

ON REPRESENTATION: BIOLOGY POLITICS

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By Enma Saiz

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Thesis Committee Advisor Corrine E. Fitzpatrick, Lecturer, SAIC

Abstract

In this thesis I write letters in an epistolary style to four artists whose work has influenced my own visual arts practice—Ana Mendieta, Doris Salcedo, Laura Aguilar, and Terri Kapsalis. The manner in which they represent the “other” in their oeuvres—respectfully, without repeating stereotypes, and sometimes elevating the “other” to ecstatic visions—has influenced my work which has to do with victims of medical experimentation, particularly African Americans and women.

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On Representation: Biology Politics¹

As a medical doctor I feel a duty to shed light on the violence and injustices suffered by women and people of color at the hands of the medical establishment. By shedding light on these atrocities through my research-based visual arts practice, my desire is to help educate the public about the violence perpetrated against the victims of medical experimentation. My goal is to attempt to prevent this type of violence from happening in the future. My focus in the accompanying art exhibition is the violent history of the speculum, embodied by J. Marion Sims, the “father of American gynecology,” and his experiments on enslaved black women in the 1840s.

Today, in my community of Miami, Florida, the COVID-19 virus is taking the lives of African Americans at a rate of almost two times that of whites. “The disease has only magnified a high rate of chronic illness that is a legacy of generations of unequal access to jobs, education and healthcare.”² The history of medical experimentation on African Americans as discussed in Harriet Washington’s book, *Medical Apartheid*, has made them leery of the medical establishment. She states, “studies and surveys repeatedly confirm that no other group as deeply mistrusts the American medical system, especially medical research.”³ American university research centers have historically been located in inner-city areas, and accordingly, a disproportionate number of these abuses have involved experiments with African Americans.

¹ Sylvia Federici, Lecture Two: “Body Politics” in the Feminist Revolt,” in *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020).

²Daniel Chang and C. Isiah Smalls II, “Black People in Miami Die of COVID-19 at a Greater Rate Than Whites, State Data Shows,” *Miami Herald* (Miami, FL), April 18, 2020.

³ Harriet A. Washington, introduction to *Medical Apartheid* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008), 5.

“These subjects were given experimental vaccines known to have unacceptably high lethality, were enrolled in experiments without their consent or knowledge, were subjected to surreptitious surgical and medical procedures while unconscious, injected with toxic substances, deliberately monitored rather than treated for deadly ailments, excluded from life-saving treatments, or secretly farmed for sera or tissues that were used to perfect technologies such as infectious disease tests.”⁴

Sylvia Federici argues that women have also been at the forefront of a struggle over their bodies—namely, to avoid pregnancy and to avoid sex, inside and outside of marriage. In the 1970s feminists began to organize to fight under the banner of “body politics” for control over our sexuality and for the right to decide whether to procreate. “Body politics expressed the realization that our most intimate, presumably “private” experiences are in reality highly political matters of great concern to the nation-state, as demonstrated by the extensive legislation that governments have historically adopted to regulate them.”⁵ For this thesis and exhibition I am using a variation on the concept of “body politics,” instead calling it “biology politics.” The sphere of “biology” is more consistent with my background as a pathologist, and it implies the medical gaze slicing through the body and breaking it down into its constituent parts, tissues and cells, that have also been highly politicized.

For enslaved black women in the US, the goal was to encourage reproduction to create more free laborers who could be sold into slavery. In more contemporary US society women of color have been maligned as abusers of the “Welfare” system and discouraged to reproduce using forced sterilization or implanted birth control devices.

In my thesis exhibition I am dealing with the medicalization of women’s bodies. As a breast cancer survivor who has undergone multiple deforming surgeries, I am building a wall containing resin casts of my explanted breast implants, which were removed at the time of my most recent cosmetic surgical revision. The wall represents the barriers to intimacy that my

⁴ Ibid, 6.

⁵ Sylvia Federici, Lecture 2, “‘Body Politics’ in the Feminist Revolt.”

cosmetic deformities created and that I have been dealing with for more than a decade. Women also cross borders for cosmetic surgeries (like getting breast implants), possibly for the pleasure of the patriarchal gaze. The wall will also contain numerous clear plastic specula inserted into holes in the wall through which light will shine from behind, and the spectator can look through the specula into the exhibition space. Through my commentary on the violent history of the speculum, I am also assigning the speculum the meaning of the patriarchal gaze in an attempt to repossess it.

