most frequently was being able to deliver the messages creatively without seeming condescending or preachy, but without losing their effectiveness in the translation. How could she visually translate what she wants to convey? In addition, she fears that since art is elitist, artists tend to be seen as unapproachable, especially if they are foreign. How then could she connect with the viewing audience? Furthermore, she is continually concerned with finding the best way for her to reach these goals without falling into exclusivism and/or reductionism.

Mayobre found the answer to these challenges in employing a language that is either universally understood or that she could translate so that the messages she needs to convey could be better understood. She found that manipulating the language she uses would be the ideal vehicle to get social messages across without losing meaning or her public. Visually integrating a metaphoric language would then be the best way to connect with her viewers,
identify better as a Latina, or a woman of color, and translate her feelings and beliefs. Oriana Baddeley refers to elements used within the restructuring of a visual discourse as "languages of allegory", and explains that it is "an important part of the dialogue between the ‘old world’ and the ‘new’…to highlight the culturally specific meanings in the power relations within the tradition of the metaphor, in a time of changing valuations of identity, both sexual and ethnic (Baddeley The Visual Culture… 590).” As a linguist, managing language as allegory in art was especially significant to Mayobre because she did not feel she could speak English well enough to literally convey what she needed to say. This, she says was her way of communicating with U.S. society.

In the “S” Files exhibition in the Spring of 2008, Mayobre’s pieces for her installation, *Y dio a luz* (literal translation: “And she gave light”), is an expression in Spanish referring to the moment in which a woman gives birth (see Fig. 31). In Latin American and Caribbean vernacular, when a woman gives birth she is said to be passing on the light of life. Mayobre created several neon light sculptures to “illuminate” the significance of light as a symbol of birth. One of the light sculptures, for example, is a multi-colored array of large round light bulbs grouped together on the ground resembling a tight cluster of zygotic cells. The cluster is lit because it contains life, but it has not yet attained full luminescence because it is not a total life.
In another piece, the light sculpture is a figure that is representative of a fetus in the womb. The neon baby’s head tilts down such as when it assumes the birth position. The figure was installed at the height of the artist’s abdomen (46 inches from the floor). The power cord takes on the role of the umbilical cord, and it is attached to the transformer, which represents the placenta. The outlet is the life source. The pieces should be understood as literal translations so that the viewer can fully grasp the significance of the expression used to describe birth in the Spanish-speaking world. Mayobre takes a universal concept such as birthing and leads the viewer toward an understanding of a concept’s significance in another culture. As a result, the artist has invited the public into a “discussion on connections and similarities between cultures without homogenizing or appropriating subjects” in a nuanced manner (Kaplan 141).

On the other hand, viewers can also extract as they stare at the cold neon light emanating from the pieces, that there is a systematic social and cultural disintegration in the
name of modernization and supposed progress, when what is really occurring is more indicative of mimicry and assimilation on the part of the subaltern, and appropriation on the part of the dominant order. In this context the “Other” is a depersonalized object because, rather than negotiating and mediating identity, it is negated, alienated, or sacrificed in the belief that assimilation means accepting modernity, technology, and progress. The lack of technology is equated with retrogression. Chela Sandoval tells us that, “Technology asserts authority because it appears to raise out of…one who seems to know for sure… [thus] creat[ing] power of the dominant social order” (123). She also adds that, “We create ‘white’ forms of consciousness in the colonizing class (126).” The fact that an act as natural as childbirth—giving light to a life—is depicted as a modern electrical contraption makes the viewer disturbingly aware of the dehumanizing quality of technology in general; it further demonstrates the progression of cultural disintegration as subaltern groups increasingly absorb the “white form of consciousness.” Either way, Mayobre’s goal is to get the viewer to see other valuations of identity through allegory.

In other works, Mayobre pushes forth her social message by engaging in a word play with her name. Using the translation of her name Esperanza (Hope), she reveals her stance on U.S/Latin relations, and particularly United State’s immigration policies. As a true discursive revolutionary of the visual, the artist uses her own image to translate for the immigrant and takes on the role of heroine, bringing them truth and “Hope”. She places her image on devotional candles and prayer cards and transforms into a patroness of the immigrant. Her body becomes text through which the Latina/o immigrant can “read” and gain understanding of what awaits them in their relationship with the United States.

With the prayer cards, Mayobre created small packets containing Legitimate Dust of Saint Esperanza: A Balsam for Immigrants, Exterminator of illegals. It also contains instructions on how to perform a ritual and prayers obtain U.S. citizenship and protection: “After dissolving the contents of this package into 1 liter of water, sprinkle in a cross through all the corners of the house praying 3 creeds. It protects hopeless immigrants.” Mayobre places the image of her face
on these objects of veneration as a symbol of empowerment for herself and other immigrants. It is her way of saying that the power and strength to survive as an immigrant in this country must be mustered from within.

Colirio (2004) is the brand name of an eye washing solution drop. The artist created a fictional laboratory with the idea of “conducting studies on the spaces created between sickness and death.” It is a construction consisting of 144 sealed boxes, stacked over each other. The whole piece creates a wall divider. The rows of boxes are sealed with magnifying lenses at the front that produce an optical illusion, as these lenses distort the size and form of the objects contained inside the boxes. The viewers' perceptions of the objects within are warped by the lenses depending on the distance, position and angle the viewer has in relation to the boxes. The viewer may see one box merging into another, see too many objects at the same time, or see nothing at all. “An optic/haptic effect is created. The back is a skeleton of the construction of the pieces, in which its emptiness is in contraposition with the baroque [quality] of the front.” The artist goal is for the viewer to read the piece and revise her/his perception after the initial response; after “applying” the eye cleansing solution. The piece alludes to the fact that ideological constructs, as products of the dominant discourses, many times thwart our ability to see things clearly and this leads to erroneous impressions. The thwarting is what Sinfield explains are the ideological faultlines that require constant and continuous reworking, since they tend to be the most awkward and unresolved topics within the contradictory messages of the stories we see and read (Sinfield, Faultlines 257), and we ultimately believe. The idea is to be careful not to believe or accept things as they seem; to clear our vision, and this is particularly true with politics in any country. Nothing is as it seems or as one expects in every aspect of one's life, death, or in between.
Virgen de la Esperanza

Santisima Señora Madre de Dios de la Esperanza aquí postrado a tus pies imploro tu amparo con la confianza que como madre divina que eres atenderás las súplicas de este pobre inmigrante. Intercede por mí ante tu hijo los Estados Unidos de América para poder alcanzar la ciudadanía que ruego con esta oración. Gracias. Dios te salve María, etc.

Virgin of Hope

I come here to implore you help with confidence, that because of your divine motherhood you will hear the prayers of this poor immigrant. Intercede for me, so that your divine son the United States of America will grant the citizenship for which I now pray. Hail Mary Full of Grace, etc.

LEGITIMO POLVO DE SANTA ESPERANZA

- $ money
- green card
- passport

BALSAMO PARA INMIGRANTES EXTERMINADOR DE ILEGALES

Disuelva el contenido de esta sobre en 1 litro de agua y rocíese en cruz por todos los rincones de la casa rezando 3 credos

De muy buen resultado

(NOTA)

Use también el agua Espiritual de Santa Esperanza o el oculto

Protector de los inmigrantes desahuciados

Fig. 32 Esperanza Mayobre, Virgen of Hope (Virgen de la Esperanza), 2006.

Private Collection.
In all her works, Mayobre enlists the aid of language as the tool of choice to translate her social messages: “For immigrants to understand what the reality is upon coming to the states, and for U.S. spectators to understand the plight of the immigrant as well as the reality of the diaspora” (Mayobre 2009). The artist also enlists the aid of her own body as a linguistic device. When the artist employs the image of her own body, she also stresses the importance for the immigrant Latina woman to understand the power she holds in assuring that cultural identity is maintained within the Anglo-American society. Mayobre insists that if through her art she can help make Latinas aware of what they contribute to U.S. society, Latinas can use this power to successfully mediate between both cultures without permitting the disintegration of their culture.
4.2 Cultural Reaffirmation, Race Relations, and Women’s Roles within the Latina/o Diaspora

a. Blanka Amézkua

I am interested in the comic’s reductive representation of women’s bodies and identity. I appropriate these images in hopes of liberating them from their pulp fiction world; merging embroidery and crochet with popular culture --Mexican comics-- to witness the new language that is generated through this interaction—Blanka Amézkua, Artist’s Statement, 2008.