The wall is also a commentary on the walls being built on the US Southern border and the associated xenophobia. As a Latina immigrant to the United States growing up in a predominantly white Southern town, I struggled with the idea of being an “alien” who became “naturalized,” feeling uncomfortable and inauthentic in my American “skin.” My concerns as a Latina, as an immigrant, a woman, mother, educator, doctor, researcher, artist, activist and breast cancer survivor all intersect in my visual arts practice. By studying the methodologies of other visual artists and writers who helped me on my own journey in the visual arts, I hope to shed light on the violent histories perpetrated against the “other.”

In this thesis I will write letters in an epistolary style to Ana Mendieta, Laura Aguilar, Doris Salcedo, and Terri Kapsalis, artists who have influenced my work throughout my training. These artists and writers have successfully represented the “other” respectfully, without repeating the stereotypes and violence perpetrated against the “other” historically. They have successfully represented and shed light on victims of rape, displacement, migration, disappearances, violence resulting from slavery, Jim Crow laws, medical experimentation, and physical differences, including obesity. They have not only dismantled these stereotypes but, in some cases, have elevated the victims to exquisite, “ecstatic” visions. While several of the artists (Mendieta, Aguilar) use their own bodies to establish being the “other,” i.e., people who are underrepresented, misrepresented, or not represented at all, Salcedo uses objects to stand in for victims and disappeared people. I wanted to explore artists who do both because I also use my own body and let “ready-mades” and other objects stand in for my body. Because I

am writing in the epistolary style, I can interject how the artists influenced my process and include photos of my artwork alongside their artwork.

I. Letter to Ana Mendieta (b. 1948, Havana; d. 1985, New York City)

Dear Ana,

I know you will never read these words, but I hope my sentiments reach you in the spirit world. After all, you believed in Santeria, your caretakers in Cuba taught you about the *orishas*. You found strength in Yemaya, Oya, and Oshun on your journey to the United States from Cuba as a Peter Pan child. I wonder how you, a twelve year-old girl from a tropical island, adjusted to the loneliness, the loss and longing for your homeland, the separation from your parents, and the cold winters of Iowa in a foster home with only your sister to comfort you.

Ana, you undoubtedly adjusted through your art. You went to art school in Iowa and contributed to the “era of flux” in the 1970s, whereby you explored new avenues of art-making through personal forms and subject matter including body art and performance art. You found freedom to express yourself and gender issues in an art form “not yet encumbered with a history of male predecessors.”⁶ In your earth-body sculptures you used your own body, expressing your personal story but also universalizing it. You drenched yourself in animal blood, a purifying gesture and *ashe*- (power-) giving practice in Santeria, and rolled yourself in feathers in *Bird Transformation* (performance at Old Man’s Creek, Iowa, 1972). You brought attention to the raping of women by playing an assaulted victim, blood running down your legs, to an unsuspecting audience. “For (you), these rape works were a means of personal and cultural exorcism of this brutal act, and with these works (you) aimed to give women *ashe*, empowering them to regain control of their bodies.”⁷ You excavated and embedded your

⁶ Mary Jane Jacob, *Ana Mendieta: the “Silueta” Series (1973-80)* (New York: Galerie Lelong, 1991), 4.

⁷Ibid, 10.

mud-covered body in the ground and trees in South Florida and Mexico to leave your imprint in those place that reminded you of your homeland. In preparing the land for the earth-body sculptures, you went through rituals, working alone, making the land sacred. Your art practice was your spiritual practice.

Santeria found a way into your consciousness when feminism was beginning to appear in art.⁸ Santeria is a New World form of Yoruban⁹ religion created by the first slaves of Nigeria that were brought to Cuba during the early sixteenth century. Slaves preserved their religion under the guise of Catholicism, the religion imposed on them by Spanish law. Their supreme deity, *Olodumare*, and the lesser gods, *orishas*, were correlated with saints in the Catholic Church, much like the Romans appropriated the Greek gods into their own pagan religion. Santeria teaches that Earth is a living thing from which one gains power. Each *orisha* is identified with a force of nature. Unlike Catholicism, Santeria also incorporates women priestesses (*Santeras*), and many of the powerful *orishas* are female.

Mary Jane Jacob states that “women were gravitating towards matriarchal, goddess cults in the 1970s. They had matriarchal precedents—“celebrations of the woman and of female, birth-giving sexuality, historical continuity with the past, and a renewed sense of power in the present.”¹⁰ There was a loss of the matriarchal establishment to patriarchy with the ancient conquest of Europe and the Near East by Indo-Europeans. Jacob states, “with the patriarchal new order came disrespect for nature, seemingly god-given ownership rights over women and permission to control their bodies.”¹¹ Therefore, women of the 1970s search out the Goddess

⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁹ Yoruba (n.) 1. A member of a people of southwestern Nigeria and Benin; 2. The Kwa language of the Yoruba, and an official language of Nigeria. Yoruba (n.d.) *Oxford Dictionary*. Retrieved April 12, 2020 from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/yoruba

¹⁰ Mary Jane Jacob, 5.

¹¹Ibid, 8.

as a means of empowerment. She states that “(you) made (your) art in order to come in touch with the spirit, to give women back their bodies, and to give them power.”¹²

Ana, your most famous works include your earth-body sculptures and your silhouette series. You created silhouettes of your body in soil and silhouettes with candles, bamboo sticks, and fire to more generalized, archetypal figures recalling prehistoric times. *Imagen of Yagul* (1973) is the first in a series of silhouette portraits in which you trace the outline of your body in different locations between Mexico and Iowa. Your body is fully present here instead of being represented as an ephemeral silhouette that marks where you once had been, as in *Alma, Siloueta en Fuego* (1975). The loss and longing for your homeland influenced your earth-body sculptures and your silhouettes—where you metaphorically attempted to return to the earth of your homeland, Cuba.

Ana, I respect you deeply for bucking the patriarchal systems you undoubtedly encountered in the art world. By focusing on the idea of the *orisha*, the feminist ideologies in your art helped return women back to their place of dignity, where the “Great Goddess” of prehistory claimed fertility as her prime attribute. Her nurturing gave rise to her healing powers. “The earth was the womb: Mother Nature.”¹³ As a Latina, did you struggle with the *virgen/puta* dichotomy imposed on us by colonialism and Christianity? As you know, during the colonial period Christians associated indigenous goddesses with the morally transgressive Eve. By being associated with a fallen human woman, maligning of the goddesses transposed to the maligning of actual indigenous women, especially healers, midwives, and “harlots.”¹⁴ This maligning continues today in a more generalized fashion as an internal struggle in the psyche of Latina women like us; this is what we call the *virgen/puta* dichotomy. These struggles not only affect Latina women, though. The roots of women’s exploitation can be traced back to the

¹²Ibid, 8.

¹³ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴Irene Lara, “Goddess of the Americas in Decolonial Imagery: Beyond the Virtuous Virgen/Pagan Puta Dichotomy.” *Feminist Studies* 34, nos. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 101.

history of capitalist society, and you would be disappointed to learn that feminism in 2020 is still incapable of devising strategies to significantly alter the material conditions of women's lives. Ana, you would be disappointed to learn that the patriarchal world has not changed much since you tragically left us when you "fell" out of a window from your 34th story New York apartment, possibly at the hands of Carl.



Ana Mendieta, *Arbol de Vida* (1975)



Ana Mendieta, *Imagen de Yagul* (1973)



Ana Mendieta, *Alma, Siloueta en Fuego* (1975)



Enma Saiz, *Your American Skin: La Naturalizacion de Enma* (2016)

II. Letter to Doris Salcedo (b. 1958, Bogota, Colombia)

Dear Doris,

You wrote that “an aesthetic view of death reveals an ethical view of life, and it is for this reason that there is nothing more human than mourning.”¹⁵ I admire how you respectfully depict the disappeared/deceased victims of the civil war and drug wars in your homeland of Colombia. In *Atrabiliarios* (1992-97) you placed victims’ shoes inside mausoleum-like nooks in the museum wall and sutured pig skins onto the nooks, shrouding them from stark visibility.

¹⁵ Doris Salcedo, “A Work in Mourning,” *Doris Salcedo*, Julie Rodrigues Widholm and Madeleine Grynsztejn, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 215.

The negative space within the empty shoes represents the lost victims. In many cases the victims' bodies were never found, and you provide a burial site for them. While the shoes may be specific to the victims, there are no identifiers present in the work. Hence, they are not particular but can be regarded as universal.