The Mexican born, Chicana raised, self-defined Latina, multimedia artist Blanka Amézkua is committed to changing the discourse on the female body and its subsequent sexual imagery. Trained as a painter, Amézkua was always particularly interested in the human form. She was also interested in the use of the female figure as political metaphor. She studied drawing of the human body in Italy and then returned to Mexico where she revived her interest in traditional crafts. Since then, she has worked on blurring the definition between fine art and crafting. She specialized in confectioning traditional crafts that focus on the feminine, such as embroidery, needlepoint, and crotchet, into which she integrates colorful pop art images of women as they are portrayed in Mexican popular arts, such as the hyper-sexualized female images depicted in the Mexican adult comic books (see Fig. 33).

While Amézkua admits that the images she draws are appropriations of Mexican erotic comic book images, the idea is to manipulate the figures so that they are no longer just sexualized images of the female body. Amézkua merges pop art, the images of the populace, and traditional arts on needlework to make a public scrutiny of sexism. She draws the figures onto fabric that she then stitches and adds text. On her webpage, Amézkua’s commented that these illustrations are “a depiction of heroines who have been liberated from the stifling territory of
pulp fiction into a world where a woman’s sexuality is fully eroticized on her own terms.” On the same page the KPB Gallery curator Sarah Stanley adds, “Blanka’s refashioned pop images question how power relations have kept a woman from finding her sexual identity based on the uniqueness of her own desires” (www.blankaamezkua.com/embroideriesgallery.html).”

The pop art embroideries are reminiscent of the Chicana *Rasquache* art style, a Mexican inspired kitsch-type art form that was developed by Chicanas in the 1980s and 1990s to defy an imposed Anglo-American cultural identity, [and to defy] the restrictive gender identity within the Chicano culture (Mesa-Bains, *Ceremony*…12). As Ana Mendieta before her, Amézkua is concerned with the political importing of symbols. The images and texts are meant to question sexist images and concepts both written into the comic strip captions, as well as depicted in the drawings of over-sexualized, huge-breasted female figures in provocative positions. She places the female figures in domestic scenes, confectioned with embroidering, or other needlework, and frames them in Victorian or Baroque style picture frames. The artist’s goal is to rescue female sexuality, and request respect from the spectator for the woman, the Latina and for the validity of the technique and for herself as an artist.

Amézkua at times also manipulates the sexy female images placing these into tragic scenes to add dramatic overtones, a la soap opera. With delicate needlework, Amézkua enhances the character’s sex appeal by highlighting the figures’ huge breast and buttocks, exposing the male obsession with these body parts. The artist wants to disturb the viewer and embarrass the men who ogle at these comic book fantasies, by publicly displaying the crass imagery that is intended for male eyes only. The appropriation of the dominant discourse's concepts and imagery is a way for the artist to employ a dissident text. This discursive dissidence is a reverse discourse through which a subordinate could demand legitimacy of the dominant order) and embarrass the dominant order at the same time (Sinfield, *Faultlines* 32-47).

Another consequence that Amézkua of this appropriation of imagery is that she is able to create a semantic clash. While the images of her female characters are oversexualized and the backgrounds and/or mediums used are delicate and frilly, the texts or captions are strong assertive remarks, in Spanish and English, or in both languages. The clash emerges between the image, the text, and the medium: one represents the vulgar and pornographic; the second is representative of the feminine concept, and a third projects strength and empowerment.
There is, in the artist’s opinion, a good amount of social clash, quarrel, and anger between Latinos/as and U.S. society. Amézkua understands that her role as an artist is to aid in the construction of new identities by revitalizing and reinventing traditional forms (Mesa-Bains 10). The artist feels that as an artist it is necessary to tackle social issues in order to validate Latin Americans in this country. “We [Latinos] are in a ghetto, limited, so we [the artists] need to come forward in support of diversity, and make our image clearer for the Anglo-American public” (Amézkua 2008). With this goal in mind Amézkua creates images that question established notions on cultural, gender and sexual identity, women’s roles in the male dominated order, and negotiate the roles of women within the Latina/o diaspora.

Amézkua’s devotion to reconstructing and validating the Latina/o discourse is not limited to solely exhibiting her own art. He desire is to empower other artists of color and female artists as well. The artist gives others an opportunity that is very difficult to obtain when one does not belong to the mainstream, which is space where they can show their art. She converts her bedroom into project art space that she calls the Bronx Blue Bedroom. Once a month the artist strips her bedroom bare and permits the artist to put up an installation, or an exhibit a piece. In exchange the artist promises to prepare an informal dinner the next week and offer a talk on his/her work. The project has now been inducted as part of the Bronx Council of the Arts South Bronx Trolley Tour held on the first Wednesday of each month.

b. Melissa Calderón

*How does the materialistic culture buy into [the Latino] identity and what then becomes the “truth” about our culture...what we have and what we are?*

In the case of New York born Puerto Rican artist, Melissa Calderón, art is about searching for the significance of a U.S. Latina identity and the importance of cultural origins. Her installations generally address two main questions: What is real Latina/o culture in New York; does it really exist, and what does it mean to be a Latina and/or a New York Puerto Rican woman? The artist’s work reveals both the constant search for meaning in cultural identification for the second generation of Latina/os, and an affirmation of womanhood.

Calderón believes that the major dilemma that she encounters as part of a diaspora is whether being a Latina/o in New York is only about accepting “the materialistic culture we buy into that becomes the ‘truth’ about the Latina/o culture” (telephone Interview 2007). In other words, is Latina/o culture of New York a creation, molded with what has been commercially fed to U.S. society? Is the constant exposure to merengues and salsa music, the soap operas, and wearing big jewelry with engraved names just a marketing ploy? Is Latinidad about purposely engaging in such allegedly customary behaviors such as displaying fiery tempers, being an overly emotional female, or a cocky macho man? Is it perhaps about language, Spanish only, or Spanglish? Is it about exhibiting national emblems such as the flag everywhere and anywhere at all times? Or is it about territory, living in El Barrio, the Lower East Side, or the South Bronx that gives Latina/os their sense of cultural identity. Or could there be an autochthonous culture that the community has refused to let dwindle?

Melissa Calderón was born and raised in the Throgg’s Neck sector of the Bronx, a predominantly Italian neighborhood, and although she has always been aware at some level that she is of Puerto Rican heritage, her association with the culture never went beyond the inclusion of little cultural knick-knacks and details around her home, and very sporadic short trips to the island during certain holidays. English was her first language, and Puerto Rican linguistic idiosyncrasies were rarely manifested in the home. It was not until Calderón began venturing into the art world during her high school years that cultural identification, or lack thereof, became an issue of significance. Her ethnicity was brought up for the first time in relation to her creativity,
when she would be classified as a Latina artist in certain events or exhibitions. This may seem to be a simple detail, but to Melissa it became a matter of deep consideration, important enough to define the journey she would undertake from then on during her artistic development.

On one hand, Calderón was afraid that since she could not speak Spanish well enough she would not be able to connect with her public, and be rejected as a Latina. Considering that she was a second generation Puerto Rican, her Anglicized upbringing, her very limited dominance of the Spanish language, and knowledge of her cultural history, could she, and others like her, think of themselves as Latina/os or Puerto Ricans, or Nuyoricans? On the other hand, she feared being labeled simply a Latina artist, or what people expected to see if she were labeled as such. However, she understood that it was due to American commercialization and propaganda that limits and constricts Latina/o art and not the artists themselves. She concluded that, above all, it was essential that she connect freely between herself and the public through her art. This conundrum, and the artist’s own journey of self-analysis peaked her curiosity and desire to create work through which she could question and investigate Latina/o identity, the portrayals and preconceived notions of Latina/o culture, the Puerto Rican diaspora, and the image of the Latina woman in American society.