Doris, you create this universal feeling using triangulation. You intercalate yourself between the victim and the art. You become that victim in a process of substitution; the art then stands alone in terms of the message you convey to the viewer based on his/her own memories and experiences. You therefore create a "precarious triangle," a space you once occupied that the viewer subsequently occupies. Another substitution then occurs, and a connection is created between the viewer and the victim.¹⁶

You often choose dining tables to use as material, as in the *Plegaria Muda* (2008-10) and the *Unland* (1998) series. Formerly, these tables were communal spaces where families and friends (of the victims) shared meals and conversations. By using these utilitarian items like victims' tables and starched cotton shirts entombed in concrete with steel rods driven through them (*Untitled*, 1989-90), you make sculpture a topography of life.¹⁷ Unlike DuChampian "ready made," however, your materials are not neutral; they are already charged with significance, with meaning acquired in the practice of everyday life. Your used materials are "profoundly human; they all bespeak the presence of a human being. Therefore, metaphor becomes unnecessary."¹⁸ Furthermore, you physically displace items from the victims' homes into foreign spaces—museums far from their homes. Victims' personal items formerly used in their daily lives are themselves violated by being moved into distant, impersonal spaces, to be viewed by strangers, further deploying the feelings of displacement experienced by the "disappeared" victims.

¹⁶ Doris Salcedo, interview with Carlos Basualdo, Doris Salcedo, Carlos Basualdo, Nancy Princenthal, and Andreas Huyssen, authors. *Doris Salcedo* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 14.

¹⁷ Carlos Basualdo. "In Conversation with Doris Salcedo," Doris Salcedo, Carlos Basualdo, Nancy Princenthal, and Andreas Huyssen, authors. *Doris Salcedo* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 21.

Doris, you also helped inspire my *Goddess of Seas, Divided* (2015) sculpture, a backyard slide that belonged to my children, repurposed into a goddess-fountain. It had the traces of their childhood as well as my maternal imprint. I had the urge to slice it open in a violent manner, much like your *Shibboleth* work at the Tate (2007). The word *Shibboleth* (mid-17th century, from Hebrew meaning “ear of corn”) was used as a test of nationality because of its difficult pronunciation. You created a long, thin crack in the floor of the Tate that people would choose to cross or not. I created the rift in the upper layer of the slide with my rotary saw to explore the barriers people faced crossing the Mediterranean during the mass migrations resulting from crises and events like the recent Syrian War, many people dying at sea or being turned away by European countries.

Your work can be called “monumental minimalism.”¹⁹ You use large furniture pieces from the victims’ homes, not just dining tables, but also dressers and wardrobes containing personal items like shirts, handkerchiefs, and jewelry, and you fill them with concrete. You forever memorialize the victims’ personal items in this way because of the inability to give the victims themselves proper burials. The furniture pieces, in their muted wood tones along with the neutral cement and their substantial solidity gives them a dignified, monumental quality—what can be described as an “aesthetic view of death revealing an ethical view of life.”

¹⁹ Nancy Princenthal, “Silence Seen,” Doris Salcedo, Carlos Basualdo, Nancy Princenthal, and Andreas Huyssen, authors. *Doris Salcedo* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 40.



Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth* (2007-8), Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London. Photo by henning thomsen. <https://smarthistory.org/doris-salcedo-shibboleth-2/>



Enma Saiz, *Yemaya, Goddess of Seas, Divided* (2015)



Doris Salcedo, *Unland: Irreversible Witness* (1995-98) MCA Chicago. <https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/unland/>

III. Letter to Laura Aguilar (b. 1959, San Gabriel, CA; d. 2018, Long Beach, CA)

Dear Laura,

You photographed your subjects (Chicanas, lesbians, obese women) with frank empathy and humanism. Your work explored intersectionality, radical vulnerability, and (self) portraiture, especially (self) portraits as landscape, as a means of attaining (self) acceptance.

You employed intersectionality, the feminist theory that originated among feminists of color and formally defined by law professor and critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989.²⁰

²⁰ Allyson Healey, Episode 6: “Fly Like an Eagle,” *Art History for All: A Podcast Dedicated to Making Art Accessible*. July 30, 2018. Accessed December 10, 2019. <https://arthistoryforall.com/page/4>.

Intersectional feminism recognizes that for individuals who embody multiple marginalized identities, those identities cannot be considered independently, but must be considered in terms of how they intersect. Your work, *Three Eagles Flying* (1990), a large gelatin silver triptych where you stand in between an American flag and a Mexican flag, best exemplifies this theory. Your head is wrapped in the Mexican flag with the image of the eagle clenching the serpent prominently covering your face, your torso is naked, and you wear an American flag around your waist, draped over your lower body. A thick rope snakes around your neck, torso, hands, waist and thighs. Your imagery embodies the three “eagles” (the American eagle signifying Imperialism, the Mexican eagle signifying the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan that was sacked by the Spanish conquistadors led by Hernan Cortes, and your name, Aguilar, derived from the Spanish word for eagle, *aguila*).