Calderón’s goal is to understand Latinidad as a political identifier, so it is crucial that American assimilation be addressed. “Fear of being put into a little box makes us not address the issue of American assimilation. We should not be afraid of identifying ourselves as Latinas/os” (Calderón 2008). In the 1980s Moraga also concluded that to name one’s racial/cultural identity was “to name a politic…that refuses assimilation into the U.S. mainstream” (Moraga 33). But Calderón believes that the danger of assimilation goes deeper than just losing an identity, that assimilation also makes us internalize racism, we develop a self-loathing because the dominant discourse teaches us to be afraid to identify as Latinos. Similarly, any identifier that is coupled with strong convictions, such as feminism, or heterosexism, instills a “fear of being rejected to
such a degree that it leads us to turn a blind eye to problems that affect us as people of color, and/or as women of any other unpopular identifier” (Calderón 2007).

In the *S-Files* exhibit at the Museo del Barrio in September 2007, Calderón included an installation piece entitled *Permanence of Pain* (see Fig. 34). Initially, the artist’s intention was to create a strictly feminist piece; a commentary on society’s ideas on how women are expected to deal with physical and emotional pain. But, as the artist explains, as she installed the work, she decided to take on the issue of Latina stereotyping and identity, as well.

![Image of Permanence of Pain installation](http://www.facebook.com/people/Melissa-Calderon-V/1366309236)
The installation is a tissue paper, wire, and metal construction. The seemingly endless stream of tissues sprouts out of a metal tissue box that hangs on a wall and splatter on to the floor. Among the tissue splattering on the floor there are hypodermic needles, gauzes, and other medical paraphernalia. The structure is representative of the physical and psychological distress women endure due to gynecological disorders, childbirth, abortions, or miscarriages. The artist went through a traumatic experience some years ago for which Calderón needed to undergo a painful medical procedure. Calderón constructed the piece with tissues that she used to wipe her tears during her hospital stay, and which she saved as a dreadful reminder. The tissue is a visual representation of personal suffering.

The artist also wanted to highlight the semantic contradictions in the perception of Latinas. On one hand, Latin American and Caribbean soap operas give societies, on both sides of the border, the impression that women are weepy, weak, and frail. “Good women” are often portrayed as being overly servile and acquiescent, accepting of their destiny as martyrs, as if it were divine virtue. On the other hand, the Latina woman is also expected to be brave and withstand pain without complaint. “Traditionally, social expectations demand that a woman accept her purpose in life, which is to endure pain in silence” (Calderón 2007). The overly emotional Latina stereotype reinforces the myth of the indulgent, inconsistent Latin American and Caribbean woman who is responsible for maintaining and perpetrating the culture of machismo. For a time, there was a misguided notion that the insignificant number of Latina women in the feminist movements’ rolls was due to the woman’s alleged innate over-emotional nature and public outbursts of hysteria, which meant she was too complacent with her gender based role in life, making her totally incompatible with the feminist cause.

The above notion may not be as popular a belief as it was in the 1960s, but the exhibit catalog for the “S” Files offered a reading of the artist’s use of the tissue medium as an “illustration of the whirlwind of emotions and clashing cultural ideologies [which is meant to] challenge the new dynamics that insist a Latina women must …balance traditional and feminist
roles” (2008). This reading seems to suggest that the latter opinion is still in effect. The piece does challenge the dominant discourses that insist on what a Latina is expected to ascribe to, yet Calderón’s use of the tissue is not to further the notion of the weak Latina versus the strength of feminism, but a commentary on the perception of this alleged “clashing” of ethno-cultural ideologies and Anglo-feminist positions. The artist employs tissues because the fragility of the material presents the viewer with this notion of vulnerability or feebleness. Upon closer inspection one sees that these tissues are glued onto a steel wire, so they are not as flimsy as they first appear. The tissues acquire stamina and stability that are not readily perceptible, destroying the perceived image of susceptibility. The scenario that Calderón presents proposes that women as a whole, and Latinas specifically, are emotionally stronger than many people are made to believe. Latinas are not like the caricatures we watch on soap operas; the cultural ideologies do not necessarily clash, they are however, misunderstood.

In the 1960s-1970s, many women of color in the United States were reluctant to join the feminist movement because the former felt that the movement did not address their concerns adequately. In truth, socially engaged U.S. Latinas, as well as their male counterparts were involved in other political issues at the time and the Latin American feminist struggle was very much a part of the political issues that were being addressed. In reality it is the caricaturizing of U.S. Latina attitudes and emotions that make people believe that they collide with feminist struggles.

The artist’s challenge was to redirect this notion to oppose the ideas that contributed to the exclusionary tendencies of the Anglo-American visual culture. The artist indicates that the manner in which she illustrates the “new dynamics” is by constructing a discourse through her discovery of hybridity. The subconscious product of this hybridity once more can be understood as a visual bilingualism; upon molding the structure with two disparate materials—the fragile, soft “wept on” tissues and the hard, strong wire, she merges the stereotypes regarding Latino/a tradition and modern feminist concepts. To paraphrase Coco Fusco, the artist’s discursive
reconstruction stresses her hybridity as a formal strategy to determine the meaning of the Latina cultural character and delimit its identity. The discourse demonstrates that the social understanding of the Latina is out of sync and invites us to rethink our understanding of the culture. This installation piece then, disarms the alleged paradox between Latina and Anglo women—the innate Latina soap operatic emotional quality versus the serious socially conscious Anglo woman. The idea of the Latina vulnerability that we have been led to believe is a persistent obstacle to our “enlightenment” is challenged. In reality there is no contradiction, but there is a need to re-read the Latino/a cultural ideology (Corpus Delecti 5-6).

With “Cock” Calderón (see Fig. 35) expands her search for the female identity of the Latina. Here the artist invites the spectator into the world of the Latino male mind. The title of this piece, “Cock,” is a play of words with which Calderón makes reference to the Caribbean male attitude, to machismo, and to the male organ, or better said, what this organ means to the U.S. Latino male. The rooster is the symbol of ultimate manliness in the Spanish New World islands of Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Cuba, not only because he symbolizes the ultimate sexual fantasy for the Latino male, the sole male in a coop with numerous hens at his disposal, but also because of the rooster’s well known semblance and behavior. A rooster is always willing to fight whenever he deems another rooster is invading his territory. Because of the instinctive bellicose nature of this fowl, cockfights are a long-time traditional sport in the islands. When he fights, the rooster is aggressive and defiant, fighting till the death. When not in battle, the rooster struts in a seemingly proud gait with his head pulled back and his chest pushed forward.
Calderón again wanted to address the discursive contradictions immersed in the Latina/o mind, and at the same time with a bit of humor, affectionately pokes fun at the Latino male attitude. To capture the Latino machismo, the artist constructed eight metal life-size roosters and placed them scattered about on a worn rubber-tiled floor. The roosters seem to be strutting and posing, as roosters do, some facing the spectators. In the center of the scene, there is a megaphone record player, a recording plays sounds and music over and over in a loop; the sounds that are usually heard in bodegas. Bodegas are the corner grocery stores in urban Latina/o neighborhoods. For the older generation of Latino men in New York, the Bodega is a microcosm; a home away from both homes (in New York and in the island), where they can better salvage their identities, and reenact a semblance of their previous island lives. The Bodega is the
social gathering place for many Latino men. Within this realm a Latino male can strut, speak of his battle scars, of his love trysts, and can crow triumphantly with every domino game he wins. Here, he is still macho, this is his realm; this is his coop, where he can still feel powerful.

A similar piece produced by a resident island artist, would most probably convey a different message. There the roosters could have been taken as representative of the indomitable nature of the Caribbean peoples, or of pride and resistance. The fact that the artist places her rooster structures in a bodega setting is significant. Calderón shows us that there is a difference between the meaning of manhood on the islands and here within the Latino diaspora. The difference becomes visible through an element of consciousness that is distinguishable in the men of the diaspora that is not so patent in men of the mainland islands. In this structure Calderón tells us that the Latino male feels that the survival of the cocks depend on their staying together in one “coop.”

Calderón also wants us to question, “How do we as spectators view Latino manhood from the outside?” She wants spectators to ask how U.S. society reacts to the gathering of minority males in large numbers. Is it “threatening or frightening, [or seen as] strength and communal resilience?” (Calderón Personal Interview 2008) Does the viewer see these gatherings as a cultural reaffirmation, as a nuisance, or an ungrateful gesture, with which these men shun U.S. hospitality and diminish the beauty of the City to boot?

The work could be interpreted as a critique of the Latino male’s misplaced perception of his reality and social status in the United States. As a man of color, there is dehumanization and a reduction of his sexuality in the United States, very similar to the dehumanization and the un-gendering that the enslaved black men and women of centuries past suffered (Fusco, the bodies… 5). Rather than challenging the Anglo dominant culture that strips him of his sexuality, in this corner store he can exhibit his machismo, and feel he is in equal standing with the other men in this society. The work could also be viewed as a symbol of collective resistance where the
Latino male defiantly refuses to let his culture be destroyed regardless of the countless threats of appropriation or cultural annihilation. Still from another point-of-view, it could represent the individual stoicism and strength, a statement on “male dominance in Latino culture.”

Melissa Calderón wants the viewer to join her in her quest for questioning and understanding the Latina/o identity and experience through a continual discursive restructuring. As an artist who is in a process of constant cultural discovery, her visual discourse should be interpreted as an expression that stems from a hybrid space and is a product of diasporic experiences. However, as part of a newer generation, the artist reveals a point of view that highlights that what her cultural heritage has given her is not a way to recall memories she never had, but fodder for defining a new socially conscious woman of color for the 21st century. Her discourse is not about being, or rescuing her Latinidad, but about accepting the significance of the cultural elements it has offered her, and merging these with her sense of feminist justice, as cultural materialism proposes (Sinfield, Faultlines 49). As a result she can successfully develop a female discourse at this specific historical moment for women of color of this generation.

c. Yasmín Hernández

My identity and my history [is my inspiration]. There is a tendency to want Latinos to be part of the mainstream— to have art that’s not “visually Latino”. But I want to be unapologetic; I don’t want to be conceptual and abstract

—Yasmin Hernández, Artist’s statement 2006.

Yasmín Hernández is a prolific painter, lecturer, and public speaker regularly offering talks on the historical events or social issues that inspire each of her paintings and collages. Her works are perhaps the most thematically transparent, since the messages the artist wishes to project, in the visual images are depicted through realist renderings. Hernández inherited from the previous Puerto Rican artists of the diaspora and continues to portray, “the social political
theme [that] stems from the Puerto Rican colonial status with the United States since 1898...” (Ballester 2).

Stylistically, the artist stands out because she merges the salient characteristics found in the works of the Puerto Rican artists of La Generación del 50, the language captured by the aforementioned New York Boricua art movement of the 1970s, and the feminist discourses of the 1970s and 1980s into a contemporary visual discourse of hybridity. Hence, her works present an illustrative fusion of political commentary, feminist and social issues, and the artist’s spiritual concerns with nativist symbols and icons, which reveal a true cultural materialist approach in the sense that she is deconstructing and reconstructing the old male, Anglo-centered discourse. In addition, Hernández makes use of the female body in a way that is very reminiscent of the bodies in the works of Myrna Báez where the woman’s body is a realistic depiction, but symbol and text at the same time.

The artist creates from within a space where gender, ethnicity, and tradition are expressed through the nature of her relationship within the diaspora. She divides her work into three categories: political, spiritual, and cultural. In each category she places the characters she portrays in settings that highlight their role as Latina women, their significance in Puerto Rican history, and in the New York Puerto Rican diaspora. In the settings she creates her female characters are empowered, and can exist in places where they have traditionally been denied access. She seeks to “fill voids with images we don’t usually see but should...brown goddesses...mothers as saints...freedom fighters...harsh realities in a world that masks truth behind a bling-bling generation” (Hernández 2007).

Her depiction of the Nationalist poet Julia de Burgos, for example, exalts the bard’s firm political convictions and defiance against Puerto Rican society. She was criticized and frowned upon by her peers and socialites, who recognized and admired her poetic talent, but branded her a woman of “dubious” reputation because she did not conform to social norms. In the artist’s
rendering the poet’s image does not appear as it commonly does in old photographs and
drawings where de Burgos sits, dressed in professional attire with her hair neatly parted and
tightly braided with her right hand cupping her face. The image evokes an air of romanticism; the
picture of an innocent looking young woman deep in thought. Hernández redresses the bard’s
role, painting de Burgos in a warrior stance with wild unruly hair and machete in hand (see Fig.
36).
Dressed this time in rebellious attire—pants (women were not allowed to wear pants in the 1930s), she is ready to defend the agricultural worker, and to fight for national independence (see Fig. 36).

Another of the artist’s strongest images is that of the Nationalist revolutionary, Lolita Lebrón (see Fig. 37). Lebrón and three other Nationalist Party members shot off their guns in the lobby of the House of Representatives in 1954, wounding a few congressmen. Although her gun jammed and did not go off, she was held as a political prisoner in the United States for over 25 years. Hernández captures the famous photographic image of Lolita taken at the moment she is being apprehended and put under arrest in front of the Congress building. In this painting, the artist captures this moment from another perspective than the one intended by the photographer. Hernández places emphasis on Lolita’s pose, highlighting the defiant stance, the proud stare, and the calm demeanor. She presents the viewer, not with an image of a weak woman who was only humbly following the whims of a crazed Nationalist leader, as many claimed, nor that of the terrorist the media wanted to project, but that of a brave woman who had the gall to do what was then inconceivable for a woman; she stood up and acted upon her beliefs.

Hernández depicts Lebrón’s body in the same pose, but nude, because Lebrón’s body transcends the image of a woman being arrested, but informs on the plight of the Puerto Rican woman in her ongoing relationship with the dominant order. By extension, we understand the woman’s body as representative of the island and its relationship with the imperial power of the United States. It is the denunciation of the Island’s colonial status reflected on the freedom fighter’s body with bars up and down as if she were in a jail cell. The image “illustrates how the female body can become a holding cell, within which we [women] are contained and upon which

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6 On February 23, 2004, in The Washington Post Magazine, the Miami bureau Chief Manuel Roig-Franzia ran an article on Lolita Lebrón, which he titled “When Terror Wore Lipstick”. “Lipstick, and other stereotypical symbols of “femininity”, is weaved throughout the article to portray her, unapologetically, as a woman. In doing so, the article and her critics pigeonhole Lolita into predetermined gender roles that do not allow room for the objector, or revolutionary” (Hernández 2007)
violence is inflicted” (Hernández 2007). At the same time, Lebrón represents the island being held captive by the U.S.
On Lebrón’s body, behind the cell bars, the artist combines the images of famous Puerto Rican women from both regions—from the Puerto Rican mainland and New York—so the message can be clear to Anglos, Nuyoricans and islanders alike. She includes the image of Haydeé Beltrán, who is presently a political prisoner in the United States. In the background are also the images of other Puerto Rican women who are or have been political prisoners and freedom fighters in Puerto Rico’s long history of struggle against its colonizers, Spain and the U.S. These include women such as Luisa Capetillo, the feminist, labor leader and anarchist who was incarcerated for wearing pants in the early 20th century, and others who have become tragic symbols of violence and brutality. The artist sought to transcend the physical with Lolita’s body, elevating it to the metaphorical, symbolizing these female compatriots who throughout the island’s history have been jailed for standing up against colonialism, and/or have been victimized, ostracized, and subjugated because of their political beliefs and gender.