In her essay for your *Show and Tell* catalog, “Beyond Face Value,” Deborah Cullen quotes Luz Calvo: “Far from staging a straightforward critique of racial and sexual oppression in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands, *Three Eagles Flying* produces a thoroughly ambivalent position for both the spectator of the image and for the Chicana lesbian subject of the photograph.”²¹ *Three Eagles Flying* is so rich in iconography that it goes far beyond sexual oppression. The use of flags is very powerful and has a profoundly rich history (Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), Jasper John’s *Flag* (1954-55), David Hammon’s red, black and green *African American Flag* (1990) and Juan Sanchez’s use of the Puerto Rican flag to signal the fraught territory of identity for Puerto Ricans in *Mixed Statement* (1984). The rope around your neck might allude to lynching of black and brown people in the United States, or it might allude to BDSM as in Catherine Opie’s *O Portfolio* (1999). The covering of your head/face is a reference to human rights violations and disappearances experienced by activists in Latin America or to prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison. I also created a sculpture, *Sanctuary* (2018), where I sewed

²¹Luz Calvo in Deborah Cullen, “Beyond Face Value: Reconsidering Laura Aguilar’s *Three Eagles Flying*,” *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, Rebecca Epstein, ed. Vincent Price Art Museum exhibition catalogue, (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017), 27.

strips of gold and silver rescue blankets into an American flag. I placed the PVC flagpole in a gallon water jug containing sand that overflows the jug onto the floor. This piece is a testament to the refugees who attempt to cross the southern border of the United States on a daily basis, many of whom die in the desert during the crossing. Miami's mayor, Carlos Gimenez, refused to designate our city, which is full of Latin immigrants, as a sanctuary city, exposing the immigrants to raids by ICE and eventual deportation.

You documented yourself in the landscape near your home in the San Gabriel River Valley in California. You could trace your maternal lineage for five generations to the San Gabriel River Valley where the Californio people were tied to the River. Your maternal grandmother collected rocks, many of which looked like the rocks you gravitated to in your self-portraits-as-landscape. Perhaps you were making a statement about early landscape painting in the United States, exemplified by the work of Frederick Church and other Hudson River Valley painters, who depicted the landscape devoid of any human beings, namely, the indigenous peoples who lived there. Perhaps you did it because these landscape painters (and later, landscape photographers) tried to claim the lands that they depicted/photographed as their own. For example, no subsequent photographer could touch Yosemite without encountering the presence and influence of Ansel Adams. There was a sense of ownership inherent to these landscape paintings and photographs. In contrast to the desire to possess the land, you inserted yourself into the landscape to declare your presence, as an indigenous, brown, obese, lesbian woman. Laura, your personal bravery resonates through your images.

Another reason you intercalated yourself in the landscape was as a means of self-acceptance regarding your obesity. In your self-as-landscape series you call attention to the contours and irregularities of your body, the folds and defects of your skin, especially when viewed in the context of the desert rocks with their own deviations, inherent folds, pockets, and crevices. You gained acceptance of your body through your work and through your own and others' acceptance of your work. Laura, I feel like your primary goal was honesty and your the secondary goal was self-acceptance. You demonstrated immense personal bravery in your

nude photographs. This is what author Amelia Jones had to say about your “radical vulnerability,” Laura, a vulnerability that is deeply affecting to the viewer. “In investing her practice with radical vulnerability, Aguilar’s project offers this possibility of exposure, as well as a strategic mode of intervention into the convention of portraiture: rather than seeming to ‘give’ us the person depicted, as portraiture of the Renaissance through the modern period offered to do, (you) make us work for a relationship, one coded in terms of body size, able-bodiedness, ethnicity/race, class, and gender/sexuality.”²² You make us aware of our own mutability and vulnerability, in relation to these multiple modes of identification. Inserting yourself into the artwork affects the viewer deeply. By being authentic (unlike Cindy Sherman, for example, who portrays herself as a myriad of “characters” rather than as herself), you connect to the vulnerability of the viewer through your own vulnerability, and in so doing, you helped yourself and the viewer attain self-acceptance. You inspired the self-portrait I created of my torso, revealing my scars from my bilateral mastectomies that have been haunting me for 10 years. Furthermore, after being with the same man for over 20 years and finding myself single again, you are helping me take down a barrier to intimacy with new partners, and you are helping me on my road to self-acceptance. Laura, for your example, I am most grateful.