Yasmin Hernández has purposely shied away from the more popular identity-seeking art trends. In concurrence with Coco Fusco’s position, Hernández was a bit suspicious of the overzealousness with the multicultural trend of the 1980s (Fusco, *the bodies…xiv*). She also concurs that these trends may have been largely responsible for the practices of assimilation and the amalgamation of cultures of color that flourished with this multiculturalism vogue. Consequently, she also believes that the increased visibility of people of color in the media and in the arts does not assume racial and cultural parity in U.S. society. Hernández does not criticize other artists who do follow multicultural trends, but she “seeks to unveil what racism and colonialism have suppressed, creating art that documents the post-colonial and neo-colonial experience-art that challenges and empowers” (Hernández 2007). As Mendieta and Báez, Hernández favors the use of the female body as textual site. And as Bruguera and Fusco, Hernández seeks that the female body be “a personal link to a very political history of colonialism, [since it is a] history [that] has shaped a very specific relationship between mind and body for colonized and enslaved peoples and their descendants” (Fusco xiv). She wants her work to be “part of a new form of liberation art,” a new Boricua political art movement. She joins the ranks of a growing generation of New
York Puerto Rican artists who since 1998 (the centennial anniversary of U.S. domination over Puerto Rico) decided to go beyond the identity-seeking trend to denounce colonialism through art.

As a socially engaged Latina/Puerto Rican artist of New York Hernández’s discourse reveals, not only the collective and individual anger of cultural and historical occupation, but also the frustration of a woman of color in a patriarchal society with its cultural, racial, and gender oppression. Her visual discourse is provocative but it is also mediatory, and above all educational; it is social and political denouncement and criticism, but it is also a language of empowerment and offers new plausible scenarios for a colonized people.

d. Adriana López-Sanfeliú

Since April of 2002 I have been documenting the lives of young Puerto Rican women and their families living in Spanish Harlem, Manhattan, New York. There is a hardness that characterizes these streets, and innocence dies young...Women are the pillars and often the source of vitality and strength in family life. These women represent the potential elements of change in this society... –Adriana López-Sanfeliú, Artist’s Statement 2002.

Thus reads a portion of the artist’s statement on the photo documentary, Life on the Block (see Fig. 38). Adriana López Sanfeliú, a blonde, blue-eyed, middle class Spaniard, felt she might not fit the image many people in the United States have of a U.S. Latina, and feared that the former might then not accept her input for the topic of this dissertation. She even asked the interviewer if it was acceptable for her to be included in this investigation. Yet the artist herself provided the answer to this question, when she explained with the explanation she offers regarding her interest on the subject matter.

When López-Sanfeliú arrived in New York City and went to El Barrio or Spanish Harlem for the first time, she says that she was thrust serendipitously into a world that was totally alien to
her. She unexpectedly began to be drawn into this world, as she interviewed and photographed the Puerto Rican women she met. She began to feel a strong connection to her female subjects. Although she did not experience a similar plight in life, as a woman she empathized with their struggles and emotions. What began as a mere passing interest on the effects of drug abuse on the residents of Spanish Harlem grew into a strong sense of solidarity with the lives of the Puerto Rican women of the community. As she worked on the project, she became increasingly astonished and perturbed about how life and culture in El Barrio can exist right alongside the wealthy Upper East Side neighborhood just a few streets away, and be practically invisible to the latter residents; so physically close, yet so emotionally far and psychologically isolated. It also astounded her how resilient the women of this community are. Her interest then shifted towards the unwavering strength and commitment that she saw in the women who had to deal and live daily under the most unfavorable social conditions, such as poverty, illness and abuse, and still were able to function as the foundation of the community and their families.

For López-Sanfeliú, the need to make U.S. society aware of the existence of this other world, this subculture in the underbelly of New York, became an obsession. The artist went through an emotional process, through which she did not merely gain a deeper understanding, or develop a slight commiseration toward the women, but as she described it, it was very similar to what we have understood to be the realization of a border consciousness, as she developed what Bhabha described as the “sense of a specific space of a cultural colonial discourse” (120). López-Sanfeliú begins this journey, as she stated, with the sole intention of documenting the lives of those living within a drug culture. As her work and her involvement in the community progressed, so did her solidarity with the women trying to survive within the marginalization they are subjected to since childhood. Although the photographer abhors classifications and in reality does not consider herself a political artist, she experiences the progression of a consciousness regarding the life of struggle these women endure. In other words, she absorbed the specific expression that was born of the cultural colonization within this neighborhood, and through pictures she captured the ominous feelings, the state of mind and the overall sensations of doom.
that a community of this nature can give those whose life has trapped them in a never-ending cycle of marginalization, cultural destruction, misrepresentation and obliviousness. An article by Valery Oisteaneu in the September 2009 art newsletter “The Brooklyn Rail” best describes the photographic series as follows:

In Sanfeliu’s exploratory aesthetic, men appear only in a supporting role as a new woman struggles to emerge from a formerly machismo culture through social changes, the ascent of feminism and the inexorable (if still gender-slowed) rise of women’s economic power. But it’s a hard battle. The story is permeated in the cycle of poverty and is sometimes sad as it touches on alcohol addiction, teenage pregnancies, crime and disease, all contributing to a jobless, dysfunctional society called “the ghetto life” by its protagonists.

--Valery Oisteaneu, Curator’s Statement 2009

While López-Sanfeliú was producing the photo documentary on the lives of the Puerto Rican women in El Barrio, she was simultaneously working on a series on the Gypsies of Southern Spain that she had recently begun (see Fig. 39). The artist’s intention upon undertaking each project was similar: to capture images of the daily lives of these subjects through photography. This talented art photographer was able to capture with her characteristic style, the same respectful and sensitive gaze in both of the photographic series, but there is clearly an indefinable dialogical aesthetic that emanates from the pictures of the poverty-ridden neighborhood of East Harlem that is not apparent in the Gypsy series. While the Gypsy series captures different aspects of the rigorous lives and survival tactics of this group, the images of the four Puerto Rican women presents a more personal, intimate portrait, permitting the viewer to enter their lives and share their struggles. The viewer can look at the Gypsy people in the photos, and appreciate their day-to-day existence, but in the Life on the Block series the viewers are pulled into the world of the inner city. The photos are permeated with the pain, disappointments,
disillusionment, hopelessness, and the cycle of struggle and apathy that the women in this Puerto Rican diaspora as they experience them daily in this New York City neighborhood.

López-Sanfeliú has the viewer partake in the lives of four New York Puerto Rican women, Mercy, Sheila, Amy, and Midget. She lets us see, through bold, frank, and sometimes raw scenes of their daily lives, how the American dream is nonexistent among a population that has internalized that there is no escape from the life they lead. As women who inhabit a world within the borders of "two" New Yorks, of those marginalized and those who are not, have been forced to assume the responsibility of being the pillars of their social realm without the benefit of choice. Because they were given "roles as women in a male-dominant culture, as Latinas in a primarily white society, and as [single] mothers [forming] the upcoming American generations" (López-San Feliú 2007) to dream of a better life is yet not an option.

The two photo documentaries allow the spectators the unique experience of literally observing the visual shift that takes place in López-Sanfeliú’s cultural discourse. The artist’s creativity is articulated almost through an anthropological approach in one work, while it displays a discourse of an emerging border or hybrid consciousness in the other. In the former, the artist wishes to share her objective curiosity, to simply observe the Gypsies, this reserved group, in a non-judgemental way. In the other, the artist attempts to awaken the viewing audience, make them aware of the invisible forces behind cultural destruction. She presents society with an open invitation to question and discuss the dominant discourses that engender the “denied knowledges” (Bhabha 114), to which impoverished communities are subjected; these knowledges being the other possibilities that life can offer outside of their world; the existence of other discourses that can build instead of destroy cultures.

In Gypsies-the Salazar Family the photographer captures different aspects of the family’s life such as the wedding of a 16 year old couple, the family patriarch, the older boys teaching a young boy to smoke, the family participating in celebrations with dance, exhibiting a community of
hard-working, proud people with strong family ties and tradition. While in the series *Life on the Block*, Sanfeliú enters the intimate lives of four young women trapped in the only world they know, where the men are mostly absent, but they continue to fight to survive. The men in the lives of these women are dealing with their own demons, drugs, crime, violence, being abused and abusing, so the women from a very young age must usually survive on their own. The women work, raise the children they have had too early in their lives, and support these men emotionally and sometimes economically. This is the life they were brought up in, and this is what they know. They may at times be destroyed or self-destruct, but most of the time, they become stronger.
Through these images, the artist has confirmed Raymond William’s argument that culture and cultural discourses are always political, implicitly embedded in the visual and literary production of a society (25). Thus, López-Sanfeliú integrates a creative language in her photographic reproductions that takes on the difficult task of interpreting and mediating the seemingly contradictory internal emotions and outward responses of these women to situations and challenges others never even dream of dealing with; feelings such as the unlikely pairing of the total desolation on one side and ferrous determination on the other. That is the case of Midget who must face another Saturday morning without the presence of the father of children, who is in jail, and yet be strong enough to raise her children alone. In another case, a woman must witness a family member stabbed to death by an enraged boyfriend and then hides in her mother’s home for fear of being attacked by her sons’ father, yet must put her fears aside and go out to work every day to support the child.

With these photographs, Ms. López Sanfeliú has captured these Latina women’s “challenges of survival and quest for empowerment” (López-Sanfeliú 2008), and through this exercise, serendipitously, the artist reveals the essence of a hybrid consciousness; she mediates between opposing cultures of the mainstream and the marginalized within New York City via these pictures by exposing the structures that contributes to the repression of women’s voices to the rest of the world.
e. Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz

My intent is to give a voice to the seen but seldom heard — to attach a sound to the unseen female majority

--Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, Artist’s Statement 2005.

The South Bronx native Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz began as an illustrator and graffiti artist. As she moved towards the interdisciplinary arts, she delved further into the Puerto Rican and Nuyorican cultures, feminism, and introspective analysis. Through her journey down this road, she has become the recipient of numerous awards for her brazen, but insightful performity of identity and social-political issues. While her work has evolved and her repertoire has increased to include multimedia installations, performance, and video art, she has never abandoned the focus on womanhood and on her heritage as a Puerto Rican.

Smart, witty, and quick thinking, Raimundi-Ortiz is always, stage-ready. In other words, she can go into a performance skit, or think of some new creative piece or act, on canvas or otherwise, at the drop of a hat. During a very entertaining and interesting five hour interview the artist answered questions, recited verses, drew an abstract figure on the wall and performed a short skit, all addressing cultural identity and pre-conceived notions of Latinidad, in all of which she uses her personal life as a narrative tool.

Among her most memorable creations is her series on the adventures of Wepa Woman, aka Julissa Salvatodo (Julissa Saves-All), a quasi-autobiographical character, and her arch nemesis, La Chuleta (The Pork Chop), aka Mara Yoprimer (Mara Me-first). Finally, there is Francesca Drake, a drag performer and Wepa Woman’s close friend and hair stylist (see figs. 40, 42); the first of the two characters introduced by the artist in a sort of open diary that she created at the age of 18 in the form of a graphic comic book. Through humor and homespun philosophy, the artist discusses her personal issues and battles, and thought-provoking social concerns.
Wepa Woman is a Latina super heroine, battling against cultural social ills such as machismo, prejudice, stereotyping, and cafería (trashy Latino/a people and their behaviors). At first the character was only meant to be an alter ego through whom the artist could vent and purge, but as the character gained popularity so did her significance. The idea behind the character then became to create an image of empowerment for New York Latinas, such as herself, who shared similar concerns and preoccupations. During the interview for this study, the artist describes the character as “…raised by a single mother. Intelligent and shy, poised for greatness…An avid reader [who] sought comfort in being able to help others in understanding the nuances of the human condition within literature.” Later Raimundi-Ortiz creates a blog site that she titles The Revenge of the Wepa Woman, which the artist headlines as follows:

The world as we know it will never be the same. She is the voice of the voiceless! Born and reared in the cinders of the burning Bronx, nursed on the breast of overcrowded public school classrooms, swam in the lakes of frustrated but willing teachers. She drank from the wellsprings of their knowledge. She’s here. Now. She is the Wepa Woman and her vengeance is now!!

-- Wepa Woman Webpage 2006

The blog site became so popular that in 2006 the artist produced a traveling exhibition series of portable murals that she titled, “Who is the Wepa Woman?” The series became so popular that the exhibit continued until 2008. It was shown in art spaces in several major cities of the U.S., and in Puerto Rico.

Raimundi-Ortiz wanted to empower Latinas while denouncing disapproving behaviour on the part of both the dominant order and the populace. As Raimundi-Ortiz matured so did her characters and her artistic discourse. Wepa Woman became more subdued, not as condescending or judgemental, and La Chuleta became less cafre (tacky) and more representative of the voice of the common folk. As the artist gains more tolerance and is less critical towards the behaviors of La Chuleta, the character becomes savvier, donned with the kind
of knowledge only a woman bred in the inner city who has been through much of life’s turmoils and difficulties could have. *La Chuleta* was first created as a toxic character, with the intention of ridiculing the *chusmería* (trashy behaviors) similar to what was described previously regarding Muñoz’s theory on disidentification. In this case, the artist wants to use herself as a vehicle of communication to create a bond with the people of the community.
Raimundi-Ortiz created another blog titled *Ask Chuleta* in which the character, now personified by the artist herself, answers questions on intellectual topics in a simple straightforward language. *La Chuleta* sheds her trashy, ignorant demeanor and becomes a more humble, naïve but straight-talking woman, not formally educated, but exhibiting the down-to-earth, homespun wisdom of a humble people. The idea behind *La Chuleta’s* evolution is to make art less elitist and more accessible to the masses; as the artist stated, “to bridge the gap between the art world and everyday people” (Raimundi-Ortiz 2008).

In her more recent work (2008) Raimundi-Ortiz produced a video performance in which she plays several characters, most of which are Puerto Rican. In this piece called, *Los Machos de mi vida* (*The Machos of My Life*) (see Fig. 41), the artist’s intention was to uncover and rebuke Latina stereotypes in the media by simulating a *telenovela* (a Spanish-language soap opera) format. In the photographer Qiana Mistich’s blog *Dodge and Burn, Diversity in Photography* (Nov. 30, 2009), Raimundi-Ortiz explains, “I have always been interested in how novelas play a subliminally integral part in the shaping of psychological submission in contemporary Latino culture. In this new work I take aim at the contemporary Latino *novela* while exploring multiplicity, subservience, class, and gender politics while using the very medium I love to hate” (2009). The idea behind the production is to expose how the dominant discourse molds our perceptions and “shapes our psychological submissions” by feeding on the diaspora’s yearnings, its fear of losing its culture to assimilation of the Anglo-American culture, and its desire to recapture the homeland through false romantic notions. The artist reveals the struggle of the children of the borderlands to negotiate an identity through her own struggle to overcome the confusion these dominant discourses create within those that are part of the Latina/o diaspora.
Fig. 41. Wanda-Raimundi-Ortiz, Los Machos de mi vida (The ‘Machos’ in my Life), 2008. Performance. Reproductions in
http://www.wepawoman.blogspot.com/.
Fig. 42. Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz, *The Adventures of Wepa Woman*, 2005. Mural on back of Building on Lincoln Avenue and 136th Street, Bronx, New York 10455.
4.3 To Be or Not to Be (Identified): The Struggle Against Labels and Categories

a. Glendalys Medina

If Yasmin Hernández is about affirming Puerto Rican identity and race, Blanka Amékua and Elia Alba about restructuring dominant discourses on gender and ethnicity, and Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz and Melissa Calderón about overcoming the confusion brought on at times by the experiences of the diaspora and hybridity, Glendalys Medina is about undoing traditional structures and restructuring discourses, and disavowing identity affirmations on gender, race, culture or color. The artist does believe that a restructuring of dominant discourses can only be achieved by completely rejecting them. In contrast to the other artists, she stated in her interview that to claim any identifier on race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation only brings consequences that are contrary to what artists belonging to subaltern groups should try to achieve with their creative expressions. The results of all these other quests are, in her opinion, counterproductive.