²²Amelia Jones, “Clothed/Unclothed: Laura Aguilar’s Radical Vulnerability,” in *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, Rebecca Epstein, ed. Vincent Price Art Museum exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017), 42.



LAURA AGUILAR, *THREE EAGLES FLYING* (1990)



Enma Saiz, *Sanctuary*, (2016)



Laura Aguilar, *Grounded #11*, (2006)



Enma Saiz, *Torso #3* (2020). Photo by Marilyn Traeger

IV. Letter to Terri Kapsalis (b. 1966)

Dear Terri,

I feel so privileged to have had you as a graduate studies coordinator during my first summer session at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. You encouraged your students to write often, as writing clarifies and sheds light on our visual thinking. I am so grateful to you for having put your body on the front lines of medical education, on both sides of the speculum. As a Gynecology Teaching Assistant (GTA), you played the gynecologic patient, allowing medical students and residents to examine your vagina and cervix using a speculum, and you taught the students how to appropriately conduct the exam on other GTAs. You helped these medical students and other professionals develop empathy for the female patients whose bodies they would examine in the future through the speculum. As a medical doctor who studies the violent histories of medical experimentation, I am also very grateful for your exploration of J. Marion Sims, the “father of American gynecology” in your book, *Public Privates: Performing Gynecology from Both Ends of the Speculum*.

Although the speculum in its various manifestations has been in use since 97 A.D., it found its way into modern American medical practice when Sims started using the speculum on enslaved women for repairing vesico-vaginal fistulas in the 1840s. These defects occur with prolonged childbirth and in multiparous women of any race. Sims sought to help women suffering from this ailment by experimenting on enslaved women. The defect between the bladder and the vagina causes painful and embarrassing leakage of urine into the vaginal vault; the urine then leaks out of the body and causes odor. It is uncontrolled because it is not restrained by any sphincter.

Terri, you quote W. O. Baldwin, M.D. as he eulogized Sims and emphasized the instrument’s importance:

The day which made him great was the day the idea of his speculum dawned on him—that day when he first conceived the thought of throwing an abundance of light into the vagina and around the womb at the same time obtaining an ample space to work and ply his instruments. The instruments caused his name to flash over the medical world like a meteor in the night. Gynecology today would not deserve the name of a separate and cultivated science, but for the light which Sims's speculum and the principles involved in it have thrown upon it.²³

By “throwing an abundance of light into the dark cavity,” you write that Sims made the invisible, visible. You invoke the Freudian idea of women as “the dark continent” and its link to the 19th century colonialist imagination. If woman is dark, in this case “doubly dark” due to her mysterious anatomy and African origins, Sims was the source of “enlightenment,” examining her and constructing knowledge about her internal depths. You also quote Mary Ann Doane who returns to images of light: “Light also enables the look, the male gaze—it makes the woman specularizable. The doctor's light legitimates scopophilia.”²⁴ The light introduced by Sims's speculum allowed for an entirely new medical specialty premised on the vaginal spectacle.

The subjects of Sims's experimentation were enslaved women whom he kept in a shed in his backyard. The most famous were Lucy, Anarcha, and Betsey, although there were others. Sims argued to the women's masters that the women could not continue performing their duties as servants due to their “disgusting” condition. So he offered to house them and experiment on them with their masters' consent as long as the masters paid their taxes and clothed them. The slaveowners were delighted by the proposition that Sims would repair their laborers, making them fit for their duties, increasing their likelihood to reproduce—a vital aspect of their roles as slaves, as their offspring could be sold into slavery. Unfortunately,

²³ W. O. Baldwin, MD, “Tribute to the Late James Marion Sims, November, 1883,” in *The Story of My Life*, by J. Marion Sims in Terri Kapsalis, *Public Privates: Performing Gynecology from Both Sides of the Speculum*. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 1997), 38.

²⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) in Terri Kapsalis, 38.

these women did not get to write their histories. They were made to leave their homes for four years while Sims worked on them. We do not know if they were allowed to leave Sims's backyard hospital during their tenure there, and we do not know if they were given any choices, if they agreed to his experimentation and under what terms. We do know that anesthesia was not available at the time. Lucy was the first to undergo surgery to suture together the edges of her fistula. Sims remarked on her fortitude: "that was before the days of anesthetics, and the poor girl on her knees bore the operation with great heroism and bravery."²⁵ The pain these women must have experienced during and after these operations is inconceivable. They even served as each other's surgical attendants. After performing 30 surgeries on Anarcha, Sims changed the type of suture material in 1849 from silk to silver, and he was finally successful in repairing her fistula. The operations proved to be a success.