Medina’s argument is very similar to what some theorists such as Fusco or Blocker claim. Jane Blocker, for instance, notes that “in their rush for visibility, minorities and women become victim to their own public representations, which contributes to, rather than subvert dominant ideologies…there is real power in remaining unseen politically” (25). In her fierce opposition to the use of identifiers, Medina also expressed a view very much in line with Sinfield, when he argued that there are “entrapment modes of ideology and power maneuvered [in such a way] that [they] seem designed to challenge the system [but actually] help to maintain it (Faultlines 49). Medina does not simply and passively avoid being defined or boxed into categories of a specific gender, race or color; she instead uses her art to actively fight against these categorizations. Medina’s political stand is to visually obstruct labels and categories that she vehemently believes hinder the creative process.
In Medina’s performance, the artist’s body is not a metaphor or text, but a symbol. In contrast to Troyano’s Carmelita Tropicana or Raimundi-Ortiz’s Wepa Woman, through which these artists emphasize their Latinidad, female empowerment, and femininity, her character, Shank wants to “strip away individuality” as a way of demonstrating that the strongest political standpoint is “to be everything and nothing” (Medina 2009). The artist argues that when you use the “I” as a creative form it is being “anti-social but not political”, because it is self-involved. She also underscores that when an artist refuses to eliminate him or herself as subject in an art piece or performance, the realization as creative force is lost. While the public looks at the artists, it is defining them, thus striping them of their voice, and losing their creative essence. Initially Medina did not feel that she was being heard. “Viewers do not listen to what you say when they are looking at you and defining you.” She concluded that labels and classifications continuously bog down creativity. Consequently, she decided to create a new person, one that could not be identified or categorized. Shank’s character came to light to offer a solution to this problem.

In Medina’s video performance, the character Shank is indefinable and unidentifiable. The figure wears lose clothing, dark glasses, and the head is completely covered with a hood. The video image is a bit grainy, and the camera shots are long angles, focusing mainly on the feet or the back of the character, making it impossible to determine Shank’s gender, color, or race. Even the name of the character is genderless. The word shank refers to a piercing object; it is usually a handcrafted instrument made almost exclusively for violent purposes to mame or kill people. Medina decided that the word would be very effective for symbolizing self-made power. Medina felt that the word would adequately reflect her desire to “cut categories into pieces and rebuild [them] from scratch.”

In her performance Medina has Shank making a DVD in which s/he is teaching the viewer to dance Hip-hop. The artist clarifies that she is not a hip-hop fan, nor does she know how to dance it. She wanted to use Hip-hop because it is commodified. The dance is representative of a system, and as such, has rules that the system expects you to follow faithfully. What is
supposed to be an act of individual expression, in reality is an element of negation of creativity. “Hip-hop is a reenactment of someone else’s voice, not your own” (Medina 2008). To prove the latter point, Shank instructs Glendalys the artist and her viewers what to do, step-by step, but does not follow any of the steps her/himself. The steps are totally made up by Shank; they do not follow any real hip-hop moves or rules. Medina’s goal is that the viewers question what real expression is versus what is counterfeit.

In an exhibition show, The Cut Project, Medina’s intention once again was to destroy established identities, to “cut categories into pieces and rebuild” (Medina 2009). In this show, instead of assuming the character, the artist made Shank figures out of sugar so that she could literally cut the character into pieces. She then signed each piece and hung it from the ceiling. The pieces were left hanging to deteriorate as the sugar dissolved. The artist had two goals in mind with the dissolving of her Sugar Shanks. On one hand, Medina wanted the signed pieces of Shank, since they were now “identified” parts, to represent the “dissolving” of people when they are labeled or categorized. On the other hand, she wanted to expand the symbolism of the character. Shank destroyed by the sugar industry in the same way that the sugar industry destroyed the Caribbean; an industry that has been historically controlled by capitalism. “Capitalism destroyed lives by forcing people into categories; people were either slaves or indentured servants. Regardless of gender or age, the system did not see people as plantation workers or individual laborers, but objects.” The artist reshaped and created a “Shank” for each faceless individual; she wants the spectators to understand that dominant discourse, whether they are articulated by the left or the right, force people into belonging to specific identity categories, and, as a consequence, each person’s individuality and creativity is destroyed.

Medina explains that her work is a reaction to being categorized. The fundamental basis of her work is to construct an oppositional discourse that inverts viewers’ concepts of individualism and identity. She goes against the requirements imposed by a society that bases its definitions of identity on false notions and categories. According to Medina, “society as a whole
thinks of itself as one, and when you don’t [accept this imposition] you go against what the United States wants you to believe. The dominant order feels threatened when its members are unidentified.” She believes that the problem is that when people are labeled their individuality is eliminated. She also argues that “if on the contrary you reject the identifiers, you eliminate boundaries [and] language-labeling.”

Glendalys Medina’s artistic philosophy is a prime example of how the tactical approach of a socially committed artist’s discourse of hybridity functions regardless of beliefs or intended message, regardless of style, and regardless of medium or venue. While some of the artists feel it is utterly necessary to identify as a Latina to inform and deliver their social concerns effectively, and others believe it makes no difference whatsoever, Medina feels that it is absolutely essential to eliminate all identifiers to obtain the maximum level of communication with her viewers. The artist’s discourse may perhaps seem contradictory, but is clearly a product of hybrid consciousness nonetheless, because it is a discourse that most probably could not have evolved thus had it not been for her diasporic experiences. In Medina’s “third space of enunciation” the elements of an oppositional discourse came together, and manifested themselves as adamant “disarticula[tions of] the voice of authority” (Bhabha 132). The artist’s approach can unequivocally be assumed as cultural materialist as her intent is to subvert the dominant discourse, and present alternative criteria of plausibility.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

At the beginning of this study questions were posed regarding the aesthetic trajectory of the New York Latina arts in the post-civil rights era. The questions addressed in this dissertation were: What have been the discursive changes in the visual arts produced by contemporary socially-engaged New York Latinas since then? How did this new generation of Latina visual artists view these discursive changes, and the women artists’ relationship with the dominant power structures? How do these socially committed visual artists define their role in the present political and social reality of Latina/os within the New York diaspora? And, how are these realities reflected in their artwork?

This analysis has shown that after the wave of civil rights struggles, ethnic pride movements, and cultural reaffirmation battles of the 1960s and 1970s, socially engaged Latina artists of New York solidified a discourse of hybridity that has become an essential part of the contemporary Third World ideological visual culture of the city. The latter in turn, is a significant sector within the make-up of the U.S. art world that is committed to contemporary feminist concepts and social equality. The visual aesthetic discourse begins to emerge after the mid1980s in New York influenced by the flourishing multicultural and postcolonial theoretical currents that emerged during a period when governmental policies became more conservative toward the arts, and cultural identity issues became more central in the articulation of artistic discourses.

The visual discourses of the various Latina artists discussed in this dissertation, address their specific relationship with the dominant discourse, and their positions and ideas on feminism, and cultural or ethnic awareness. Drawing upon Homi Bhabha’s theoretical views on cultural identity and resistance we observed that the aesthetic discourse of Latina visual artists is constructed within a third space of enunciation that stems from a consciousness of hybridity. The elements that influenced the development of the hybrid consciousness shared by many socially committed Latina artists of New York, are a product of similar diasporic experiences and cultural history; it is a merging or “suturing,” as Raymond Hall called it, which does not essentialize their
identities, but aids the artists in constructing these identities with which they wanted to represent themselves (4), and in elaborating a visual discourse of hybridity.

One of the foundational elements discovered in the development of this discourse of hybridity is the legacy of Latin America’s and the Caribbean’s cultural histories. As art historian and theorist Gerardo Mosquera suggested, Latin American/Caribbean art and literary theory show a partiality toward the social/political arts, and for Marxist and dependency economic theories, and those have deeply influenced generations of socially engaged Latina/o and Chicana/o artists in the U.S., more so than any other artistic or political movement. Latina/o artists in the United States are producing works that are aesthetic and at the same time, raise awareness about the social and political issues affecting their communities, and the world at large. It is clear that for Latina artists there is a desire to create an aesthetic discourse aimed at social transformation, and that supports class, cultural, sexual, and gender equality.

Since the discourse is based on social and historical elements, is not static, it shifts as conditions and positions change. The discourse has been evolving since its onset in the 1960s, and particularly since the mid-1980s. In other words, as this study has established, socially committed and politically active Latina cultural creators, including other subaltern political artists, such as gay and lesbian artists, produced a discourse that highlighted, denounced, and confronted dominant discourses, and as conditions and environments changed, so did the need to modify these discourses. Politically inclined Latina artists, specifically, have been partial to incorporating neo-Marxist and feminist elements into their art work as an effective means of addressing the issues that they felt most affected women of color and their communities. These findings we found to be attuned with the theory of cultural materialism, as opposed to the strict Marxist-based social realist art discourse embraced by the artists of the 1960s. The confrontational, collective, class consciousness-raising discourse was then transformed into an approach that offered what Bhabha described as an articulation of negotiation, a dialogical aesthetic. This dialogical aesthetic approach has been identified by Raymond Williams. When
applied to the arts, the approach seeks to revolutionize predominant discourses by deconstructing and reconstructing them, with the purpose of seeking social and political equity for the most underrepresented or marginalized sectors of society.

Based on Williams’ findings, English professor and writer, Allan Sinfield concluded that human communities within a diaspora are usually persuaded by the dominant discourses that their languages and cultures are inferior. Sinfield argues that once the dominant order convinces a subaltern group of its cultural inferiority, the former can justify its insistence on pushing toward “one superior, homogenizing, hegemonic past, requiring diverse people to repudiate their actual histories (On Sexuality 290). Cultural materialism on the other hand, refers to discourses that reinforce the language and culture of the subordinate groups. What this study argued, is that since the 1980s, and up until the present, socially engaged U.S. Latina artists and writers, based on their unique diasporic experiences, have sought to revolutionize the prevalent discourses that have maintained minorities within minorities, specifically, women, people of color, and gays and lesbians, in a subordinate state. Thus, what they have employed in their visual discursive reconstruction is very much a cultural materialist approach.

This study about the works of socially engaged Latina artists documents their desire to produce an art that attempts to destroy the old myths based on gender roles, class, culture, and race, and present new plausible scenarios upon which different cultural models can be built (Sinfield, On Sexuality 290). The cultural materialist approach is identifiable within the aesthetic visual discourse through the tactical similarities and cultural meanings found in the works discussed here. In the Latina artist’s aesthetic discourse there is an evolutionary trajectory and shared characteristics and standpoints in the way they construct desired identities. The tactical similarities employed reflect, first of all, that regardless of whether the aesthetic manifestations vary diametrically in style and technique from artist to artist, a common denominator is a hybrid consciousness, “a third space of enunciation”, where the distinct forms of their politics of identity are constructed and revealed (Bhabha 25).
Our analysis has attempted to use the works of the theorists and critics referenced in this study to provide a framework to reveal the basic tactical similarities employed within the creative works of contemporary Latina artists in New York. The writings of Stuart Hall, Gloria Anzaldúa, Homi Bhabha, Coco Fusco, and Chela Sandoval, especially, have argued that the discourse created by socially concerned cultural creators from subaltern groups permits the latter to use their creativity to try to recover and reconstruct the past, with the goal of recuperating a diminished or denied cultural identity and giving it coherence. Whether these identities are articulated as a reconstruction conducted via mutual appropriation and an exchange of a common ground to benefit both the particular culture of origin and the patriarchal order, a byproduct of hybrid, border, or mestiza consciousness, or one that comes from neither the space occupied by the dominant culture’s articulation, nor from the language of the subaltern or the colonized. Latina visual artists have set for themselves the goal of creating an oppositional discourse.

In conclusion, based on the theories propounded by the aforementioned thinkers, the tactical aesthetic discourse could be summed up as follows:

- It is a “dialogical aesthetic”, in other words it is a mediatory language between the Anglo-American and Latina/o cultures, and between traditional culture and modern concepts. The finished art product is an invitation for the viewer to question or provoke discussions on the issues that affect Latina/os in the diaspora; issues such as colonialism, racial and cultural discrimination, gender inequalities, and different sexualities.

- This dialogical or mediatory language consists of a type of visual code switching, or bilingualism. It reveals an integration of the linguistic and visual codes derived from their respective national cultures. The awareness of their hybridity or mestizaje, and of their diasporic condition, manifested through this code-switching, or bilingual imaging translates, interprets, and enables the mediation between the respective cultures and U.S society.
The discourse is also a site of resistance and negotiation that confronts any culturally antagonistic discourse. It is a revolutionary discourse that offers cultural models that are an alternative to the dominant paradigms on gender identity, women’s rights, cultural reaffirmation, race relations, and offer women of color new roles within the diaspora. These new roles are in direct contrast with those established cultural models and stereotypes historically imposed upon Latinas and other women of color by the Anglo dominant order. The Latina artists produce a visual discourse that uses the woman’s body as site of resistance and negotiation, simultaneously presented as symbol and text.

The Latina artists researched for this study, as women of color and part of a marginalized diaspora, all produce art that reveals a visceral oppositional discourse solidified by a specific dual cultural perspective. The dual cultural perspective allows these individuals to “translate” from one discourse to another, facilitating mediation between cultures. As mentioned previously, since their cultural identity emerges from a specific hybrid space, it does not emerge solely from the space occupied by the colonizer, or by the subaltern. It is a “third” space that in turn affirms a consciousness of hybridity, through which the artists are able to speak to both sides of the border.

This consciousness of hybridity is articulated through a discourse of hybridity that functions as a site of “resistance and negotiation.” It resists colonialism, sexism, heterosexism, and racism, and negotiates gender identity, women’s rights, diaspora and exile, cultural reaffirmation, and women’s roles. The alternatives to the dominant paradigms that the artists offer the spectators are elements of self-representation, “articulation of the female agency and power, cultural formations and social negotiations of the collected self” (Nogueras 168), through the reconfiguration of the female body; and challenge and redefine binary concepts such as white-black, us-them, and colonizer-colonized. These points were addressed time and time again by each artist interviewed for this study.
This study also highlights the fact that throughout the history of the Latin American and the Caribbean creative arts, women artists who are interested in restructuring dominant discourses, have never accepted defeat, but have in turn almost always led the way when the artistic production is threatened by the established order. There have been many instances in the history of Latin American and Caribbean art since the 1960s, in which politically inclined women artists and artisans have made it their objective, and have been successful in rescuing the arts via discursive restructuring. This research shows that this tendency continues to be true among the contemporary U.S. Latina artists of New York. Thus it can be concluded that socially engaged and/or politically active U.S. Latina artists have been luchadoras, warriors in the ongoing battle for recognition and validation within the U.S. American art scene in general, and the social and political arts in particular.

While the target of the confrontation remains the same—the patriarchal, dominant structures—the strategic approach has been modified, by the desire and intent to revolutionize the visual discourse, and by integrating civil rights issues, the ethnic liberation, and feminist movements and a Third-World feminist ideology that “functions as a medium through which [the discourse is] transform[ed] into tactical weaponry for intervention of power.” It is a new form of discourse that went from strictly oppositional to a “differential form of consciousness” (Sandoval 61); where the language traditionally employed in literary and plastic works had failed to eradicate prevailing ideological faultlines that are constantly reinforced by the dominant culture, and can only be corrected if they offer alternate criteria of plausibility to destroy myths. This particular discourse illustrates what Stuart Hall refers to as a discursive revolution, a “new concept” or “reconceptualization [of identity]” (2). As women of color of a Latina diaspora, these artists, thus, produce a visceral visual aesthetic discourse that contributes to the edification of a new cultural perspective.

It is befitting for this dissertation to end with an open-ended statement made by the artist and writer Lucy R. Lippard in a paper she wrote and read to mark the 20th anniversary of New
York’s Taller Alma Boricua, as part of in the Exhibition Colloquium “Social Political Implications,” held on October 21, 1989. With these words Lippard summed up the prevailing attitude among the new generation of subaltern political artists, which I believe best describes the task U.S. Latina artists have undertaken in their quest to deconstruct and reconstruct the ideological scripts imposed upon the subaltern groups and which will hopefully motivate subsequent studies on the discourse of hybridity created by socially committed Latina/o artists as part of the New York visual culture and American art in general:

Art with both spiritual depth and socio-political meaning is for the most part homeless in this society, often separated by class and intention from art world models. Politics and the spirit are both fundamentally moving forces, acts of faith. If we are not moved to communicate and create change, if we stand still, the status quo is our reward. —1989, 20.
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