Terri, you point out that the combination of women's skin color combined with their female sexuality made them the site of great attention in the 19th century, within a scientific community that systematically found them to be pathological.²⁶ Often as many as a dozen white male spectators watched as Sims experimented on the enslaved women. The 19th century was full of examples of African women's genitalia being the subject of spectacle, including the "Hottentot Venus," Saartje Baartman, who was exhibited in Europe for over five years as a "freak show attraction" for her large buttocks. After her death, her genitalia took the spotlight because she was subjected to a post-mortem exam, and her genitalia was put on display. George Cuvier, a pathologist, presented "the Academy the genital organs of this woman prepared in a way so as to allow one to see the nature of the labia."²⁷

Sims later founded the Women's Hospital of New York. Its wards were filled with destitute Irish immigrant women. As was the case with the enslaved women, patients in the Women's

²⁵ J. Marion Sims, MD, *The Story of My Life*, ed. H. Marion-Sims, MD (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1886) in Terri Kapsalis, 40.

²⁶ Terri Kapsalis, 41.

²⁷ Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sex, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) in Terri Kapsalis, 42.

Hospital were often kept there indefinitely and underwent multiple surgeries. However, unlike the enslaved women, these women had the benefit of anesthesia. Sims also sterilized many women with mental disorders. Sims's commemorative sculpture in Brooklyn has been taken down in recent years due to protests by women, especially African American women.

Your words helped inspire my specula sculptures which attempt to shed light on the violent history of the speculum and the experimentation on enslaved women. I feature the African continent on a mirrored surface that can be seen through the opening of one of the specula. The viewer not only sees an image of the African continent but also sees their own reflection in the mirror as a complicit participant in the medicalization of women's bodies. I also feature cells derived from a cervical smear stained by the Papanicolaou technique, that would be seen through the microscope. These two sculptures highlight the ambivalence I feel about the speculum and the Pap smear, at once a life-saving technique to detect cervical cancer but entrenched within a violent history. The most compelling sculptures you inspired, Terri, are the ones dressed in antebellum costumes. The "snouts" of the specula give them a predatory, alligator-like appearance, invoking the fauna of the American South. They have tassels for teeth, further alluding to a predatory, reptilian appearance. These may represent the white Southern women who would have benefitted from the experimentation on enslaved women. The third set of sculptures features a speculum within a speculum, alluding to the invasive, rape-like nature of the experimentation. The "receiving" speculum is clad with brilliant blue vertical labia, alluding to the pathologized history of African women's genitalia and to the repeated raping of enslaved women, but it is also a nod to artist Mickalene Thomas whose character, *Din, une tres belle negresse* (2012), has full lips adorned with bright blue lipstick.

Terri, I struggle with how we should evaluate reproductive technologies like the contraceptive pill, implantable devices like Devo-Provera and IUDs but also cosmetic devices like silicone breast implants that promise to restructure our physical makeup and reconstruct our bodies in ways that potentially better conform to our desires. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, the demand for body shaping is on the rise. In the US alone 17.5

million people in 2018 underwent minimally invasive plastic and cosmetic surgeries, for a total expense of \$16.5 billion.²⁸ As Silvia Federici asks in her book, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*, “do these technologies enhance our control over our bodies or do they turn our bodies into objects of experimentation and profit-making at the service of the capitalist market and the medical profession?”²⁹



Enma Saiz, *Specula/Spectacle* (2019-20)

²⁸“New Statistics Reveal the Shape of Plastic Surgery,” American Society of Plastic Surgeons, March 1, 2018. Accessed April 27, 2020. <https://www.plasticsurgery.org/news/press-releases/new-statistics-reveal-the-shape-of-plastic-surgery>

²⁹ Silvia Federici, introduction.



Enma Saiz, *Specula/Spectacle II* (2019-20)

Conclusion

I will end my discussion by reflecting on the words of Silvia Federici. Federici's book, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism*, has helped me put the artists' and writers' work featured here in a historical and political context. Even though Federici's book focuses mainly on women, it can be expanded to encompass the former colonial world as a whole. For example, the procreation of black subjects was encouraged after England banned the slave trade in 1807. Thomas Jefferson went to great lengths in Congress to protect the prices of the slaves that women on the Virginian plantations would procreate: "I consider," he wrote, "a woman who brings a child every two years more profitable than the best man on the farm. What she produces is an addition to the capital, while his labors disappear in mere consumption."³⁰ The ongoing assaults on *Roe v. Wade* are also a testimonial to the nation's need for procreation to produce laborers as cogs in the capitalist machine. However, in the 1970s-1990s, new generations of Africans, Indians, and other decolonized subjects were coming to political age, demanding a restitution of the wealth that Europeans had robbed from them. A massive campaign to contain what was defined as a "population explosion" was mounted throughout the former colonial world, with the promotion of sterilization and contraceptives, like Depo Provera, Norplant, and IUDs that, once implanted, women could not control. In a similar way, in the US, successive governments have tried to block black people's struggle for liberation through the mass incarceration of millions of young black men and women. They serve as the new enslaved laborers.

³⁰ Silvia Federici, Lecture One, "The Body, Capitalism, and the Reproduction of Labor Power."

Regarding the medicalization of our bodies, while some authors celebrate our becoming cyborgs,³¹ we should reflect on the social consequences of the mechanization process that we have already undergone. As Federici emphasizes, it is naive to imagine that our symbiosis with machines necessarily results in an extension of our powers. We cannot ignore the constraints that technologies place on our lives, their increased use as a means of social control as well as the ecological cost of their production. Women in capitalist development have suffered a double process of mechanization. Besides being subjected to the discipline of work, paid and unpaid, in plantations, factories, and homes, they have been expropriated from their bodies and turned into sexual objects and breeding machines. Even without gene editing or other technological interventions, we are already becoming mutants capable, for instance, of carrying out our daily lives while aware that catastrophic events are occurring all around us, including the destruction of our ecological environment, the murder and disappearances of those trying to avert humanitarian and/or ecological crises, and the slow death of many people now living on our streets, whom we pass by daily without much thought or emotion. What threatens us is not only that the machines are taking over, but also that we are becoming like machines.

That is why I so deeply admire the women artists in this thesis. They are able to propel the specific/particular into the universal—the universal plight of humans, whether it be due to violence, displacement, death, mourning. They all achieve this with triangulation, by physically placing themselves in the victim’s place like Ana playing the rape victim or immersing herself in the environment, Doris handling and using materials that belonged to the victims in her art, Laura physically putting herself in the landscape, and Terri putting herself on the receiving end of the speculum.

On January 15, 1968, radical feminists led by Shulamith Firestone organized a torchlit funeral procession, calling it “The Burial of Traditional Womanhood,” “who passed,” as the flyer

³¹Donna Haraway, “Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. (New York: Routledge, 1991).

read, “after 3000 years of bolstering the egos of warmakers and aiding the cause of war.”³²

They also protested bridal fairs, denounced the duty and compulsion to be “beautiful,” and called themselves “witches.” I think the artists and the writer featured in this thesis might all be considered “witches” in this vein, especially Ana who dealt with Santeria, orishas and the Earth, Doris who deals with death and mourning, Laura who dealt with the earth as part of her indigenous heritage and self-acceptance and Terri who deals with shedding light on historical atrocities but also participates in present day medical education and healing. They remind us that we need to unite with other people to reclaim our collective power, to decide how we want to live, what kind of health and education we need to have, and what kind of society we want to create.

Federici discusses the “biology of politics” as follows: “I believe it is politics because it has so persistently and so negatively been used against us that it is almost impossible to speak of “biology” in a neutral way, without fear of reinforcing the existing prejudices.”³³ That is one of the challenges of representation with which I struggle and the reason I chose the artists in this thesis—how to represent the “other” without reinforcing the same historical stereotypes and prejudices. Federici continues:

It is also politics because decisions concerning the most significant factors in the constitution and development of our physical makeup have been made in institutional contexts (universities, medical labs, etc.) beyond our control, prompted by economic and political interests, and because we know that though our bodies are the products of a long evolutionary process, they have nevertheless been impacted by a host of policies that have constantly modified them even at the level of the DNA. In other words “bodies” and “nature” have a history; they are not a raw bedrock on which cultural meaning are attached.³⁴

³²Silvia Federici, Lecture Two, “‘Body Politics’ in the Feminist Revolt.”

³³Silvia Federici, Chapter Four, “On the Body, Gender, and Performance.”

³⁴ Silvia Federici, Chapter Four, “On the Body, Gender, and Performance.”

This statement is at the crux of my visual arts practice—the historical, structural impositions on women and formerly colonized peoples—and how to overcome these structural constructions, and ultimately elevate these populations in meaningful ways.

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